

**Women-only Networking in PR: Discourse analysis of the entanglement of barriers and benefits**

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**ABSTRACT:**

The PRCA December 2020 census tells us that, in the UK, the public relations (PR) industry continues to be predominantly female, with 68% of respondents ticking that box. It also highlights a “gender pay gap” of 21%, an increase of 7% from March 2020 and states that “this can be explained by the fact that the respondents ... are largely in senior roles which tend to be more male dominated” (PRCA, 2020), thus demonstrating a leadership gap as well as a pay one. Both of the leading PR professional membership bodies in the UK – the PRCA and CIPR – acknowledge the gender pay and leadership gaps, made starker in an industry dominated by women, and have committed to tackle the disparity.

In this chapter, I build on Liz Yeomans’ (2020) work, in which she suggests “new avenues for researching neoliberalism and postfeminism in PR” (p.44) to examine the “apparently progressive moves” (ibid) by women’s networking organisations. I analyse website texts from two women’s-only PR networking organisations – Women in PR and Global Women in PR – to explore the ways in which they construct their function, purpose and role, and to examine their position vis-à-vis the contemporary postfeminist media culture (Gill, 2007). The research takes a feminist, discourse analytic approach and sheds light on the reality of women in PR as constructed by organisations whose stated goal is to: “improve equality and diversity across the industry by increasing the number and diversity of women in leadership roles” (Women in PR, 2022).

**KEYWORDS:**

(Please supply up to 6 keywords for your Chapter)

RUNNING HEADER: Women's Work in Public Relations

1. Women in PR
2. Gender pay gap
3. Gender leadership gap
4. Postfeminist sensibility
5. Women-only networking
6. Feminist discourse analysis

**Main Body:**

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**Introduction**

Drawing on the extensive literature about women in public relations (PR) from a variety of historical and feminist perspectives as well as the extensive literature about postfeminism, women and work, this chapter provides an overview of existing research and empirically explores the function, purpose and role of women-only networking in the PR industry – as articulated by website-texts of two such networks – to address some of the challenges faced by women working in PR today.

In this introduction, I define key terms and set out the aims of the chapter. Next, in the literature review, I examine central issues from the literature, including the history of research about women/gender, feminism, postfeminism and networking in the context of women in PR. Then, in the methodology section, I explore the ways in which women-only networks present their function, purpose and role by examining texts from two organisational websites: Women in PR ([womeninpr.org](http://womeninpr.org)) and Global Women in PR ([globalwomeninpr.com](http://globalwomeninpr.com)). This is to investigate how these networks position themselves in relation to the challenges faced by women who work in PR and the extent to which the claims made have a feminist or postfeminist sensibility. This is done using a discourse analytic approach with attention to interpretative repertoires. Finally, in the discussion and conclusion, I point to the ways in which the topic of women-only networking for women in PR offers a window onto and a path to future research about women, feminism and networking in PR and beyond.

When writing about PR, I draw on Toth and Aldoory (2021, p. 45) who, adhering to Rakow (2013), define it as “communicative activity used by organisations to intervene socially in and between competing discourses in order to facilitate a favourable position within a globalized context.” When contemplating this definition, which incorporates organisations as key actors in a global setting and when writing about women in PR in this particular moment, it is important to attend to a key aspect of our times, namely neoliberalism. Eagleton-Pierce defines neoliberalism as “commonly associated

