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Opening spaces for researching feminism and public relations: Perspectives from Australia, Indonesia and Malaysia

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Abstract
Drawing on communication, feminist studies and public relations scholarship, this interdisciplinary paper contributes to feminist perspectives on public relations in order to draw attention to the disciplinary implications of the ongoing exclusion of diverse women's voices and the ways gendered exclusion is exacerbated by the marginalisation of voices from Global South, Indigenous and settler colonial contexts. Writing from three countries located in the Asia-Pacific region, the authors interrogate the field as feminist public relations scholars and highlight the need for more inclusive practices in academic processes that shape disciplinary knowledge. The paper challenges liberal feminist and postfeminist perspectives, arguing these have significant implications for the production of public relations knowledge. Instead, it argues that feminist public relations scholarship needs to foreground intersectionality and social justice and embrace perspectives and

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research outside the US and Europe. It calls for greater awareness of the ways power is associated with privilege and determines 'legitimate' disciplinary knowledge within public relations in order to challenge structural and institutional inequalities. In advocating for critical, intersectional and transnational feminist public relations, the paper argues for greater reflexivity and vigilance in opening up the field to new and diverse perspectives and improving disciplinary processes.

Introduction

This paper contributes to feminist scholarship on public relations, drawing on examples from Australia, Indonesia and Malaysia, in order to call attention to the disciplinary implications of ongoing exclusion of diverse women's voices. It emerges from our experience of submitting an unsuccessful panel proposal offering regional, feminist perspectives to the public relations division of the International Communication Association [ICA] conference scheduled to take place in 2020 on the Gold Coast, Australia. To reflect the 'Open Science' conference theme, we titled our panel 'Opening Spaces for Researching Women and Public Relations in the Asia-Pacific Region.' This title also responds to calls for a feminist manifesto for public relations, where 'opening up' means including marginalised perspectives that challenge hegemonic interests and 'closing down' 'tends unduly to be privileged' (Fitch et al., 2016; Stirling, 2008: 285). We acknowledge the ICA is a competitive conference and rejection is not unusual; however, the brief feedback from three reviewers led us to reflect on the production of public relations disciplinary knowledge from a feminist perspective and, drawing on Rakow and Nastasia (2018), the extent to which this experience evidences ongoing resistance to feminist scholarship.

Feminist scholarship can usefully identify and address inequality. Ideally it is critical in that it is concerned with power and social justice (Ciszek et al., 2022; Golombisky, 2015). However, an intersectional feminist approach requires recognition of the ways gender intersects with multiple identities, including race, class, sexuality and ethnicity, to exacerbate inequality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) and a transnational feminist perspective demands attention be paid the ways in which gender is implicated in and shaped by global inequality (Shome, 2006). This paper therefore engages with both feminist, public relations, and communication scholarship to understand the ways exclusion along gender, race and Global South divides reproduces existing structures of power and the implications for the public relations discipline. We argue the discipline needs greater reflexivity around its ethnocentric and gendered narratives, more engagement with intellectual concerns in cognate disciplines, as well as challenges to patriarchal authority.

This paper offers one such challenge, building on the work of other feminist public relations scholars and on scholarship on gender and diversity in cognate fields, in order to

establish the need for urgent dialogue and real change within the discipline and to improve disciplinary processes around the production of public relations knowledge. First, we briefly discuss comments from the three ICA reviewers and consider the purpose of peer review in order to highlight the ways their feedback is symptomatic of a broader set of problems. Second, we introduce feminist public relations research to highlight the field's gendered and ethnocentric history and establish the growing body of work embracing critical and intersectional approaches. Third, having established the need for a critical feminist research agenda, we problematise feminism by drawing on Australian, Indonesian and Malaysian examples, which demonstrate different impacts of gender inequality in the public relations industry and resistance to the concept of feminism in diverse contexts. This section reinforces the need to understand transnational and intersectional approaches and the challenges for Global South, Indigenous and settler colonial scholars in explaining and deconstructing the feminist project (Bachmann and Proust, 2020). In the final section, we discuss how similar debates concerned with race and gender have played out in communication scholarship, much of which has targeted the ICA, and yet appear to have had limited impact within public relations. We return to the production of public relations knowledge and call for greater diversity, intersectionality and interdisciplinarity in public relations scholarship.

