

# **ADOPTING MASCULINE TRAITS TO GET AHEAD – AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF MALAYSIAN FEMALE & MALE PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS’ JOB ROLE & ORGANISATIONAL POSITION DISPARITIES**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study explores the disparities in the job-role enactments and promotion opportunities of Malaysian female and male public relations practitioners, and the adoption of masculine traits by female practitioners to counter the male-biased and masculine-centric organisational glass ceiling. The significant contrast of a female-majority PR industry and a mainly male-monopolised management trend has been evidenced by researchers for years. Positively studies conducted in recent years have given new hopes to female practitioners, who are increasingly being promoted to lead PR departments, thus the glass ceiling was seemingly broken. This study, based on the feminist theory framework, examines job-roles and organisational positioning disparities from the perspective of gender-traits (feminine and masculine), in contrast with previous research that mainly focused on biological-sex differences (female and male). The qualitative data for this study comes from semi-structured interviews and open-ended questions with nine female and three male practitioners. The findings highlight that PR departments are mainly led by female practitioners, who enjoy equal advancement opportunities as their male colleagues. Results also show the successful organisational positioning of female practitioners who adopted masculine traits; however, organisational top management circles remain a male-majority domain. In addition, male PR practitioners have stronger influences among organisational higher-ups, while their female counterparts are burdened by family-versus-work commitments.

**Keywords:** public relations, job roles, gender traits, feminist theory, organisational position disparities.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The public relations (PR) industry has a majority of female practitioners. Tertiary education programmes of PR studies also comprise a majority of female educators and students. Therefore, the term feminisation has been used to describe the PR profession. However, the abundance of female PR graduates and practitioners does not mirror their representation in organisations' management and leadership positions, which are mainly held by males.

A myriad of academic scholars in the PR field had conducted research into the gaps between managerial roles enactment and organisational positioning between female and male PR practitioners, which generally favours PR men (Daymon & Demetriou, 2014; Dozier, Sha & Shen, 2013; Erzikova & Berger, 2016; Fitch & Third, 2010; O'Neil, 2003; Toth & Aldoory, 2001). Their studies had proved that female PR practitioners were mainly put into less significant job roles such as data gathering, media calling, news release writing and running events. In contrast, male PR practitioners were placed onto more prominent job positions in charge of managerial supervision, strategising organisational policies and being consultants to the top management. Moreover, various PR researchers have based their studies' foundation on the feminist theory to examine the detrimental plight of PR women (Aldoory, et al., 2008; Golombisky, 2015; O'Neil, 2003; Umeogu & Ifeoma, 2012; Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2017).

With these in mind, this study researched and analysed the disparities in female versus male practitioners' enactment of managerial functions, as well as the male-favoured reality of organisational positioning. Based on the feminist theoretical perspective, it investigated the reasons behind organisational stereotyping of female practitioners as being low in managerial potential and only fit for lower-level technical job scopes. It also explored the adoption of masculine traits among female practitioners who seek to get ahead and climb atop the corporate ladder of organisational hierarchy.

Previous PR scholars had studied job-roles and organisational positioning disparities from the focal point of biological-sex differences (female and male). In contrast, this study is premised on differences from a gender-traits perspective (feminine and masculine). This gender-traits focus, which had been posited by previous scholars such as Jiang and Shen (2013), Umeogu and Ifeoma (2012) as well as Yeomans (2010), would unveil whether female PR practitioners adopt masculine traits to counter organisational glass ceiling in order to reach the higher pastures of managerial ranks and management echelons.

In their study of Malaysian PR practitioners, Yesuselvi, Tan, and Suffian (2016) sought to examine job-roles comparison between the sexes: male and female practitioners, in addition to whether their salaries and career prospects differ as a result of organisational biases. On the other hand, for gender-based masculine-feminine disparities, there is scarce research from an Asian context; one that turned up was Wu's (2009) leadership-style study of Taiwanese PR practitioners, where masculine gender traits significantly predicted PR men and women's organisational management styles.

The significant contrast between a female-majority PR industry and a mainly male-monopolised management trend has been evidenced by PR researchers for years. Dozier and Broom (1995) found this female-male discrepancy in organisational PR departments; Fröhlich and Peters (2007) concluded that PR managerial positions were mainly given to male practitioners; Aldoory, et al. (2008) similarly argued that management positions were mostly helmed by males.

Past studies have indicated that PR men benefitted from more opportunities for career advancement. Verhoeven and Aarts (2010) as well as Place (2012) noted the disparities in promotion opportunities that favoured PR men and neglected PR women, not merely at the PR departmental level but also within organisations' top management circle. Based on Toth and Aldoory's (2001) as well as van Ruler and de Lange's (2003) findings, there exists a glass ceiling within organisations that obstructed female practitioners' promotion as departmental managers and also constrained their advancement toward higher organisational hierarchy.

On the bright side, studies carried out in recent years by researchers such as Pommper and Jung (2013) as well as Dozier and Sha (2010) had given new hopes to PR women, in the face of these studies' findings that female practitioners were increasingly being promoted to lead PR departments, thus the organisational glass ceiling was seemingly broken. These findings mirror that of Yesuselvi, Tan and Suffian (2016), whose interviewees in the majority disagreed that Malaysian PR women faced biases in their daily work, as well as not lacking in on-the-job promotion opportunities, nor were they generally stereotyped as weak in their communication competencies.

Considering the problem discussed above, this study aimed to investigate the disparities in job-roles enactment and promotion opportunities between Malaysian female and male PR practitioners. Additionally, it sought to explore whether female practitioners adopt masculine traits as a way to counter the male-biased and masculine-centric glass ceiling. This paper's research objectives are to explore:

1. Whether Malaysian male PR practitioners are more often offered managerial roles compared with their female PR practitioners.
2. Whether Malaysian male PR practitioners are awarded more advancement opportunities compared with female PR practitioners.
3. Whether Malaysian female PR practitioners adopt masculine traits to further their managerial roles enactment and management positioning.

The following interview questions were inquired of research respondents:

- RQ1:** Do male PR practitioners hold manager roles more often than female PR practitioners?
- RQ2:** Do male PR practitioners garner more advancement opportunities than female PR?
- RQ3:** Do female PR practitioners encounter an organisational glass ceiling?
- RQ4:** Do female PR practitioners with masculine traits successfully counter the glass ceiling?