with the expansion of commercial markets and the privileging of corporations" (2016, p. xiv) and states that "studying neoliberalism means uncovering the reoccurring struggles over capital accumulation but always with an eye on how such processes are shaped by a range of conditions" (2016, p. xv). One such condition is the "growing interest in networks" (Eagleton-Pierce, 2016, p. 126) which Eagleton-Pierce posits is "a form of organisation that generates particular types of identities and interests" (ibid). He argues that networking is widely seen as "the process of intentionally pursuing contacts for personal gain" (2016, p. 127) and that this is "something distinctly neoliberal" (ibid). From this standpoint, he observes that "the appeal to social networking is commonly considered an important, even essential, activity for building and sustaining a professional career" (ibid) and that the concept of the network, particularly since the advent of the internet and platforms like LinkedIn, has become even more popular. He claims, following Castells (2009), that this rise in popularity is due to an early techno-determinism about the ability of internet-enabled networks to level the playing field of power relations. In a pertinent example for this chapter, Eagleton-Pierce reminds us that networks can and do also serve forces other than neoliberalism: "Thinking of networks as forces of liberation is also very common within social movements and civil society groups, such as in some feminist activism" (2016, p. 126). Thus, here I explore the texts of women-only networks for women working in PR to examine the tension between the role of networking to enable personal career advancement alongside its capacity to bring about feminist change.

Taking a feminist perspective, I adopt Gill's definition of feminism, and use the term "to signal a concern with enduring gender inequalities and injustices" (2007, p. 25). And in response to Dow's (1995) call for feminist scholars to situate themselves explicitly within feminism, I follow Mendes' (2015) lead and "classify my position and the project as having a 'feminist cultural studies perspective'" (p.45). Additionally, I wish to acknowledge that while the term 'gender' has in recent years become contested, much of the literature that explores women in PR as well as the literature about postfeminism, women and work, uses the terms 'women' and 'gender' interchangeably when discussing the ways in which women are treated and discriminated against in society and in the world of work. And thus, so will I, for reasons of clarity and consistency.

Feminist Methodology is a broad church and I adopt Shulamit Reinhartz's (1992, p. 6) definition of feminist research methods, that they are "methods used in research projects by people who identify themselves as feminist or as part of the women's movement". While there is no single way to conduct feminist methodology, it does imply a commitment to work "for the transformation of the

condition of the lives of women" (Brunskell, 1998, p. 39), as well as "a reflexivity which stresses the accountability of the analyst" (Gill, 1995, p. 166), which must take place from the very beginning of the research process (Hesse-Biber, 2012), as is the intention here.

The aim of this chapter is to respond to Yeomans' (2019) questions about women-only PR networks, such as whether they are simply a manifestation of "neoliberal feminism" (Rottenberg, 2014) and/or an effort to bring about gender equality for women in the industry and even beyond. The research aim is also informed by Toth and Aldoory's (2021, p. 56) call for studies to explore "networking dynamics by gender". In addition, they appeal for more research to further "build our understanding of discourse analysis [...] to reveal how gender meanings are built and reinforced" (ibid), which I endeavour to accomplish in the empirical work presented here. I do this by studying the organisations' texts themselves, employing a discourse analytic approach. I ask whether texts on women's networks' websites have a feminist or postfeminist sensibility? And whether they engender an individualistic approach or promote solidarity? Within the analysis, I examine the texts for indications regarding the "sources and solutions for gender inequality in the workplace" (Gill & Orgad, 2015, p. 340) and ask what this can tell us about the networks' position vis-à-vis feminism and postfeminism?

### **Literature Review**

In this section, I will review the existing literature about women in public relations (PR) from a variety of historical and feminist perspectives as well as the literature about women and networking alongside that about postfeminism, women and work.

#### **Women in PR**

Topic, Cunha, Reigstad, Jelen-Sanchez and Moreno (2020) provide a thematic analysis of the literature on women in PR and highlight trends in the existing lines of enquiry and identify topics for future research. Toth and Aldoory (2021) also provide a historical perspective of women in PR, and a feminist perspective. Both sets of authors concur that the 1980s "are the period when scholars increasingly started to research on women in public relations" (Topic et al., 2020, p. 394) and that there have been various themes to this inquiry in the intervening years. Both also concur that most of the research has been by Anglo-American authors from an Anglo-American perspective with a focus on the women working in PR rather than the industry's impact on women more generally. This chapter fits within this broad trajectory.