Talking back to the reviewers

Inspired by bell hooks' (1989) notion of back talk as an act of resistance, we use comments by three anonymous reviewers in one ICA division as the starting point for exploring structural and institutional processes around diversity and the significance for public relations scholarship. The specific comments from reviewers that were the basis for the rejection of our panel proposal included:

- 'Gender was a hot topic in the eighties of the last century.'
- 'Even though the topic is on women in public relations, it will be an innovative approach to include male scholars discussing this topic from men's perspective.'
- 'First of all, this proposal lacks the regional and gender diversity.'

The first comment indicates ignorance of the significant growth and diversity in feminist public relations scholarship in the last decade and of recent calls for more intersectional approaches, which in itself calls attention to the qualification to review a panel proposal on feminism. This comment represents a postfeminist position, where feminism is safely confined to the past and deemed no longer relevant (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2016; McRobbie, 2009).

The second comment – that the panel should include a male scholar – suggests a troubling and problematic understanding of gender in public relations scholarship. Ultimately, this reviewer adopts a liberal feminist position assuming that equality is achieved through equal representation, rather than challenging and transforming structural and institutional processes, and appears ignorant of critical feminist and intersectional public relations scholarship. Including a 'token man' or even ensuring

'gender balance' does not achieve diversity; rather such strategies fail to recognise the gendered history of struggle and the ways in which women (along with people of colour and scholars from the Global South) are systematically under-represented in public relations scholarship and reinforce structural inequalities of the discipline (Ahmed, 2007, 2012; Rodriguez and Guenther, 2020).

The third comment regarding the lack of diversity relates to broader issues around power and legitimacy. Who determines who, or what, is diverse? Even raising such a question points to issues of inclusion and exclusion in knowledge production. Aside from the apparent lack of gender diversity, we are not certain why proposing a panel of scholars from one geographical 'region' was of concern, or whether there is an expectation around a more representative 'Asian' panel informed by more than four countries.[1] The panel proposal was not blind for the reviewers and we consider it is important in this paper to locate ourselves as researchers. We are an Indigenous Australian (Kokatha/Wirangu) early career researcher, a white Australian senior lecturer, an Indian citizen working in Malaysia as a lecturer, an Indonesian associate professor, and a Malaysian professor.[2]

Our initial response to these review comments foregrounds the peer review process and the ways it shapes disciplinary knowledge. Reflecting on our correspondence with each other, we were collectively 'stunned' and 'shocked at these comments from PR colleagues', which we found 'highly offensive'. We noted that the ICA mission statement commits to the facilitation of inclusiveness and debate among scholars from diverse backgrounds and from multi-disciplinary perspectives on communication-related issues. In 2019, the ICA Executive Committee released a statement 'On Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Access', which recognised longstanding inequities, including on nationality, gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity and the need for greater diversity in order to advance the communication discipline. We wrote to the ICA Executive, who were supportive of our concerns but stated they do not intervene in divisions. However, we note subsequent changes around the ICA peer review process, as submitters now rank their 'diversity' on a scale of 1–5 and have an avenue for escalating concerns over review comments.

We recognise reviewing, and often conference management and journal editorial roles, is voluntary work and that ICA reviews consist of a numerical ranking in specific categories and brief comments – often no more than one or two sentences – and these comments therefore lack nuance and context. Nevertheless, reviewers are expected to be experts who determine what counts as quality 'research' within the structures and values of the discipline; they therefore play an important gatekeeping role (Paltridge, 2017: 184–5). Furthermore, as Johnston and Krauth (2008: *n.* p.) argue, 'disciplines are shifting, convoluted arrangements' and 'good peer reviewers also need to be aware of the currents, the shoals, and the goals within the discipline.' Given the importance of peer review to knowledge production – in its filtering or gatekeeper role designed to determine or measure quality – there should be transparency in choosing reviewers and alignment of reviewers with subject expertise (Jennings, 2006) and accountability on the part of reviewers and of those who select them and use those reviews as the basis for acceptance or rejection (Lee and Bero, 2006). Given our concern with the reviewers' apparent lack of familiarity with contemporary feminist public relations scholarship, in the following section we offer a brief overview.