In addition, the following three follow-up interview questions were raised upon analysis of the above four RQs, to further clarify respondents' observations and elaborated experiences:

- Q1:** Most PR department managers are females. But, between female and male PR managers, mostly males would be accepted into an organisation's or an agency's top management. Please elaborate/provide examples/experiences.
- Q2:** Positions come with power, but in terms of influence between female and male PR managers, mostly male managers hold and exert more influence in idea-acceptance, opinion-approval, top-management access, etc. Please elaborate/provide examples/experiences.
- Q3:** In terms of family-children responsibilities, female managers (and also potential managers) face more burden than males, thus restricting females' advancement opportunities. Please elaborate/provide examples experiences.

This study's focal approach of exploring female-male discrepancies from a gender-traits point-of-view (feminine and masculine), versus the usually utilised basis of biological-sex differences (female and male), would open up newer frontiers for future scholars to examine the predicaments encountered by female PR practitioners, the effectiveness of their adopting masculine traits at work to get to the top, as well as whether PR women must behave like men in order to get noticed and get ahead.

The study aims to uncover whether the Malaysian PR industry also faces the problems of female PR practitioners wielding a numerical upper hand but male PR practitioners wield higher positions in the upper management domain of organisations. Its findings would benefit both female and male PR practitioners in terms of realising the causes of job roles and management positioning discrepancies so that more equal functional and positional distributions could be aspired to.

This study also sought to discover whether Malaysian female practitioners have successfully garnered managerial positions in organisational PR departments and seats within the senior management circle of organisations, so that a positive revelation with regards to this findings could become a catalyst for PR women to strive harder for equal treatments, in addition to organisational top echelons being fairer in their assessment of PR women's professional competencies.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 *Feminisation of PR Industry Yet Led by Male Management*

The feminisation of the public relations industry entails female PR practitioners making up the majority of those employed in the PR profession (Fitch & Third, 2010). The authors noted that feminisation of PR practice has been recorded internationally in the previous three decades. They added that PR women had surpassed the number of PR men in the United States since the 1980s. This feminisation trend was mirrored by Aldoory and Toth (2002) who stated that PR women constitute 70% of PR practitioners in America. Feminisation of PR profession was also reflected in European countries such as Germany, Netherlands and Sweden (Verhoeven & Aarts, 2010).

Although there are no cited figures for the number of male and female PR practitioners in Malaysia, there exist figures cited for Asian nations that also showed the industry's feminisation. In Indonesia, its PR industry, in addition to academicians and students, is majority females (Simorangkir, 2011). In Taiwan, 78% of PR practitioners are women (Wu, 2009). In Australia, PR women make up 73% of the industry (Fitch & Third, 2010).

However, there is a striking contrast between the fact that PR women are in the majority while in reality, PR men are mostly the ones who hold higher positions in organisational PR departments and also independent PR consultancies. Based on interviews conducted among PR practitioners in the U.S., respondents reported that female practitioners are often employed for lower-level non-managerial PR technician positions (Toth & Aldoory, 2001). On the contrary, interviewees reported that male practitioners are often hired to take up management posts. In a follow-up study, Aldoory, et al. (2008) pointed out that positional power and organisational influence are mostly in the hands of PR men although they are in the minority. This was a result of the majority of PR women holding lower positions than their male colleagues.

### 2.2 *PR Men–Women's Disparities in Management–Technician Positions*

PR men and women's disparities in management and technician positions were researched in the U.S. where Toth and Aldoory (2001) reported in their gender discrepancies study that female PR practitioners were significantly hired into technician positions, but less likely as managers compared with male PR practitioners. Similarly, according to O'Neil (2003), PR women were described as being segregated into the technician job category when they are employed to implement mostly routine PR tasks of publicity writing and communicating with the media. On the other hand, PR men were comparatively more likely to be employed and promoted to management positions with opportunities to liaise with and advise the top-management about organisational policy strategies.

Furthermore, according to Fitch and Third (2010), there was a marked demarcation line that clearly separated male and female PR practitioners, meaning PR management posts were often helmed by men while PR technician functions were more likely carried out by women. This segregation of genders and roles was

reflected in Dozier, Sha and Shen's (2013) study, which reported that there existed a disproportionate number of women enacting the PR technician role as compared with men who were the majority in PR management. Moreover, O'Neil (2003) stated that gender-based demarcation even extended to women when they got promoted to PR manager roles because they continued to conduct technician tasks, while male PR managers concentrated more on management responsibilities.

On the contrary, van Ruler and de Lange's (2003) research of PR practitioners in the Netherlands revealed that PR men and women had both gained equal opportunities in being promoted as managers of PR departments. However, in terms of the macro-organisational hierarchy, the authors reported that PR women still held comparatively lower positions than PR men. Two other studies in the U.S. also found that PR women have gained traction in garnering management posts: Dozier and Sha (2010), Pompper and Jung (2013), Vieira and Grantham (2015) stated in separate studies that for the first time in more than thirty years of research, PR women and men in America garnered about the same rate of manager role enactment, however, the authors clarified that follow-up research should be carried out to prove this trend of equality. This is similar to the Malaysian PR study conducted by Yesuselvi, Tan, and Suffian (2016), in which the authors concluded that the lack of perceived stereotypes and discrepancies against PR women should be re-examined via a larger sample size.

### **2.3 PR Men–Women's Disparities in Career Advancement**

From a macro-organisational hierarchy perspective, PR women lack formal power and positional authority as a result of being blocked from advancement, while PR men are often groomed for ascension onto management functions and positions (O'Neil, 2003). This is a stark contrast to the reality that the PR industry has more female practitioners, but there are fewer female PR managers than male managers (Aldoory, et al., 2008). Contemporarily, Erzikova & Berger's (2016) research found that while PR women-respondents blamed PR men for hampering the former's leadership ascendancy, the latter did not see themselves as barriers – but intrinsically expected women to hold subordinate posts; thus conveying a masculinist culture that is prevalent in societies that uphold traditional-patriarchal gender status, which has embedded itself into organizations. In addition, Vardeman-Winter and Place (2017) highlighted the long-term consistency of the PR field having 60–70% female practitioners, with male practitioners' percentage hovering at 27–37%, however, PR men overwhelmingly occupied the managerial ranks within departments and also in organisations' top management.