From a historical standpoint, Topic et al. (2020), detail that in the 1980s the two main avenues of investigation were what they call 'work discrimination' and 'bias against women', characterised broadly by discussions about the glass ceiling, gender pay gap, the technician role that many women occupied and a culture of chauvinism in the PR industry. They go on to detail that research published during the 1990s took a feminist turn and opened a discussion of how best to analyse and envision women in PR from a feminist – be it a liberal or radical feminist – point of view. Toth and Aldoory agree that "Early feminist public relations scholars tended toward labelling their research radical or liberal, as they attempted to explain the reasons for gender discrimination data in the field and to address solutions" (2021, p. 51). Topic et al. (2020) draw, for example on the work by Weaver-Lariscy, Cameron and Sweep (1994), to articulate the radical feminist perspective, which critiqued the liberal feminist approach to the topic of women in PR for its focus on individual success rather than collective progress.

According to Topic et al. (2020), the 2000s were a period in which radical feminist research continued to gain prominence and to focus on the connection between feminist and PR values, positioning the industry as a potential beneficiary of its majority female workforce. This is also a period in which authors of studies on women in PR began to argue that it is necessary to take an intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989) approach to research and practice. The final period analysed by Topic et al., the 2010s, are characterised by a return to the themes found during the 1980s, namely discrimination and bias against women in the PR industry. The authors lament that despite the large body of research stretching over four decades, critiquing the position of women in the industry, suggesting avenues for action and further research, women are "still underrepresented in leadership positions... [the] pay gap is a persistent problem and that both... are still linked to the fact that women primarily occupy technical roles" (2020, p. 400). In a call for future research, the authors propose focusing on organisational and social structures, which I will explore further in the empirical analysis in this chapter.

In their recent book chapter, Toth and Aldoory also set out the research agenda on women in PR from a historical perspective and address the "critiques and challenges to feminist theory, including how feminist theory compares and contrasts with other public relations theoretical perspectives" (2021, p. 46). Taking a feminist approach, they suggest that PR research that is closely aligned with a feminist understanding of the ongoing discrimination and bias against women working in PR aims to "search for ethical communication practices that can advance both organisations and their publics' interests" (2021, p. 52) and adopts a critical research perspective. Thus, they themselves are critical

of the solutions proposed by the industry to date, what they term "individualist women solutions" (Toth & Aldoory, 2021, p. 53), which they claim "continue to reinforce the assumption that women can change the inequities if they just try different strategies" (ibid). It is from this standpoint that they call for, among others, future studies about "networking dynamics by gender" (Toth & Aldoory, 2021, p. 56), a call to which I begin to respond in this chapter. In addition, I am building on the work conducted by Yeomans, in which she asks similar questions about women's networks in the UK PR industry and whether they are an example of individual and/or "collective efforts for change on behalf of all women in PR practice (and beyond)?" (2019, p. 130), a question that I will explore in the empirical analysis section of this chapter. But first I will discuss the literature on women and networking in general and the role and function of women-only networks in particular.

### **Women and Networking**

While it is widely recognised that networking is "commonly considered an important, even essential, activity for building and sustaining a professional career" (Eagleton-Pierce, 2016, p. 127), its benefit to women remains contested. In their thematic review of the literature on women and networking, Topic, Carbery, Arrigoni, Clayton, Kyriakidou, Gatewood, Shafique and Halliday identify the general practice of networking as creating barriers for women, because it is "a masculine practice that adversely affects women, primarily working mothers and those with caring responsibilities ... but also other women, as many report sexism and sexual harassment" (2021, p. 6). They also find a contradiction in studies about women-only networking, between those who claim that it "can create a bottom-up approach and help women advance in their careers" (p.18) and those who suggest that it "does not always impact promotions" (p.15). Furthermore, when it comes to the increasing popularity of women-only networking (Jacobs, 2023), which Pini, Brown and Ryan state are often "established because women have been marginalised in mainstream organisations" (2004, p. 290), they are seen by some as separatist (ibid). Accusations of elitism and posturing have also been levelled at women-only networks (Jacobs, 2023) along with critique that they display a postfeminist sensibility, and "could do more by adopting feminist advocacy approaches" (Yeomans, 2020, p. 45).