Mapping feminist public relations scholarship

Acknowledging there is no single feminist theory, we argue there are multiple 'feminisms' to account for the diversity, complexity, and heterogeneity of its various forms and theories (Bachmann and Proust, 2020). In this section, therefore, we offer an overview of feminist public relations scholarship by discussing liberal feminism (which emphasises equality and representation); postfeminism (as a form of backlash and closely linked with neoliberalism); critical feminism (foregrounding gender and power relations); transnational feminism (challenging a 'West-to-rest' mindset and globalising processes) and intersectional feminism (emphasising how multiple factors operate to amplify inequality). We acknowledge the long history of feminist public relations scholarship, dating back to at least the 1980s – a significant decade for white feminist communication scholarship (Rakow, 2016) and investigating the status of women in public relations (see, for example, Cline et al., 1986) – but identify the need to develop a more sophisticated understanding of gender and its impacts on public relations theory and practice.

Liberal feminist approaches, often characterised as feminism's 'second wave', draw on concepts of equality (in roles, status, salaries and, one could argue, in representation in academic journals and conference panels) and individualism (Fitch, 2016a). Liberal feminism has dominated feminist public relations scholarship, and contributed to Aldoory and Toth's (2021: 4–6) identification of three historical gaps in feminist public relations research: the uncritical reliance on individual practitioner perspectives, without considering broader societal and institutional contexts; the failure to focus on 'other voices', in terms of practitioners who did not identify as white, female or straight; and the dominance of US scholarship, evident in the leading public relations journals.

Liberal feminist discourse around individual agency and freedom – noting that such ideas are built on certain assumptions around race (whiteness), sexuality (heteronormativity) and (middle) class – are harnessed in postfeminism to justify the rejection of feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Postfeminism can be understood as a 'backlash' in that feminism is consigned to the past (and therefore perceived as unnecessary) and as an active resistance to examining structural gendered inequalities (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2016; Gill and Scharff, 2013; McRobbie, 2009; Tasker, 2020; Tasker and Negra, 2007). As noted above, we consider the review comments to represent these ideological positions.

A significant challenge for feminist public relations scholars is the need to move beyond a male-female binary, in order to address the failure of public relations theory to account for gendered inequalities in theory or practice (Fitch, 2016a; Daymon and Demetrious, 2014; Rakow and Nastasia, 2018). Focusing on gender enables a stronger understanding of power and the structural processes that produce inequality. Gender is socially constructed, performative, fluid and dynamic (Butler, 1999) and its performative aspects create opportunities for resistance (Golombisky, 2015). For example, calling attention to marginalised identities directly challenges that binary in that it exposes the ways in which privilege works (Butler, 1999; Edwards, 2018). For feminist public relations scholars, this means challenging the neoliberal and patriarchal structures of the

field and recognising the impact of gender on theory and practice (Rakow and Nastasia, 2018).

Limited attention has been paid to transnational feminism within public relations scholarship, yet a transnational feminist lens enables a stronger understanding of the significance and diversity of global inequalities for shaping disciplinary knowledge, and of the ways that Western feminism is too often the benchmark for understanding the impact of gender (Hemmings, 2011; Shome, 2006) or even postfeminism (Butler, 2013; Dosekun, 2015). Transnational feminism draws on postcolonial, Indigenous and decolonising approaches to decentre the West and Global North and offers a critique of globalising processes (Mohanty, 2013), in which public relations plays a key role. It therefore goes beyond promoting the inclusion of more culturally diverse voices and enables a more complex and nuanced understanding of global impacts on public relations knowledge (Edwards, 2018; Golombisky, 2015).[3]

Intersectionality potentially addresses the failure of much feminist scholarship to consider how different factors such as race, class, ethnicity and even geographical location contribute to and exacerbate disadvantage and discrimination. That is, drawing on US black feminist legal scholar Crenshaw (1989, 1991), who sought to articulate and complexify structural disadvantage beyond gender, intersectional feminism recognises how diverse and interdependent identities – such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality and geographic location – operate to amplify inequality. In the last decade, there has been a significant growth in feminist public relations scholarship adopting critical and intersectional perspectives and investigating the combined impacts of gender, race and sexuality (see, for example, Ciszek, 2018; Ciszek and Rodriguez, 2020; Ciszek et al., 2022; Clark et al., 2021, 2022; Edwards, 2018; Logan and Ciszek, 2022; Place, 2015; Tindall and Waters, 2014; Vardeman-Winter and Place, 2017; Vardeman-Winter et al., 2013).