Dozier, Sha and Shen (2013) argued that PR manager role enactment was a significant stepping stone to inclusion and participation in an organisational top-management circle. In addition, Verhoeven and Aarts (2010) posited that because female PR practitioners had fewer experiences and exposure in enacting PR managerial job functions, thus this negatively affected PR women's chances of being promoted and included in dominant coalition in the future. The authors commented that PR practice was a gender-differential profession, which was caused by discrepancies of

power that unfairly divided PR men mostly at the top and PR women usually at the bottom. This runs counter to the sole Malaysian PR study found of its kind done by Yesuselvi, Tan and Suffian (2016), albeit the researchers had emphasised the need to increase the sample size, they found Malaysian PR women did not face work-based biases, nor did they lack opportunities for advancement.

Other than positional power, female PR practitioners also lack influential network, which is defined as accessibility to management mentors and organisational role models (O'Neil, 2003). The author added that female PR practitioners seemed to be alienated from the good-old-boy network comprising PR men who could access organisational dominant coalition's circle and take part in top-management discussions, decisions, and policymaking. PR women lack active participation in these influential, interpersonal and informal organisational networks that could aid in career advancement (Aldoory, et al., 2008). In Place's (2012) study, PR women longed for occupational empowerment such as mentor support, network building, and promotion opportunities, however, their lower accessibility in mentorships and informal networks hindered their advancement. This scenario where female PR practitioners lacked network influence and management impact was also evident in comparatively egalitarian and socially equal Scandinavian nations such as Germany and the Netherlands (Verhoeven & Aarts, 2010).

Organisational top-management often used the reason that PR women are generally more family-and-children oriented to restrict their promotion possibilities. These mid-career interruptions are found to be more often occurring among female PR practitioners. Their child-bearing and family-setting tendencies are misinterpreted as a lack of career dedication or neglecting their work responsibilities (Toth & Aldoory, 2001). Family-inclined and motherhood factors have adversely affected female PR women's advancement chances as their commitment to their tasks and careers are often questioned (Frolich & Peters, 2007). Thus, management posts and leadership scopes that take up much time and sacrifice are seen as less suitable for female PR practitioners. Furthermore, Dozier, Sha and Okura (2007) stated that women who return to PR work after maternity would often end up being offered lower job posts and also given a lesser opportunity for promotion.

### **2.4 Glass Ceiling Obstructing PR Women's Ascension**

The organisational glass ceiling is an allegory of the barriers encountered by women that obstruct their professional ascension and career advancement (Toth & Aldoory, 2001). This glass ceiling exists as invisible yet ever-present mechanisms that block females from ascending an organisation's hierarchy (van Ruler & de Lange, 2003). This work-based reality catalyses an organisational environment where males and those who are more masculine to be more favoured, rewarded, receiving more benefits and promotion potentials. Thus, the glass ceiling culminates in an organisational milieu in which women and those who are more feminine lack power and influence. In addition, a distorted scenario arises because women become encouraged into adopting masculine traits in order to get forward and rise higher (Frolich & Peters,

2007). To counter the discriminatory effects of a glass ceiling, women were expected to occupationally and organisationally conduct themselves in accordance to masculine characteristics (Jiang & Shen, 2013).

From the perspective of effective PR practices, feminine characteristics are more preferable as these correspond with the Two-way Symmetrical Model of PR. Grunig and Grunig (1992) postulated that this PR model best exemplifies how PR should be conducted and managed by the top-management of corporations and also independent PR agencies. The authors posited this PR model as the excellent way through which PR could be most effectively practised, implemented and managed. They also argued that feminine characteristics such as socialisation, mutual communication, and empathy for others make female PR practitioners not just trusted consultants to organisational management and corporate clients, but also trustworthy company representatives for consumers and customers.

Furthermore, the Two-way Symmetrical Model of PR vitalises mutually beneficial dialogues between an organisation and its public, in order to achieve two-way understanding, cooperative actions and collaborative solutions that result in advantages for both sides (Laskin, 2009). This PR model aims to reach fair and balanced outcomes that accentuate an organisation's profitability while also accomplish consumers' and customers' need for corporate social responsibility. Female PR practitioners are comparatively more caring in their feminine gender traits which makes them professionally apt in liaising with corporate clients and targeted public to nurture mutual understanding (Aldoory, et al., 2008). Therefore, feminine traits have been associated with the Two-way Symmetrical Model of PR that espouses effective PR practices, because both share elements such as cultivating reciprocal communication, furthering common understanding, and encouraging collective empathy. However, these socio-culturally perceived traits of being more considerate, consensus-conscious and accommodating have often been interpreted as less aggressive, lacking assertiveness and at worst easily subordinated. Hence, Daymon & Demetrious (2014) argued that studies into female-male discrepancies should be carried out through a feminist lens that could critically uncover power-differentials, gender-based injustices and imbalanced privileges, brought about by social, cultural and institutional realities. Additionally, Golombisky (2015) espoused an extension of the objectives of feminist PR theory to comprise social justice, hence not limiting it to the plight of female practitioners at work but also encapsulating society as a whole and social responsibility as an aim; through this, PR practice could realize its two-way symmetrical goal of becoming a catalyst to public interest fulfilment.

On the contrary, organisational glass ceiling blocks PR women from climbing the corporate hierarchy and contributing their expertise within the corridors of top-management. As outlined in feminist theory, male-centric management's discrimination and male-inclined organisational structures often limit women to lower-level work tasks and job posts. In Wu's (2009) leadership-style study of PR practitioners, masculine gender traits significantly predicted PR men and women's management styles. In addition, organisational dominant coalitions favour and promote mostly PR

men because of their masculinity in attitude and actions, such as toughness (Aldoory, et al., 2008) or aggressiveness and determination (Yeomans, 2010), which are viewed by top-management as more suited and viable to the business pursuits of a corporate organisation.