In light of these contradictory positions, I believe that women-only networks are important to study because they "provide women with the opportunity to join a public group and share their views on work-related issues that matter to them" (Villesèche et al., 2022, p. 1904) not least in terms of "naming gender harassment and discriminatory practices" (Pini et al., 2004, p. 289). And especially so in an industry such as PR, which is female dominated and yet still plagued with bias and discrimination against women.

### **Women and Work**

In their analysis of women-only networks across four female-dominated industries – not including PR – Villesèche, Meliou and Jha claim that these networks can be reconceptualised “as political arenas in which women’s freedom can be realised and advanced” (2022, p. 1918), specifically in relation to the world of work. To consider this point, I now turn to discuss the recent literature on women and work and the ways in which it situates the topic in relation to contemporary postfeminist media culture (Gill, 2007), which is the starting point of this chapter. But first a brief overview of the concepts of feminism and postfeminism.

Feminism is often discussed in terms of waves. While this concept can be contested, it is at the same time generally agreed that the first major organisation of feminism in the West dates to the mid-nineteenth century and the cause of women’s suffrage (Bryson, 2003). It is also widely agreed that feminist activism did not cease upon the granting of women’s right to vote and that calls for further advancement of women’s rights and freedoms in the 1970s constitute a ‘second wave’ of feminism (ibid). The period from the second wave onwards, namely since the 1980s, remains contested both in terms of time and character. For the purposes of this chapter, I will focus on the school of thought which posits that this period is characterised by a simultaneous acknowledgement and repudiation of feminism (Gill, 2016; McRobbie, 2009), also known as postfeminism. Central to the notion of a postfeminist culture is Gill’s assertion that “postfeminism should be conceived of as a *sensibility*” (2007, p. 254 italics in original). In articulating the elements of this sensibility, Gill states that it is organised “around notions of choice, empowerment, self-surveillance, and sexual difference, and articulated in an ironic and knowing register in which feminism is simultaneously taken for granted and repudiated” (2007, p. 271). She goes on to assert that postfeminism is characterised by “an entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas” (Gill, 2007, p. 255), one in which, according to McRobbie (2009), feminism must remain “unavowed” (p.118) and even be “disparaged” (p.16). These aspects are further explored in the empirical section of the chapter and it is pertinent to state that I adopt the approach posited by Gill, Kelan and Scharff (2017, p. 227), namely that I am “interested in critically interrogating postfeminism as a distinctive sensibility or gender regime, not in ‘signing up’ to postfeminism”, and that I aim to analyse postfeminist culture rather than be a postfeminist-analyst. Furthermore, it is important to note the connections made by Gill, Kelan and Scharff between postfeminism and neoliberalism:

*First, both appear to be structured by a current of individualism that has almost entirely replaced notions of the social or political or any idea of individuals as subject to pressures, constraints or influence from outside themselves in wider society. Secondly, it is clear that the enterprising, autonomous, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism bears a strong resemblance to the active, freely choosing, self-reinventing subject of postfeminism. Thirdly, it would seem that women, to a much greater extent than men, are called on to work on and transform their selves – and particularly to remodel their interiority, their subjectivity, for example to make themselves into more confident or 'resilient' subjects in the workplace."*  
(2017: 231)

It is this calling upon women to 'adapt' in order to better succeed in the workplace, that I am interested in here, particularly in relation to the idea of networking. Not least because networking in general, but women-only networks in particular, typically offer "meetups for professional women looking to advance their careers" (Jacobs, 2023) and one of the persistent obstacles that professional women seek to overcome in order to achieve this goal is what is known as the 'gender gap' in both leadership and pay. According to Sørensen:

