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## Public Relations Review



## Promoting the Vampire Rights Amendment: Public relations, postfeminism and *True Blood*



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## ABSTRACT

Scholarship on public relations in popular culture presents an uncritical and unproblematic understanding of the representation of public relations. The aim of this study is to offer an alternative reading by examining a television series, which foregrounds public relations techniques and irony, and by situating this study within postfeminist scholarship and the vampire genre. It analyses the representation of public relations in HBO's television series, *True Blood*, focusing on the campaign to pass the Vampire Rights Amendment run by American Vampire League. The findings reveal there is no single reality of public relations. Instead, multiple discourses of public relations invite the audience to engage critically with public relations concepts and meaning-making. The representation of a powerful, female practitioner highlights the paradoxes of postfeminism and does not resolve gender issues. Public relations scholars must begin to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the processes of representation in popular culture, including the subversive use of humour and irony to encourage critique of normative ideals, and the significance for popular understandings of, and engagement with, public relations.

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### 1. Introduction

Scholarship on public relations in popular culture presents an unproblematic understanding of the representation of public relations in film and television. For example, scholars frequently note these representations do not reflect the 'reality' of the industry, comparing the portrayal of female practitioners with industry statistics or discussing whether public relations is presented as either a strategic management practice or low level, technical tasks. In this paper, I consider the representation of public relations in Alan Ball's popular HBO television series, *True Blood*. The series, adapted from Charlaine Harris' novels, the Southern Vampire Mysteries, was launched in 2008, with a seventh and final season to be broadcast in 2014. In addition to a cult following, the series has attracted considerable scholarly interest. This paper analyses a fictional public relations campaign run by the American Vampire League (AVL). The campaign, with obvious echoes to social movements in the U.S., aims to pass the Vampire Rights Amendment (VRA), ensuring equal rights and full citizenship for vampires, who have recently 'come out of the coffin' thanks to the development of synthetic blood.

The aim of this paper is to offer an alternative reading of the representation of public relations in popular culture, by situating this study within postfeminist scholarship and by examining a television series that self-consciously parodies public relations techniques. I investigate representations of public relations in the first four series, finishing with the bloody death of AVL public relations spokesperson turned bad, Nan Flanagan. I relate my discussion to scholarship on public relations

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and popular culture, focusing on postfeminism in order to problematise the representation of public relations practitioners and public relations activity and to highlight the instability of identity. In this way, public relations scholars can begin to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the processes of representation in popular culture, and the significance for popular understandings of, and engagement with, public relations. I explore the AVL public relations strategy in terms of the promotion of its fictive cause and the intertextual marketing of the television series, which, I argue, extends, and plays with, the narrative, parodying public relations texts and techniques. In addition, I situate this study within scholarship on vampires in order to argue that the representation of public relations in *True Blood* situates the 'knowing' audience as understanding – and indeed resisting – public relations. The use of irony is significant and encourages critical readings by, and engagement with, a media-literate audience.

This paper is structured in three sections. I review first the scholarship on popular culture and public relations; postfeminism and popular culture; and on *True Blood* and postfeminist Gothic. In the second section, I present my analysis of the representation of public relations in the first four series, which ran from 2008 to 2011. I structure this discussion around the representation of the female public relations practitioner, Flanagan; the AVL public relations campaign; and the significant intertextuality and audience engagement, extended through the marketing of the series. In the final section, I consider the implications for public relations research in popular culture.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. *Popular culture and public relations*

There have been a number of descriptive and thematic studies, which examine public relations in popular culture. For example, studies of government public relations practitioners in film found practitioners tend to be predominantly white, male and untrustworthy or, at least, unhelpful (Lee, 2001, 2009). Similarly, Miller (1999) analysed the representation of public relations in movies and books in the period 1930–1995, and concluded that practitioners tend to be presented negatively, with antisocial characteristics such as alcoholism, deceitfulness and promiscuity prevalent. While the majority of practitioners were men, female practitioners were often included as a love interest, and therefore portrayed as 'young, single and desirable' (Miller, 1999, p. 7). These findings – that women tend to be underrepresented in fictional portrayals of public relations practitioners, and are mostly attractive and unmarried – are confirmed in other, more recent studies (Johnston, 2010; Saltzman, 2012). Although portrayals of female practitioners in film and television have increased in the last decade (Johnston, 2010; Lee, 2009; Saltzman, 2012), the female practitioners continue to conform to a particular stereotype: 'they are all single (or divorced), white and middle class' (Johnston, 2010, p. 13). Morris and Goldsworthy (2008) note that popular culture representations of public relations are highly gendered: as either female, trivial and associated with fashion and hospitality or male, serious and involved in corporate and government work.

Scholars agree that public relations is often represented inaccurately on screen (Johnston, 2010; Lambert & White, 2011). In one of the earliest investigations into public relations in popular culture, Miller concluded screen portrayals do not accurately convey public relations activity, in terms of its strategies and tactics, suggesting public relations is presented as either 'magic, which only a magician with secret knowledge can perform' or 'almost embarrassingly easy – a phone call or a cocktail with a reporter is all it takes' (Miller, 1999, p. 23). In a more recent study, Johnston (2010) compares the gender breakdown of screen portrayals with the public relations industry to suggest audiences gain an inaccurate understanding of public relations through popular culture. Female practitioners mostly work in 'publicity, media and event-based work' and public relations is often presented as 'manipulative, scheming and unethical, where men are the most senior and women are in subordinate roles' (Johnston, 2010, p. 13). However, these understandings of the 'reality' of the industry are constituted within the field's dominant paradigm, which constructs public relations as an ethical and strategic management profession. I argue elsewhere that such understandings of public relations – as a professional and strategic practice as opposed to low-status technical activity, such as publicity and promotion – stem in part from professional anxiety over the impact of the industry's feminisation (Fitch & Third, 2010). The conclusions drawn from these studies suggest an uncritical understanding of public relations and of representational processes. However, Rhodes and Westwood argue that many popular culture representations of work are 'inherently and explicitly critical' and therefore enable a critical interrogation (2008, p. 2).

### 2.2. *Postfeminism and popular culture*

Postfeminism appears to celebrate female autonomy and individual choice, with scholars noting the close connection between postfeminism and neoliberalism (Adrieans, 2009; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004, 2009). Postfeminist texts are characterised by a number of themes such as the female body as a site of surveillance and consumerism; the sexualisation of culture (and the portrayal of women as sexually powerful); and individualism, where women are characterised as autonomous beings (Gill, 2007). They offer a kind of anti-feminism, where the rhetoric of 'free choice ... very effectively erases the political' (Thornton, 2010, p. 97). Postfeminist scholars frequently draw on analyses of *Sex and the City* and *Bridget Jones's Diary*, both of which have as central protagonists female publicists or public relations practitioners, to illustrate the workings of postfeminism (see, for instance, Isbister, 2008; McRobbie, 2004). Isbister (2008) notes the apparent contradictions in representations of feminism, femininity and heteronormativity in popular postfeminism, arguing that these contradictions highlight the paradoxes as feminist ideals are assimilated into a heteronormative discourse.

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