## 2.5 *Theoretical Framework*

Feminist theory is the foundational framework on which this research paper is based. A feminist theory paradigm for public relations research entails critical studies about male-female practitioners' disparities in work roles enactment, salary and job satisfaction, effects of a glass ceiling, in addition to power relations and organisational influence (Aldoory & Toth, 2002). Utilising feminist theory as a research framework, it catalyses discursive analyses about PR men and women from the perspectives of daily job functions, organisational context, discriminative reality and masculine-feminine differences (Aldoory & Toth, 2004). In a follow-up study, Aldoory et al. (2008) argued that the unfair disparities wrought upon female practitioners have been the results of historically embedded societal and cultural values and norms, which have spawned similar oppressive and obstructive consequences against women within institutional and occupational milieus.

According to Grunig (2006), feminist theory-based studies of the public relations profession and its practitioners have gone through five phases of research about gender, which are: male scholarship (focusing on men), compensatory (profiling impressive women), bi-focal (conceptualizing women and men as separate but equal), feminist (conceptualizing women on their own terms), and multi-focal (conceptualizing human experience along a continuum). The author proposed a sixth, integrative phase, which posits a more holistic perspective on male-female PR practitioners from the contexts of their work life, family commitments, and egalitarian community. The culture-based PR proponents Sriramesh and Vercic (2001) listed Hofstede's cultural element of masculinity/femininity, defined as gender-influenced societal role assignment that comes with differential status within a community or country. Sriramesh (2009) went on to elaborate that internal publics of an organisation such as practitioners in a PR department are acculturated into the societal culture, which impacts organisational and corporate culture, thus influencing all facets of their communication, interactions as well as the negotiated influences dividing men and women in their organisational roles, tasks and positions.

In their study of male-female PR practitioners, organisational positions, and power relations, Choi and Hon (2002) stated that gender roles and stereotypes are taught from childhood and form how people perceive each other and also are perceived by one another, thus perpetuating particular biases about how men and women should act. Men and women carry out certain roles not necessarily because they prefer these roles, but rather to meet others' expectations and to be compatible with traditional gender stereotypes shared by the majority of a society. Both men and women tend to take on roles that have been taught since childhood and follow through their learning based on what they perceive to be as socially accepted behaviours.

Physiologically, Reeves and Baden (2000) explained that an individual's sex (being male or female) is a biological factor; on the other hand, a person's gender (being masculine or feminine) entails socio-culturally oriented perceptions and valuations. Based on feminist theory, Broverman, et al. (1972) stated that men and women were often socially separated in their perceived status, including being positioned unequally within organisations. Occupationally, Rakow (1989) posited that men generally helmed higher positions, as opposed to women being accorded lower job functions.

These socio-culturally interpreted connotations of an individual's masculinity or femininity have been the foundations of studies on the subordination of females and those perceived as feminine (Evans, 2003). Forbes (2002) argued that feminist theory not only discloses the alienation and subordination of women but also unveils solutions to negative social stereotypes and discriminatory actions against women via personal, socio-cultural and institutional changes that aspire to achieve female-male equality.

According to Wood (2008), feminist theory focuses the limelight on women's detrimental plight at their work-place, which also causes women to see themselves as inferior to men in the organisational context. Idiyorough (2005) argued that feminist theory is a viable approach through which there exists subordinated stratification of women, as well as finding ways to counter existing socio-cultural norms that adversely places women in lower social roles and job functions.

Therefore, gender has been a means of categorising individuals by using masculine-feminine characteristics as basis for highlighting social-role differences. Although femininity or femaleness is not always undervalued, its negative bias as compared with masculinity or maleness in the majority of socio-cultural contexts that reserve positive virtues about men and masculinity has caused under-valuation of and discrimination against women and feminist traits. In spite of PR women's academic and professional competencies for PR, media and communication work, they have often been segregated to less challenging tasks and subordinated to lower job positions than PR men.

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 *Email-based Interview*

Email-based interviews formed the basis of this paper's research methodology. According to Persichitte, Young and Tharp (1997), interviewing respondents through emails facilitates data gathering and also accomplishes accuracy of contents because interviewees' transcripts are in a written form that is easily checked for misinterpretation of the initial questions or for factual errors.

The accuracy of respondents' replies is also enhanced due to the process of emailing, as interviewees get the chance to attentively read through the interview queries before properly answering them (Meho, 2006). James (2007) postulated that email-based interviews assist in garnering in-depth insights because respondents can take time to ponder through their answers before replying, thus providing clarity and

criticality in their responses, which in turn help the researcher to better comprehend and subsequently correctly analyse the descriptive data.

This study's interview questions were emailed to twelve PR practitioners to gather their personal observations as well as professional experiences that could provide insights into female-male discrepancies in their occupational settings. The interviewees' responses offer the researcher a permanent written copy that can be referred to numerous times, so that repeated themes, significant statements, and relevant quotations can be highlighted and utilised to discuss a study's research questions (Tsetsura, 2011).

Furthermore, in this paper, follow-up queries were also inquired of interviewees, based on their initial answers. This is another advantage of email-based interviewing because it grants the researcher a timely reading of respondents' replies, and develops additional queries based on emerging themes within interviewees' responses (Favero & Heath, 2012).

#### 3.2 *Research Sample and Size*

To mirror the global reality of the feminisation of PR practice reported in the last three decades in a myriad of countries and regions, as exemplified by women constituting 70% of PR practitioners in America (Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2017), a figure proximate to Germany's, the Netherlands' and Sweden's (Verhoeven & Aarts, 2010), and while no practitioner-percentage was reported for Malaysia, figures for its Asia-Pacific regional neighbours exists, such as Indonesia's overwhelming majority of female practitioners, educators and students (Simorangkir, 2011), Taiwan's 78% female PR practitioners (Wu, 2009) and Australia's 73% women in PR (Fitch & Third, 2010). Therefore, to reflect this feminisation phenomenon, this exploratory research purposively sampled nine female and three male practitioners working in either the PR, media and communication related departments of organisations or in stand-alone consultancies located within Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, Malaysia.

Interview respondents were initially contacted via WhatsApp messaging, phone-calls and also email correspondences. The interviewees were voluntary in their participation and sought no compensation in return for their effort and time spent in answering the emailed questions.