*The gender gap in management positions has, from feminist perspectives, been interpreted in different ways. From a liberal feminist perspective, the gender gap is a symbol of underlying structures producing different opportunities for men and women. Within the framework of neoliberal culture, however, gendered patterns have also come to be interpreted as merely the result of individual choice. (2017, p. 299)*

It is with this in mind that I now turn to analysing the texts of women-only networks in the PR industry with research question: How do the texts of women-only networks for women working in PR construct their function, purpose and role and what can this tell us about their position vis-à-vis women and work in PR and beyond?

### **Methodology and Analysis**

In this section I present the research design, methodological approach and methods employed. To answer the research questions, I analysed the web-based texts from two women-only networks for women working in public relations (PR): Women in PR and Global Women in PR (GWPR), specifically the sections on their websites titled 'Who We Are', 'What We Do', 'Our Mission', 'About Us', as well as information about their mentoring programmes. GWPR is a not for profit, membership

organisation of national networking groups and affiliates in the UK, Europe, Africa, Middle East, Central America and Asia as well as new groups developing in the USA, Asia-Pacific and Brazil. Its members are female PR professionals working in agencies, in-house and as independent consultants. Women in PR is the UK affiliate network of GWPR. Members of both organisations are required to have at least five years' experience in the PR industry and/or to be working at middle-management or director level or equivalent to qualify for membership.

Web-based texts are good examples of what Sørensen calls "compressed narratives" (2017, p. 302), in which "since space is limited, texts need to communicate effectively" (ibid). Discourse analysis, "a concern with discourse itself, a view of language as constructive and constructed, an emphasis upon discourse as a form of action, and a conviction in the rhetorical organization of discourse" (Gill, 2007, p. 58), is used here to examine the selected texts. Discourse analysis was chosen in order to address the 'how' part of the question: How do the texts of women-only networks for women working in PR construct their function, purpose and role? Discourse analysis was also chosen because it "has an enormous amount to offer feminists", according to Gill (1995, p. 167), in particular in exploring "a range of questions concerning the reproduction of gender power relations" (ibid). In her influential work on feminist critical discourse analysis, Michelle Lazar asserts that the discourse of "popular feminism" is in "urgent need of critique" (2007, p. 154), because of the way it constructs feminism as already accomplished and therefore no longer necessary.

When conducting discourse analysis, I follow the approach that is associated with sociology and social psychology (Gill, 1995, 1996; Potter, 1996; Potter & Wetherell, 1994; Tonkiss, 1998; Wetherell & Potter, 1988). And I employ the method of interpretative repertoires, which according to Wetherell and Potter "can be seen as the building blocks speakers used for constructing versions of actions, cognitive processes and other phenomena" (1988, p. 172). Gill further states that interpretative repertoires allow researchers "to go beyond individual or discrete expressions to begin to identify patterns across and between texts, and to connect these to wider contexts and social formations" (2009, p. 351). I have found interpretative repertoires particularly useful in highlighting the ways in which feminist and postfeminist sensibilities are negotiated within the texts, through the choice and use of language.

The starting point of analysis is Darmon's (2017, p. 43) framework, which combines Gill's (2007) elements of postfeminist sensibility with proposed elements of feminist sensibility to operationalise the theory and apply it. Table 1 sets out the key elements of Gill's postfeminist sensibility alongside

Darmon’s corresponding elements of feminist sensibility. These are useful aspects of a conceptual framework to operationalise when analysing texts and exploring what they reveal about feminism and postfeminism in contemporary media culture.