Calls for a greater focus on gender and critical feminist perspectives are not new within the public relations discipline (see Fitch, 2016a; Golombisky, 2015; Rakow and Nastasia, 2018). Aldoory and Toth's (2021) *The Future of Feminism in Public Relations and Strategic Communication* maps over four decades of feminist scholarship and the significant shifts from liberal feminism to more critical feminist perspectives. *Gender and Public Relations* (Daymon and Demetrious, 2014) and critical and intersectional feminist scholarship in this journal (see, for example, Clark et al., 2021; Edwards, 2022; Place, 2015; and Vardeman-Winter et al., 2013) have opened up the field and challenged hegemonic assumptions around gender. The point is, an extant strong body of contemporary feminist public relations scholarship focuses on the ways gender impacts on the lived experiences of women and calls for greater 'commitment to eliminating masculinist norms or power structures' (Ciszek et al., 2022: 3). Feminist critique is valuable, in that it 'can break the structures created by normative and reifying narratives' (Aldoory and Toth, 2021: 29) and identify the limitations of disciplinary scholarship and its failure to address gender issues without a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of concepts such as gender and diversity in relation to particular socio cultural contexts. We believe the discipline needs much greater reflexivity around its ethnocentric history and narratives as well as challenges to patriarchal authority. This paper is therefore one such challenge,

building on the work of other feminist public relations scholars, and we trust it establishes the need for urgent dialogue and real change within the discipline.

Interrogating feminisms and locating feminist public relations scholars

As we established in the previous section, scholars have identified the need for a critical feminist research agenda for public relations and the failure of public relations theory to account for gendered inequalities in theory or practice (Daymon and Demetrious, 2014; Fitch, 2016a; Fitch and Third, 2010, 2014; Rakow and Nastasia, 2018). In order to address criticisms that feminist public relations scholarship is 'too White and too first world' in its focus on the experiences of white, middle class, heterosexual American women (Golombisky, 2015: 389) and calls for more feminist public relations research from non-Western contexts (Aldoory and Toth, 2021; Daymon and Demetrious, 2014), we consider in this section perspectives that are underrepresented in public relations scholarship. We explore how gendered inequalities are reproduced in organisational structures and in-stitutional processes across different sociocultural contexts to illuminate the richness of diverse perspectives and contexts. We therefore explore diverse conceptualisations of and challenges for feminism in the countries in which we live and work and their relevance for public relations theory and practice.

We also note how 'feminism' not only takes diverse forms, but resistance to feminist endeavours does too. We therefore briefly map in this section the histories of women's rights alongside concerns about feminist perspectives. We identify challenges in Aus-tralia, Indonesia, and Malaysia, through a discussion of Indigenous feminist perspectives, resistance to Western notions of feminism, and forms of postfeminist backlash that argue feminism is redundant. Discussing these diverse socio cultural contexts contributes to a transnational and intersectional feminism that challenges and decolonises knowledge (Bell et al., 2019; Mohanty, 2013). We include industry examples because we believe the contemporary public relations occupation is an important site for investigating feminised labour and informing conceptualisations of the field, noting the most recent *Asia Pacific Communication Monitor* (Macnamara et al., 2021) survey found women make up more than three-quarters (75.9%) of the regional workforce, yet are under-represented in senior management and leadership roles.

Australia

Indigenous feminism offers a point of resistance against the various levels of oppression (racism, sexism, classism) that Indigenous Australian women encounter by documenting whiteness in feminism, and its representation (and subjugation) of Indigenous women and moving away from mainstream feminism (Behrendt, 1993; Huggins, 1987, 1994; McQuire, 2018; Moreton-Robinson, 2000). For instance, white feminism too often plays a role in reinforcing the privileges of the Australian white patriarchy (Moreton-Robinson, 2015) and continues to discount Indigenous women's standpoints (McQuire, 2018). Indigenous fem-inism, therefore, advocates and asserts the knowledges, lived experiences, and similarities of

Indigenous women against the oppressive barriers of colonisation, whiteness, and the patriarchy (Fredericks, 2004, 2010; Moreton-Robinson, 2000, 2013).