#### 3.3 *Data Analysis Methodology*

This study's method of data analysis utilised the email interview contents and categorised them as unified themes (for this study: similar opinions about gender-based discrepancies) and disparate themes (for this study: differing responses among participants), as explained by Favero and Heath (2012). This study's data analysis process identified the main themes and also supporting evidence for each of them, by sifting in detail through the email interview contents. Participants' direct quotes were categorised under the relevant main themes and catalogued to be used as quoted examples in this study's discussions.

All transcript data, including words, phrases, sentences and also adjectives used were reviewed and categorised. They were sorted and interrelated according to similar thematic patterns. Male and female PR practitioners' responses were compared with each other to show differences. Their responses were also considered separately to analyse each of their experiential "stories" (Aldoory et al., 2008, p. 740). In addition, according to Forbes (2002), data gathered are thematically grouped and summarised to develop a framework that explains vital aspects of the study being conducted. Relationships among salient themes and key terms were noted to produce an integrated analysis that further explains the phenomenon that is being researched. These resulted in identifying shared understandings as well as contradictions in PR men's and women's perspectives. Practitioner-respondents' "lived experiences" (Fitch & Third, 2014) via interview responses could be made aware and visible, thus their individual, interactional and organisational experiences of gender disparities can be heard and researched. For the purpose of this exploratory study, the email interviewees' responses, interpretations, and narratives about gender-based discrepancies in PR practice, in addition to participating female PR practitioners' experiential responses to countering organisational glass ceiling, were synthesised to facilitate discussions of the research questions.

#### 4. DATA ANALYSIS & FINDINGS

##### 4.1 *Majority of PR Managers are Female*

Almost all interview respondents stated that majority of PR managers are female practitioners. Only two respondents agreed that PR manager role is often held by male practitioners. Feminisation of the PR profession is one of the rationales given by interviewees. According to a female senior director of a PR and communication agency (12 years' experience), it is a

*"female dominated industry. I have only reported to three male bosses for the past twelve years",*

while a female executive of a PR consultancy (2½ years' experience) mentioned the industry reality of

*"a smaller number of male PR practitioners".*

Many respondents reasoned that the enactment of PR manager role is not based on biological sex, but dependent on the managerial competencies and professional aptitude of PR practitioners, such as "capabilities of work" and "achievements", fulfilling "expectations" and "higher performance". A marketing communication consultancy's male senior director (15 years' experience) explained that

*"there're lots of females leading the team, it's depending on the seniority", adding that "experience and passion are the key factors".*

In terms of gender characteristics, the previously quoted PR consultancy's female executive noted that women's feminine trait of being "more microscopic" in carrying out work tasks benefits them in the PR line. On the other hand, this respondent added that

*"more women are stepping up to be independent, confident and competitive"*

which are masculine traits, thus

*"being on par and competing with male PR practitioners".*

Regarding top-management participation, this same respondent stated that both male and female senior PR managers, i.e.: PR Directors, Senior Directors are included and involved in organisational management decision-making, and that

*"top management team consists of mostly females, hence the majority of decision makers are females".*

##### 4.2 *Female and Male Enjoy Equal Advancement*

Almost all, except for two interviewees, responded that female and male practitioners both enjoy equal opportunities in career advancement. The majority of respondents rationalised that being a woman or a man is not a factor of consideration in job promotion. According to them, the determinants of advancement potential include job-based "capability and performance", during which a practitioner could "prove their capabilities based on set expectations."

Male PR practitioners do not hold the upper hand in promotion opportunities because chances for advancement are open to all qualified personnel, based on fulfilment of on-the-job objectives pre-set and tracked by departmental supervisors and organisational superiors. As elaborated by a female executive of a PR consultancy (2½ years' experience):

*"Different positions have different KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) ... as a PR account executive, I have to fulfil my objectives of establishing more relationships with the media from different categories, able to produce and write more press releases, more idea inputs for potential clients' campaigns, able to manage my clients on my own."*

At the other extreme, work-and-family conflicts affect female PR practitioners' occupational competitiveness and promotion potential. Compared with male practitioners, PR women face a more emotional dilemma in striking a balance between work duties and family responsibilities. For PR women, family and children take up much importance and these familial considerations pose challenges to them and their career. This is illustrated by scenarios offered by a broadcasting organisation's female

senior executive (5 years' experience):

*“Top management would consider family as one of the criteria as managers might need to travel a lot for meetings, working long hours, need to socialise with other managers from different organisation. Another example would be if their son or daughter falls sick or has examination, they will often sacrifice their time to apply leave in order to take care of their children”.*

#### 4.3 Females Do Not Encounter Glass Ceiling

All interview respondents were of the opinion that female practitioners do not encounter an organisational glass ceiling that hinders their ascension upward the corporate ladder. The interviewees testified to the non-existence of glass ceiling by volunteering their own occupational and observational examples. A PR consultancy's female executive (2½ years' experience) exemplified it as

*“my company is managed by a female CEO and other top management positions in the region are led by women”.*

In addition, a telecommunications company's female retail operations manager (3 years' experience) claimed that it is a common fact that persons in-charge of PR direction are mostly females. Furthermore, a female senior manager of a media corporation (11 years' experience) had this to say:

*“In our department, the General Manager, Head of Sales for TV, Head of Sales for Radio are all female”. This respondent added a masculine traits point-of-view by stating that “females in these departments seem to be more aggressive, calm, hardworking” because they “have to support the family nowadays and they are just not relying on their husbands anymore”.*

On the other hand, feminist points of view were touched by a broadcasting organisation's female senior executive (5 years' experience). She mentioned about female practitioners' gossiping

*“as in complaining to their peers that the management is bias regarding who is getting promoted/who is not supposed to get promoted”.*

She highlighted that these informal conversations might trickle upward to affect the management's eventual decision on promotion. In addition, promotion opportunities and women's empowerment that counter organisational glass ceiling was brought up by a PR agency's male senior executive (4 years' experience) who mentioned his management's programme

*“to provide more chances for women to showcase their creativity and capabilities”.*

#### 4.4 Female Managers are Masculine

Almost all interview respondents agreed that female practitioners who hold departmental manager and organisational management positions had shown masculine characteristics. Among these in agreement, three of them clearly stated that adoption of masculine traits by female practitioners contributed to their advancing the corporate ladder. Only one interviewee testified to the advantages of feminine traits in managerial role enactment by female practitioners.