*Table 1: Summary of Sensibility Elements*

<b>Postfeminist Sensibility</b>	<b>Feminist Sensibility</b>
Choice	Equality
Individualism and Empowerment	Solidarity and Politicisation
Natural Difference	Intersectionality
Irony and Knowingness	Anger and Hope
Feminism as Passe or Done Wrong	Feminism as Current and Relevant

In order to conduct the empirical work, I read and re-read the texts in detail multiple times, taking notes and paying attention to linguistic content, meanings and topics, form, grammar and cohesion, trying to reveal constructive processes, argumentative organisation, taken-for-grantedness, variation and consistency within and between texts, as well as silences and gaps (Gill, 1996; Potter & Wetherell, 1994; Tonkiss, 1998). As a result of this close reading, I identified two main interpretative repertoires – Barriers and Benefits – that can be readily mapped onto two of the sensibility elements, namely ‘choice’ & ‘equality’ and ‘Individualism and empowerment’ & ‘solidarity and politicisation’. The information in Table 2 provides detail of these sensibility elements, adapted from Darmon (2017, p. 38), which are used conceptually and analytically in this chapter.

*Table 2: Detail of Key Sensibility Elements/Interpretative Repertoires*

<b>Postfeminist Sensibility</b>	<b>Feminist Sensibility</b>
<b>Choice:</b> Assumes that equality has already been achieved and that it is now up to each individual woman to make the right choices and to create her own destiny.	<b>Equality:</b> Feminist demand for equality for all women in the realms of work, bodily integrity, public representation and sexual autonomy.
<b>Individualism and Empowerment:</b> Almost complete evacuation of political discourse from	<b>Solidarity and Politicisation:</b> Need for feminists to politicise their claims and come together in

one's narrative. Everything is personal, nothing is political.	collective action within and across borders and boundaries.
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### Barriers

Across the studied texts, there is a vague acknowledgement of barriers and “unique challenges” faced by women in PR, however these are rarely explained and overall responsibility for them is not attributed to anyone or anything in particular. For example, one of the texts states that the network focuses on “advocating for women facing **the most challenging barriers** to progression”, and another that “women can face **different challenges to men** as they step up the PR career ladder”, while another refers to “**perceived obstacles**”, all without stating what those barriers, challenges or obstacles might be, how they come into being or how they might best be tackled. The words in bold highlight the different ways in which barriers are referred to in the text, which implies an acknowledgement of common problems facing women, but stops short of naming them, thereby thwarting a recognition of the systemic nature of these barriers as well as preventing an articulation of political claims and calls for collective action. It is therefore precisely these kinds of vague formulations about barriers that get in the way of “an easy undermining precisely because they do not allow the argumentative leverage for the initiation of criticism” (Gill, 1996, p. 152). By acknowledging the barriers, without detailing their inherent nature, the texts perform a double move, which makes it hard to critique the texts and their representation of women's experience in the PR workplace. Critique of the texts is further complicated by their use of words with a feminist sensibility, such as “advocating”, when referring to the different challenges faced by women. It is stated that some of the barriers women routinely encounter “include navigating a boardroom [...] negotiating equal pay or juggling work and family or caring responsibilities”, which does suggest a recognition of structural barriers unique to women and potentially that there is a need for women to politicise their claims and advocate for change. While at the same time, this statement acknowledges that “corporate culture [...] is deeply incompatible with the political project of gender equality” (Gill & Orgad, 2015, p. 333), demonstrated by the reality that the taken-for-granted, common sense goals of women being paid fairly and not being penalised for their caring roles remain unaccomplished. And yet, the texts prevent the initiation of feminist critique further by positioning men as the taken-for-granted default in the world of work, while women are left “to play the business game based on rules made by and for men” (Gill et al., 2017, p. 240). For example, in the construction that refers to women facing “different challenges to men”, which implies that they and their needs are somehow confusing and problematic in relation to the default, male ‘norm’.