Indigenous Australian women's voices are lacking in scholarship on gender and public relations (Clark et al., 2019). There is little Indigenous Australian public relations research, other than a small number of journal articles, book chapters, conference papers and theses (Clark, 2012; Clark et al., 2019, 2021, 2022; Fitch, 2021; Johnston et al., 2018; Peterson, 2016). This absence of Australian Indigenous research on public relations and Indigenous women's voices, in both theory, methods and practice, impedes understandings of communication practices for Indigenous peoples, positive representations of Indigenous peoples in media, and insights into public relations activism and social change strategies. Indigenous women, in representing both women's perspectives and Indigenous standpoints, provide a unique lens for understanding and transforming public relations knowledge.

The Public Relations Institute of Australia's (PRIA) (2016) first Diversity and Inclusion policy identified 'gender balance' as their significant concern 'as the number of males entering the industry was dropping' (2016: 3). PRIA's priority strategy was therefore to recruit more men into communication courses and offer greater representation and profile to men in the industry. This misunderstanding of structural inequality and male privilege echoes longstanding concerns over the perceived impacts of a feminised occupation on salaries and status and therefore the need to attract more men, despite evidence of gender pay gaps and under-representation of women in leadership and board roles in the Australian industry (Fitch, 2016a). For example, although women make up approximately 73% of Australia's public relations workforce, only 50% of leaders are women (Department of Jobs and Small Business, 2018; Macnamara et al., 2021) and in 2014 Australian female graduates entering public relations faced the highest gender pay gap (AUD$6000 p.a.) of any occupation (Clough, 2014). The policy recognises Indigenous disadvantage, but notes 'Indigenous representation in our industry is on par with the general population' (PRIA, 2016: 4). Ultimately, PRIA fails to address gender inequality, intersectional differences and the unique challenges for Indigenous women in public relations.

Indonesia

In contemporary Indonesia, endeavours that champion 'women's empowerment' are popular. Gender equality is embodied in Article 27 of the national government's 1945 Constitution and in other laws. The pre-1965 era in Indonesia was a progressive period for women's movements. Gerwani (*Gerakan Wanita Indonesia* [Indonesian Women's Movement]), founded in 1950, was an organisation of communist women active in Indonesia in the 1950s and 1960s. By 1957, it had more than 650,000 members and by the early 1960s, Gerwani was influential in national politics. Although Gerwani was closely affiliated with the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI), it was nonetheless an independent organisation concerned with an array of socialist and feminist issues, including marriage law reform, labour rights, and Indonesian nationalism. After an alleged coup d'etat on 30 September 1965, in which seven military generals were killed, Gerwani

was banned along with most leftist groups. Thousands of Gerwani members were raped and killed as part of the counterattack against leftist organisations that followed (Simorangkir, 2011).

Today, the term 'feminism' is widely understood to be a Western concept that is 'anti-men'. Due to its historic links with Gerwani, the term is also associated with communism (Simorangkir, 2011). When the feminist publication *Jurnal Perempuan* was preparing an international conference on feminism in 2016, the organisers stated 'most Indonesian feminists do not consider themselves feminists in the same sense as in the West' (Simorangkir, 2011). Growing religious conservatism has contributed to anti-feminism, with fundamentalist groups campaigning against 'liberalism and feminism' (Diani, 2016). In 2019, a movement called *Indonesia tanpa feminisme* (Indonesia without feminism) began an online campaign. Through its popular Instagram account, the movement claims that feminism is the antithesis of religious, and particularly Islamic, values. Organisations such as *Kapal Perempuan* (Women's Ship Institute), which focuses on women's empowerment in eastern Indonesia, have received death threats from Islamic religious radicals because they think the organisation aims to convert people to Christianity (Diani, 2016). However, successful grassroots feminist movements exist in Indonesia (Fathurrahman, 2019) and Indonesian Muslim scholars have challenged patriarchal interpretations of the Quran (Nurmila, 2011)

In terms of the Indonesian public relations industry, there is sparse research into the impact of gender on occupational culture and identity, other than a few journal articles exploring the impact of the sector's feminisation and 'lookism' (Simorangkir, 2010, 2011, 2013) and the presence of stereotypes (Saputro et al., 2017). Recent research identifies that 51% of Indonesian practitioners surveyed believed women hold themselves back from career advancement (Macnamara et al., 2021), thereby attributing this failure to individual agency and choice rather than recognising broader structural inequalities. More empirical research in the thriving public relations industry in Southeast Asia's largest economy (Benjamin, 2016), with a focus on the participation of women and the impact of gender and other intersectional factors, is needed.