The three respondents who clearly agreed with female managers' adoption of masculine traits in order to counter organisational glass ceiling and to enter the management domain offered a myriad of experiential and observational insights. A female senior PR and branding executive of a TV-media corporation (9 years' experience) provided this viewpoint (translated from Mandarin):

*“PR work requires feminine traits to soften mutual tensions and solve tight situations. But managerial tasks involve both external relations and employee interactions, where masculine traits of decisiveness, confidence and boldness are essential. These traits increase advancement chances because being in management requires resolute judgments to better lead the team”.*

Feminine traits correspond with PR technician roles, not management requirements; this was best described by a female senior executive of a broadcasting organisation (5 years' experience) who stated that

*“in order for them (female practitioners) to counter the glass ceiling, they will have to be tough, independent and aggressive to prove themselves in the managerial role”,*

adding that

*“female PR has no choice but to prove themselves in this field that by adopting masculine traits, they can do better than male PR”.*

This respondent continued by offering her friend's work-based experience:

*“Her boss is a female PR manager who required her to come back to office even though she had some family matters to settle. The boss informed her to settle the family matter first, then come back to office. If she was a manager who did not adopt masculine traits, she would have just asked her to apply emergency leave to settle the family matter and informed her not to worry about work.”*

Another interviewee was very direct in his comments about PR women having to adopt masculine traits to get ahead. This PR agency's male senior executive (4 years' experience) said that practitioners

*“who carry female traits tend to hold technician roles”*

who he described as being followers instead of leaders. He added that practitioners

*“who carry male traits tend to hold managerial roles and above”*

and are ambition-oriented and independent-minded. The positional vantage points of conducting oneself as masculine in a corporate context were posited by a media corporation's female senior manager (11 years' experience), who stated that

*“in the business world, clients need decision makers to be more aggressive, influential and definitely to be more convincing”.*

This insight is mirrored by a marketing communication consultancy's male senior director (15 years' experience) who highlighted that

*“whoever's more aggressive, bold, extrovert, outspoken will shine among others”.*

A similar observation was offered by a PR consultancy's female executive (2½ years' experience) who said that

*“female PR managerial-hopefuls would have more potential if they are more aggressive and verbal in speaking their minds, in idea inputs and firmness in decision-making”.*

adding that an ever-increasing number of female practitioners are seen to possess these apparent masculine characteristics.

#### **4.5 Majority in Top Management are Males**

Upon analysis of the initial four research questions, three follow-up queries were inquired to get a clearer understanding of the research topic. Based on the first additional query, which asked respondents whether males were more likely to be accepted into an organisation's or PR agency's top management, the majority of interviewees confirmed that organisational top echelon is mainly made up of men.

Among the personal observations and professional experiences that were volunteered by respondents to exemplify their agreement to this male-at-the-top reality, a property development conglomerate's female assistant manager of brand and communication (7 years' experience) said that men are usually perceived as more capable of portraying “macro” roles in terms of high-level decision-making, creating and churning out big ideas, providing solutions for and giving advice to top management, such as during institutional crisis communication and in strategic planning. She added that in contrast to men, women leaders mostly reside at the PR department-level, at

which “micro” management is the nature of its work responsibilities, where “execution” of ideas is implemented rather than being brainstormed, such as the technical-related job duties of press release and speech writing, proofreading and data gathering.

Other than the practical and professional capabilities as stated above, personal and social tendencies also come into play in influencing top management's preference for promoting men into organisational decision-making domain. As elaborated by a broadcasting organisation's female senior executive (5 years' experience), male PR practitioners are perceived to be “more committed to their jobs even after their working hours” because the PR line of work requires numerous events attendance even after work, inclusive of merry-making activities such as the consumption of alcoholic beverages. She went on to describe:

*“Some clients would even invite PRs to have a drink after their event. Usually female PRs will provide reasons such as they don't drink beer, it's dangerous if they go back late. Therefore male PRs have this advantage for career advancement and would be accepted into top management because in the PR field, management needs people who are able to socialise and maintain good relationship with clients.”*

The above seems to confer a sense of institutionalised sexism on the part of certain organisational top echelons in their anointing of males over females. This apparent bias was also evident in a media corporation's female senior manager's (11 years' experience) experience of being told by her top management that a male colleague was preferred over her to “tag-along” and accompany a company client.

Although most respondents agree that males seemed to be “groomed” to take up top management posts, it might also boil down to a matter of females' personal choices, as explained by a social media start-up's female managing consultant and owner (5 years' experience), who opined that many PR women chose to work at low-to-middle management level and remained contented with where they are positioned organisationally. She commented additionally that

*“appearing like they want more management involvement has become quite unacceptable, and sometimes those who do get labelled as power hungry, although the same won't be said about their male counterparts”.*

Choosing family aspects over career prospects was also mentioned, as a digital media platform's female senior principal PR consultant (8.5 years' experience) clarified, that females with family tend to strike a balance between work and life, hence many opt to

*“stay within their comfort level and not moving upwards so they can manage well between work and family”.*

#### 4.6 *Males are More Influential with Top Management*

The second follow-up query was aimed at crystallising the comments from the original four research questions by prodding interview respondents with regards to whether males hold and exert more influence in idea-acceptance, opinion-approval and top-management access. A slight majority of interviewees agreed with this contention.

Professionally and practically, PR men were attributed as “risk-takers” by a female senior executive of a broadcasting organisation (5 years’ experience), who reasoned that male PR practitioners are more “firm” in their conviction about their ideas and thus this “toughness” becomes a significant factor in getting their opinions across and ideas approved.