Another common theme across the texts in terms of barriers is the theme of women in leadership, which aligns with Gill and Orgad's observation that:

*[T]here is the growing space in popular culture accorded to debates about the persistence of gender inequalities in the workplace (particularly those pertaining to middle-class women): the lack of women in senior positions in business or the academy, the poor representation of women on Boards, and the challenges of combining motherhood with paid employment (2015, p. 325)*

Appropriately, it is stated that the mission of one networking organisation is to “**increase** the number and diversity of women in positions of leadership”, and there is also a “desire to **change** the landscape for women working in our industry”, although it is not made clear how the increase will take place nor what changes are required to the “landscape”. At the same time, there is an acknowledgement that “The PR & communications industry is female-dominated (67%) overall. However, at senior levels it becomes male-dominated with only a third of boardroom positions taken by women.” And yet, the same text constructs this situation as merely an “**imbalance**”; once again conceding a ‘problem’ but when it comes to proposing a solution, vagueness is employed: “to **increase** the number and diversity of women in leadership roles”, and to “**tackle issues** from flexible working practices to pay incentives and the working environment”, without stating explicitly how this lofty ambition might be achieved in real terms, beyond further abstraction, such as “**advocating for changes** to working practices, culture and policy”. These formulations function as a “taken-for-granted patterning of justification” (Gill et al., 2017, p. 242) which have their own internal common sense and recognisable meaning (Sørensen, 2017). After all, who doesn't want to see more women in positions of power, especially in a female dominant industry such as PR?! All the while leaving unsaid the structural reorganising required to balance the ‘imbalance’, dismantle the barriers and bring about equality for women through collective action, which could feasibly be facilitated by women-only networks for women working in PR, if they were to adopt a feminist sensibility.

### **Benefits**

In terms of the benefits that *are* attributed to membership of the networking organisations, the texts present formulations such as “**inspiring** women in PR to reach **their** leadership potential”, “**enabling** women in PR to build **their personal** networks”; “**Empowering** women to achieve leadership”; “**achieve individual** goals”; “**progress** in **their** careers”; “**fulfil their** potential”; and “**achieve their** ultimate **ambitions**”. The words in bold are straight from the lexicon of postfeminist sensibility. For example, the definition provided in Table 2 above for its element of ‘choice’ states

that the element 'assumes that equality has already been achieved and that it is now up to each individual woman to make the right choices and to create her own destiny'; and the definition provided for the element of 'individualism and empowerment' states that it is characterised by an 'almost complete evacuation of political discourse from one's narrative. Everything is personal, nothing is political'. Both of these elements are reflected in the individualised constructions highlighted in bold.

In addition, the verbs in bold can be classified as "cheer words" (Gill & Orgad, 2015, p. 339), which come "'ready-evaluated', laden with positive associations, linked into a chain of warm, fuzzy meanings which make critique difficult" (ibid). And yet, baked into these formulations is an acceptance of the unstated social reality in which there are barriers that prevent women from living up to the stated positive actions and outcomes. And that it is up to women themselves, and perhaps their networks, to rectify the 'landscape' which prevents them from overcoming those barriers. Analysts of postfeminism have designated this logic as 'postfeminist common sense', which has as one of its central features an "adherence to an individualist project, and [a] tendency to formulate issues in individual terms, that point away from structural understandings or collective solutions" (Gill et al., 2017, p. 231). And yet, in the same texts, there is an overt appeal to a sense of solidarity among women similarly struggling to individually overcome these largely unnamed workplace barriers. For example, the suggestion that networking "will create a sense of **community**"; "**connect** women to create a global networking **community**"; "actively working **together**"; and that the mentoring scheme provides "a great **community** of alumni". These formations, and particularly the words in bold, are on the one hand another example of the use of 'cheer words' to obfuscate the real, gendered causes of the very need to 'actively work together'. On the other hand, these words also represent a coming together of women in solidarity and sisterhood for a common cause and reflect the definition provided in Table 2 for the feminist sensibility element of 'solidarity and politicisation', which states a 'need for feminists to politicise their claims and come together in collective action within and across borders and boundaries'. The emphasis on 'community', highlighted above, provides a clear appeal to sisterhood, which offers a glimmer feminist sensibility. And so we see how postfeminist sensibilities (choice, individualism and empowerment) sit side by side with feminist sensibilities (equality, solidarity and politicisation), creating an 'entanglement' (Gill, 2007; Gill & Orgad, 2015; McRobbie, 2004, 2009; Sørensen, 2017) in which structural inequalities are acknowledged and elided, whether they are seen in terms of the barriers they present or the benefits they create for and among women (net)working in PR.