Malaysia

Like Indonesia, Malaysian women's right to vote is enshrined in the constitution ratified at Malaysia's independence in 1957. Unlike the West, the struggle of women's rights in Malaysia was therefore not founded on women's right to vote. This led Malaysia's then prime minister Najib Razak to declare in 2012 'there is no need for a women's rights movement in Malaysia because equality has been given from the start' (A. Razak, 2012). But despite legislation to support equal employment rights, structural inequality is evident in a significant gender pay gap and in the ways, gender, class and ethnicity impact on employment opportunities, noting that women receive lower pay, fewer career opportunities and struggle to break the glass ceiling (Mohamad et al., 2006; Nik Saleh et al., 2020; SUHAKAM, 2010).

There are two ways to interpret feminism in Malaysia. On the one hand, Malaysian women do not like to be called feminists because feminism is construed as a Western

concept and practice (Ariffen, 1999). A recent survey found that 51% of Malaysians did not identify as feminist, even as 77% of female respondents stated that achieving gender equality was important (Hirschmann, 2020). On the other hand, feminism, understood as women's rights, is accepted, has a long history in Malaysia and is not perceived to be imported from the West; rather, feminism was manifest in NGOs and women's associations such as the Malay Women Teacher's Union as early as 1929 (Mohamad et al., 2006). Many cite the Muslim intellectuals in the Middle East (mainly in Cairo) who wrote on women's liberation and demanded women's rights and legal reforms in education in the 1930s (Mohamad et al., 2006).

Discrimination against women in Malaysia is often justified under the guise of religion, although this approach is heavily criticised by feminist activists, such as Sisters-in-Islam (SIS). SIS argue Islam has been misinterpreted when it is used to justify cultural practices that make women inferior and subordinate to men (Alston and Alamgir, 2012). Muslim scholars argue that a more nuanced understanding of equality that draws on Islam is required (Nik Saleh, Wan Ismail and Abdul Shukor, 2020). For example, Karim (2021) argues that women have their own – and separate – sphere of influence and therefore Western, liberal notions of 'equality' are irrelevant.

Women have contributed to the growth of the Malaysian public relations sector since independence in 1957, although women's contributions have largely been written out of Malaysian public relations history (Souket, 2021). A longitudinal study found the percentage of female practitioners in the Malaysian industry increased from 30% in 1977 to 60% in 2018 (Idid et al., 2020); however, less than half of leadership roles are held by women (Macnamara et al., 2021). There is almost no industry research on gender, even though women dominate numerically in the industry and in education, suggesting this trend will continue (Ahmad and Putra, 2008; Pheung 2018) and making empirical research into gender and Malaysian public relations all the more important.

Regional perspectives on women and public relations

In sharing these examples, we seek an understanding of the relationship between gendered identities and public relations in particular historical, social, political, and cultural contexts. What we see in these brief accounts is an attempt to erase difference along gender and intersectional lines and different forms of postfeminism (often manifested as an anti-feminist backlash) in each context. In Indonesia and Malaysia, the assumption that feminism is no longer required as women's rights are enshrined in the constitution since independence is a classic postfeminist assumption that equality has already been achieved. Resistance to feminism is compounded by perceptions that it is a Western or anti-Islam concept that fails to account for local cultural sensitivities and customs, to the extent that women's events and movements avoid identifying as feminist. More empirical evidence of the public relations industries in each country and the lived experiences of practitioners is needed to understand the ways in which structural inequalities play out along gender and intersectional lines and that goes beyond the liberal-feminist concern of equal rights and representation.

The emerging research on Indigenous feminist perspectives on public relations offers a challenge to white feminist theory and practice. White feminism has failed to adequately account for how intersectional factors contribute to disadvantage, and public relations theory has failed to adequately account for difference. Even when an industry body, which exists precisely to support claims of professional recognition and legitimacy, offers a well-intentioned Diversity and Inclusion policy, its failure to comprehend white privilege and gendered hierarchies means it remains simply a performative gesture in that it shows the industry body is 'doing the right thing', but is unlikely to bring about any real change. Worse, the concern around 'gender imbalance' that resulted in prioritising plans to attract more young men into the industry is founded on the assumption that feminism is no longer needed. Far from confirming feminism is redundant, the examples we offer here indicate the urgent need to consider gender and power in public relations scholarship, rather than render ongoing inequality invisible.