This predilection for being comparatively more convicted coupled with their competitive nature makes males more influential in the eyes and minds of the top management. This was reflected in the feedback of a female managing consultant and owner of a social media start-up (5 years’ experience):

*“In terms of hard influences, to directly manipulate situations to gain acceptance, approval or access, that is still very much a male luxury. I also think most men grew up being told that you must fight for what you want ... I’ve often seen ideas being shot down by clients and my female counterparts will reply with ‘We will change it accordingly’ as opposed to my male counterparts who say ‘But wait, this is what you are missing’ and they go on to drive their ideas despite the initial rejections.”*

In addition, as similarly voiced in the previous query, men’s penchant for after-work socialisation also plays a prominent role in contributing to their interpersonal networking plus professional influences with members of organisational top echelon. This mirrors the observational and experiential viewpoints of both a male manager at a PR agency (5 years’ experience) and a female senior manager at a media corporation (11 years’ experience). Their responses veered towards male practitioners being much better at interacting and more direct in conversing with top management members, as exemplified by

*“a lot of social sessions over drinks or smoking breaks more common between top management and male practitioners”.*

Hence, these friendly networking sessions result in rapport building, access to assistance, sharing of ideas and provisions of professional opportunities for male practitioners. It brings out the interpersonal strengths of male practitioners in terms of utilising social activities as a channel to reach out to the top echelon in the midst of reaching higher up the corporate ladder.

#### 4.7 *Females Face Family-Work Dilemmas*

The third follow-up query uncovered deeper understanding of female practitioners’ family-children responsibilities that post dilemmas to their time management, thus restricting females’ advancement opportunities, too. The elaborated experiences of interview respondents were fairly split about this issue of family-work burdens. Note that many of the responses were utterly truthful about the predicaments faced by females who were married, with child or were bringing up their children, hence their tales are quoted extensively here-in.

There exist lower promotion opportunities for females with family duties and especially those with children’s responsibilities, because these complicate their roles as wives and mothers having to balance between competing familial and professional time and resources. This “juggling” act of balancing was mentioned by a female assistant manager of brand and communication at a property development conglomerate (7 years’ experience), who lamented on the plight of her female colleagues:

*“Often PR jobs are stressful and require immediate attention especially when crisis arises. Females often find this as a challenge to prioritise between family or work. Most females I know (with families) will prioritise family over career advancement.”*

A female senior executive of a broadcasting organisation (5 years’ experience) shared a similar observation about the conflict between management requirements versus family and motherly needs:

*“Management would want a manager who will commit in working extra working hours or attending client’s request whenever there is an urgent case. As after work they still need to go home and take care of their house chores or spend more time with their children. They don’t have extra time or energy to take more responsibility ... Hence, motherhood make it difficult for female PRs to advance in their careers.”*

An even dire consequence of family-work dilemmas was told by a female managing consultant and owner of a social media start-up (5 years’ experience):

*“My friend was forced out of the job for her ‘incompetence’ due to her pregnancy, when in truth, they just didn’t want to bear the burden of having to pay for a professional who would be legally on leave because a human being was growing inside her ... I’ve also seen friends in PR who had to leave their job to take care of children and have difficulties re-joining the PR industry because of their years off.”*

Noteworthy too was a somewhat reversal of opinion from a female senior manager at a media corporation (11 years' experience), who gave a rather balanced viewpoint on this issue:

*“Frankly, females are never satisfied. Most females want to be a good worker, good mother and a good wife. Ends up, too much burden, too much work and lots of complaint ... For example, working mothers are normally not being able to go on weekend business trip, because most of them need to take care of their children during weekend.”*

## 5. DISCUSSION

The rise of female PR practitioners helming managerial positions of organisational PR departments is a natural phenomenon. This is the reality of the PR line of work worldwide, where women make up the bulk of practitioners in the PR field, often outnumbering PR men by an approximate ratio of seven or more to a mere three. This feminisation of the PR industry, as reported by various researchers the world over, such as Aldoory and Toth (2002) in the United States of America (70% female PR), Wu (2009) in Taiwan (78% female), Fitch and Third (2010) in Australia (73% women), is also consistent with what was mentioned by this research's interview respondents regarding the male-female make-up of the Malaysian PR industry. Thus with the lack of men in local PR practice, the majority of women are bound to take up PR managerial roles or be given opportunities to lead PR departments as managers.

With the above in mind, it is justifiably reasoned that departmental PR managerial roles are currently mainly held by female practitioners. This debunks the near-millennial findings of PR scholars such as Dozier and Broom (1995), Toth and Aldoory (2001) and O'Neil (2003). Of course, the rationale for this beneficial change in PR women's career prospects is not merely due to the advantages of being more in numbers, but also to the fact that female PR managers are those who have proved themselves in their occupational tasks, PR expertise and leadership capabilities, as opined by the interviewees of this study. The reality now reflected the observations of recent PR researchers such as Dozier and Sha (2010), Pompper and Jung (2013), whose studies revealed the gradually increasing ascent of PR women into managerial positions.

However there is a glitch overlooking female PR managers' continued ascension up the corporate ladder, in the form of organisations' hierarchical barriers to advancement that disproportionately favour male PR practitioners. These hierarchical barricades come in the form of top managements' preferences to promote male practitioners into the decision-making circle of organisations. Thus, these organisational dominant coalitions, as termed by Dozier (1992), Dozier and Broom (1995), often lack the membership and participation of female practitioners, as if they have been stuck in their advancement possibilities at the departmental level.

Although almost all interview respondents were of the opinion that female and male PR practitioners enjoy equality in advancement opportunities, it is vital to also

take into account the departmental-management disparities in promotion prospects dividing PR women and men, as presented in the previous section. Even though it seemed that organisational top echelons are becoming fairer in upgrading female practitioners' job positions, this was somewhat true only from a meso-organisational perspective (Steyn, 2003), meaning at the intermediate departmental level of middle-management posts. It is as if female practitioners were stopped halfway in their tracks, because at the macro-organisational level of top management decision-making coalition, they are still under-represented as compared with men.

The positional subordination of female practitioners thus continues, as senior management posts are still held in majority by males. This mirrors the structural-hierarchical advantages slanted toward males as postulated by O'Neil (2003), in which she argued that formal powers are still concentrated in the hands of men, in addition to informal influences such as inclusion in after-work relational networks (joining the organisational superiors for dinner, drinks and other non-work activities) that favour male rather than female practitioners. It brings to mind the realisation that participation in these informal networks offers influential effects and thus endears practitioners to the top management, thus leading to participation in the dominant decision-making coalition.

These trends combine to present a phenomenon of such contrast, where an industry of professionals that encompasses an abundance of practitioners of one gender (female majority), most of whom have achieved managerial success and positional ascension (departmental level), in a practice where its own practitioners testify to being fair in its judgments on promotion opportunities (advancement equality) –yet– still stop short of gifting its capably experienced female members the chance, rights and status of entering and participating in its top-most echelons of organisational positioning, power and network.