### **Conclusion, Limitations and Further Research**

Since the second wave of feminism, women have been called upon to participate fully in the world of work. They are well educated and rightly want to succeed in work and in life. It can be confusing growing up being told you can have it all only to find out that there are invisible barriers at every turn, most obviously as a result of our biology; the spectre of motherhood and menopause (Diehl et al., 2023; Global Women in PR, 2022; Jeffery, 2023), alongside the reality of sexual harassment and assault (Topic et al., 2021), creating a myriad of barriers to women's work-related flourishing at all stages of their career.

The societal reticence to name these barriers can also be isolating, which is why women-only networking is so important, for individuals – to find and experience solidarity (Jacobs, 2023); and as a collective – because it is less risky and more possible for a network to demand change on behalf of its individuals (Pini et al., 2004). As an industry characterised by high participation of women, who are also skilled at building relationships and telling convincing stories, PR and its women-only networks could be at the forefront of the fight for equality, including acknowledging the structural barriers women face – for its own women and for all women (e.g. Villesèche et al., 2022; Yeomans, 2020). Thus it is important to acknowledge the difference that women-only networks for women in PR already make: “Women's networking associations, currently focused on putting more senior women on boards through mentoring and social activities, appear to be successful in achieving their missions” (Yeomans, 2020, p. 45). And I agree with Yeomans that by focusing not just on these ‘short term’ (Pini et al., 2004) goals but also on ‘long term’ ones of transformation (ibid), “they could do more by adopting feminist advocacy approaches...taking on a broader campaigning role to tackle social injustice for women in general” (Yeomans, 2020, p. 45). And while of course this would be a welcome – feminist – outcome of women only networking in PR, I wish to acknowledge that these networks, along with the women who belong to them and along with us all, are constrained by the neoliberal structures in which we exist (Villesèche et al., 2022; Yeomans, 2019). And that it is well documented that “women internalise external discourses that shape how choices are produced, constructed and limited in the neoliberal world of work” (Villesèche et al., 2022, p. 1906). Therefore, while the analysis of website texts of Women in PR's women-only networks demonstrates an entanglement of constructions about the barriers women face and the benefits of network participation, which on the whole position them as having a postfeminist sensibility, I am nonetheless hopeful that they have the capacity to realise and advance women's freedom by “reconceptualising them[selves] as political arenas” (Villesèche et al., 2022, p. 1918) in which this

can happen. And glimmers of this potential can already be seen in the texts' assertion that a benefit of membership of the networks is 'community'.

While this study sheds light on the postfeminist sensibility of women-only networks for women working in PR, through an entanglement of barriers and benefits, it cannot make wider claims both because of the limited scope of the texts examined and the discourse analytic approach employed to study them, which adheres to the principle that discourse is "not a proxy to tell us something beyond the text" (Gill et al., 2017, p. 232). Therefore, I propose that further study be conducted into the function, purpose and role of women-only networks for women working in PR, especially to further explore their potential for feminist transformation (Villesèche et al., 2022). This could readily be accomplished through an examination of additional website texts, such as blogposts.

Furthermore, interviews with members of the two networks studied here (Women in PR and Global Women in PR), would provide important insight into members' thoughts and aspirations as well as having the additional benefit of extending the scope of study beyond the Anglo-American perspective.

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