Opening up (and closing down) public relations scholarship

We acknowledge that many of the issues we discuss in this paper have been strongly debated in recent years within communication disciplines and in ICA journals and yet these debates appear to have limited impact within the ICA public relations division (as evidence, we point to the reviewers' comments). Public relations tends to operate within a disciplinary silo with limited engagement even with cognate fields such as communication and media studies (Fitch 2016b; Hatherell and Bartlett, 2006). White, cis-gendered, heterosexual men are overrepresented in communication studies (Ng et al., 2020: 145) and similar structural inequalities and asymmetries are evident in citation practices and journal publication (Chakravartty et al., 2018), communication handbooks (Mayer et al., 2018) and journal editorial boards and global rankings that favour the US over non-Western countries (De Albuquerque et al., 2020). Scholars have noted that the introduction of diversity policies and banning of 'manels' at ICA does not mean that structural issues around inequality have been resolved and that 'that in our supposedly post-feminist, post-racial era of complexity, gender, sexual, and racial inequality stubbornly remain in communication scholarship' (Mayer et al., 2018: 61). As former ICA president, Paula Gardner (2018: 9), argued in response to diversity issues at ICA, change in equitable representation:

> means personally seeking out scholarship from underrepresented regions of the ICA and the world to employ in our teaching and research. It means asking newcomers to the ICA about their research and adding new voices to research conversations and networks.

For Gardner, then, everyone is responsible for addressing structural inequality and creating opportunities for marginalised voices and perspectives.

In general, feminist public relations scholarship is not overly critical of globalisation and neoliberalism, despite the centrality of public relations to globalising processes (Edwards, 2018; Golombisky, 2015). Transnational feminism offers a useful counter-narrative in disciplines criticised for their US and European bias (Golombisky, 2015) and

can, to paraphrase Bardhan (2003), rupture the field's metanarratives. More research from outside the US and Europe helps propel public relations scholarship from a Global North understanding of feminism conceptualised as seeking equality along liberal feminist lines to a stronger social justice perspective concerned with how inequality is manifest more broadly in society (Fitch, 2016a; Golombisky, 2015). Comparative and cross-national research may therefore be of value in investigating the dynamics of gender in diverse national and cultural contexts and countering universalist and ethnocentric approaches (Bachmann and Proust, 2020).

This paper has highlighted diverse feminisms in order to identify the significance of thinking through public relations theory and practice with a feminist lens and situated in specific social and cultural contexts. We are not attempting to theorise an Asian understanding of public relations, but rather to expose the ways in which excluding diverse, regional voices compounds what Mukherjee (drawing on Mills (2007)) refers to as an 'epistemology of ignorance' (2020: 159). Public relations is an interesting example, given its traditional reliance on industry as a dominant referent and its primarily functionalist paradigm mean that it has struggled for academic legitimacy and disciplinarity (Hatherell and Bartlett, 2006). Yet, it is, at least in recent decades, a highly feminised occupation in many countries and therefore a useful site for thinking through the operation of gender in relation to communication industries. It is also less unique than many of its theories suggest, given that many practitioners move in and out of public relations and other communication and media roles.

We offer two examples to show how such transnational and intersectional research challenges the universalism and ethnocentricity of the dominant paradigm for public relations. First, Filipino-Australian and US-educated academic Marianne Sison describes her experiences as a female, migrant academic in Australia in an autoethnographic account: 'Even my own writing then was generic, devoid of any cultural references so that I could be accepted and be assimilated in the world of Western dominated publishing and PR practice' (2016: 38). Sison identifies the tensions around establishing a successful academic career, which led her to initially suppress her own cultural identity. Sison's (2014, 2016) work relates and situates her stance through a postcolonial feminist lens.

Second, Clark's scholarship takes a decolonial Indigenous feminist lens (Clark et al., 2019, 2021, 2022). Their Indigenous feminist position is influenced by pioneering Quandamooka woman Aileen Moreton-Robinson's (2013) Indigenous women's standpoint theory, which critiques and identifies the absence of cultural components in mainstream feminism and gendered/women's differences in Indigenous contexts. As a theoretical approach to providing understanding and insight to the research positions and perspectives of Indigenous women, Indigenous women's standpoint theory centres ways of being and belonging (ontology), ways of knowing (epistemology), and ways of doing (axiology). Both Sison and Clark's work offer important challenges to disciplinary knowledge by calling attention to the ways dominant norms and narratives shape public relations scholarship.