To further clarify, meso-level departmental PR tasks as exemplified by clientele liaisons, customer and media relations, writing and producing PR materials and visuals, community initiatives and campaign management are the vital daily functions of PR practitioners. These are essential parts of the organisational departmental-level and fundamental independent-agency job scopes of PR practices. These functions have been reported by this study's respondents and by past researchers as being mastered mostly by PR women, hence their success in helming PR departments. On the other hand, in macro-level corporate PR, higher-level areas of expertise are prioritised and take precedent, such as ideation and innovation for profit-making aims, aligning PR policies to the business's bottom-line and shareholders' interests, assessing the corporation's impact on society's wellbeing and environmental concerns, linking reputation management endeavours' returns on investments (ROIs) to improved market sentiments and public opinions.

These macro-level corporate PR areas of expertise are the ones that involve PR practitioners in the senior management domain, in which men make up the majority. Women's lack of promotion opportunities into this top management dominant coalition resulted from their being objectively characterised as comparatively lacking

in the masculine traits of aggressiveness such as in pursuing corporate profit aims, daring to push the envelope such as in offering out-of-the-box ideas that benefit the business financially, and influential in terms of convincing company shareholders such as in pumping more monetary investments for future organisational gains. Female practitioners were objectivised as holding feminine characteristics that held them back professionally and promotionally.

Females were perceived to be solvers of relational problems that are more fitting of departmental PR tasks compared with males who were opined to be solvers of corporate predicaments that fit into senior managements' and shareholders' pursuit of fiscal and reputational successes. Furthermore, macro-level management participation needs timely and emotional sacrifices, which is not helped by female practitioners' perceived feminine inclinations of family and children being more vital as compared with their careers' vitality. Hence, second-level top management glass ceiling continues to shut out most female managers, leaving them hanging on to their departmental leadership, thus an improvement from the past, yet a shortcoming for gender-based gains.

This research paper posited that female PR practitioners adopt masculine traits to enhance their prospects of managerial role enactment and career advancement, which was reflected in interview respondents' professional experiences and occupational observations, in which almost all had testified to the fact that female practitioners who have been promoted as managers of department and who have advanced onto senior management positions of organisations had shown characteristics that are more masculine instead of feminine. Moreover, almost half of the interviewees clearly mirrored this study's postulation that adoption of masculinity by female practitioners effectively resulted in their climbing the corporate hierarchy.

Therefore, findings elicited from respondents' interview contents support previous PR authors' recommendations that critical research into male and female PR practitioners' promotion and plight respectively, requires analytical studies from the perspectives of feminist theory's gender traits-based masculinity versus femininity divide, rather than merely studying biological sex-based male and female disparities. Gender-angled instead of sex-angled research, which this paper seeks to emulate, has been at the forefront of contemporary studies of managerial and management discrepancies between PR men and women, as exemplified by more recent researchers such as Wu (2009), Yeoman (2010), Jiang and Shin (2013), Umeogu and Ifeoma (2012).

In addition, the adoption of masculine characteristics by PR women has vastly contributed to their being allocated more managerial duties, being allotted higher positions and being appointed into senior management's decision-making line-up. Embracing masculine traits has assisted PR women in facing off the barriers of corporate glass ceiling, to a certain extent, as well as countering the misperceptions of women having lesser managerial capabilities and management competencies. Therefore, showcasing masculine characteristics is a boon for female practitioners who hold departmental manager posts and have top-management decision-making

powers. It is agreed upon by almost all of those who were interviewed that masculinity is a common criteria considered by organisational management for practitioners to be considered as managerial candidates.

Feminist theory, which entails the discrimination of women in societal milieus, the marginalisation of women in occupational contexts and the alienation of women from management domains, presents a viable and vital framework through which job-roles enactment, equality in advancement and glass ceiling's confinement could be studied.

By looking at the feminisation of PR practice via gender-inclined ideologies, by analysing the negative stereotyping of feminine traits through the viewpoint of corporate hierarchy that privileges masculine practitioners, and by critically studying the effects of organisational glass ceiling from the lenses of power-control held by a masculine majority, a deeper and thus clearer comprehension appears, which benefits future gender-based research. As far back as Aldoory and Toth (2002), O'Neil (2003) and van Ruler and d Lange (2003) until as recent as Fitch and Third (2010), Place (2012) and Pompper and Jung (2013), a myriad of PR authors have ventured into this feminist-theory approach.

The fallout from this study's evidence of PR women's adoption of masculine characteristics to get ahead and to advance atop is one that begs the query: Why can't female practitioners excel in PR tasks and enter senior management by being feminine? PR is itself a profession that espouses social-relational skills, the creative brainstorming of publicity ideas, and the implementation of reputation-enhancing events; all of these correspond to feminine traits, but are disregarded as lesser in degree of professional capabilities by the corporate leadership, thus discarded as less-than-significant benchmarks to determine managerial competencies and management participation.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study evidenced that in the feminised Malaysian PR industry, female practitioners are currently helming managerial positions in most organisational PR departments. Yet, organisational top echelons continue to favour males to be groomed to senior management posts. The study also found that there is equality in advancement opportunities that benefit both female and male practitioners. However, females continued to be overlooked for senior management posts partly because they face work-family burdens. It reflects the reality that female practitioners are double-burdened when career choices and familial facts clash. Coordinating their family and motherly life becomes a complex matter in the midst of being committed to their company and clients.

In addition, findings showed that many female practitioners have successfully broken the first-level glass ceiling at the departmental level, but they continue to encounter a second-level glass ceiling at the macro-organisational level. Noteworthy too were the findings that showed adoption of masculine traits by female practitioners

helped them to be promoted as departmental managers and to advance onto senior management positions of organisations.

Public relations and communication with clients require effective interpersonal and interactional skills, thus women characteristically and naturally fit into the role of female PR practitioners due to their inert traits of being supportive and sensitive to others, in addition to their tendency of seeking friendly atmospheres and solving interpersonal problems. However, this is not the case when it comes to managerial characteristics and management competencies with their intricacies of having to deal with subordinates internally and also stakeholders inside and external to the organisation.

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