Conclusion

We have shared in this paper the mundane, everyday experience of the rejection of a panel proposal because it enables a discussion around structural inequalities, such as the silencing of women's voices from under-represented regions and contexts, in the production of knowledge. Feminism is critical to understanding the impact of gender on everyday academic life, as well as the exclusionary processes of knowledge production (Bell et al., 2019). Rejecting the panel on the grounds it lacked gender diversity is to fundamentally misunderstand why discussions around feminism remain urgent and relevant. Drawing on Ahmed (2007, 2012), demanding gender balance in panels hides struggles for injustice, shuts down debates about raced/gendered others (and therefore about disciplinary white male privilege and ethnocentrism), and locates feminist epistemologies firmly outside the production of knowledge. Other scholars have confirmed the extent to which gender and race are embedded in communication scholarship; according to Mukherjee (2020), it is part of its intellectual DNA. As public relations scholars, we therefore urgently need to examine how structural inequalities operate in our institutions and impact the production of knowledge and the ways we define expertise. As feminist scholars, we believe that sharing our everyday experience of academic life in this way offers an important act of provocation, transgression, and resistance (Fitch et al., 2016).

This paper builds on the significant work by communication scholars Chakravartty et al. (2018), Mayer et al. (2018) and others that produced convincing empirical evidence around the ways knowledge production perpetuates gender and racial inequality and the need for greater vigilance around addressing such inequality. It also addresses Gardner's challenge to seek out, read, and cite diverse research, and tackle our shared '#CommunicationSoWhite problem' (2018: 1). We note that the revised ICA panel requirements now mandate gender balance. This still does not address the historic and structural inequalities around gender and serves only to elide white, patriarchal and Global North privilege and render it invisible.

This paper calls for greater awareness of the ways power is associated with privilege and determines 'legitimate' disciplinary knowledge. It offers three important theoretical insights. First, it argues that having diversity policies does not mean that understanding diversity has been achieved. Rather, it demonstrates how the existence of institutional diversity policies enables tokenistic inclusion practices (evident in one reviewer's request to include male scholars and in the Australian professional association seeking to recruit more young men). Identifying how these exclusionary mechanisms continue to play out will encourage greater reflexivity and vigilance; it will also improve peer review processes and transparency in public relations research. Second, this paper highlights the marginalisation of critical, transnational and intersectional feminist perspectives in disciplinary processes (evident in one reviewer's comment confining gender concerns to the 1980s). Ironically, critical feminist research is concerned with underlying processes around knowledge production and the impact of perpetuating inequality along gender lines. Researching gender and public relations in contexts outside the US and Europe and offering intersectional and transnational feminist perspectives challenges the gendering

and ethnocentrism of the field and enables new ways of decolonising public relations knowledge and reconceptualising feminised labour in communication industries globally. Finally, in drawing on communication and feminist scholarship, this paper makes a significant contribution in its engagement with broader interdisciplinary concerns. These concerns are well documented in recent communication scholarship, and have proved challenging for other communication sub-fields (see, for example, Ng, White and Saha who identify 'the complicity of the academy in perpetuating racial and intersecting hierarchies' and the hegemonic institutions – including ICA divisions – that are resistant to change (2020: 143)). Public relations risks becoming less and less relevant if it does not engage with broader intellectual debates and fails to confront its gendered, ethnocentric and privileged construction of knowledge.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. The same division that rejected our panel due to the lack of regional and gender diversity has had successful 'regional' panels, including one from Latin America at the ICA 2019 conference that led to a special issue in this journal.
2. The original panel included a senior lecturer from New Zealand, who has since left the academy.
3. Drawing on Dosekun, we argue the Global South and the non-West are 'dialectically constituted and differentiated by historicized discourses, imaginaries, and material inequalities, including imperialist ones' (2015: 961) and therefore more than geographical locations. These concepts are useful for challenging public relations' dominant paradigm, founded on primarily US public relations scholarship (L'Etang, 2009).

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