



## Lookism in Indonesia's public relations industry



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### ARTICLE INFO

Available online 13 June 2013

### SYNOPSIS

As a feminized profession, public relations is dominated by women in numbers, but dominated by men in power and responsibility. Because in Indonesia, public relations is often regarded as frontliners of the organization, as opposed to a managerial function, an emphasis on physical attractiveness is placed on its practitioners, thus promoting lookism. This article aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of PR professionals and students toward the existence of lookism in their field?
2. Do public relations professionals and students regard lookism as an effect of the feminization of the profession?

In-depth interviews were conducted with 50 public relations professionals and 125 public relations students in the Jakarta area. Findings show that lookism is present in Indonesia's public relations industry. While practitioners oscillate from negating and admitting the existence of lookism, students are fully aware of such discrimination, and agree that attractiveness is essential in public relations.

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### Introduction

In Indonesia, as in most other countries, public relations is regarded as a female profession, in which women have entered the conventionally male dominated fields of finance, politics, and government, and even heavy industry. This common notion is supported by the number of young women getting into college majors in public relations, and women predominating in its teaching. Many women are also setting up their own agencies and are even winning the top jobs in major public relations companies. In such a patriarchal country as Indonesia, public relations seems to be making gender equity a reality. But is it really?

Grunig, Toth, and Hon (2001) claim that women find public relations attractive because the career obstacles do not seem too difficult and these women can achieve professional status. Other attractive factors include remuneration, flexibility, and promotion prospects. Most importantly, women find public relations attractive because traditionally feminine skills in

communication—empathy, networking, and multi-tasking—are encouraged and appreciated. Hence, the feminization of public relations seems to be more advantageous for women. Nevertheless, many public relations feminist scholars (e.g., Cline et al., 1986; Fröhlich, 2004; Grunig et al., 2001; Simorangkir, 2009) argue that the increasing number of women in public relations actually camouflage the negative impacts of such feminization. In Indonesia, one of the effects of this feminization is prejudice on grounds of appearance, also known as *lookism* (Simorangkir, 2009).

Budgeon (2003) says that today's society has become ocular centric because people increasingly tend to identify themselves and others through their eyes and therefore construct self-identity based on the physical appearance. Hence, ultimately the outer appearance becomes what is most important. Indeed, findings from labor-market research show that attractiveness is highly awarded while unattractiveness is penalized, as Hammermesh claims, attractive workers who interact with the company's clients earn more

year after year, and that fact is reinforced when these attractive workers inspire other workers and also increase their productivity (Hammermesh & Biddle, 1994).

In many Western countries, there are antidiscrimination legislations that aim to prevent denying employment on the basis of “weight and personal appearance” and “facial features, build and height” (Greenhouse, 2003; Saltau, 2001). Nevertheless, Cavico, Muffler, and Mujtaba (2013) argue that appearance-based discrimination is not illegal in the USA, unless it “can be connected to a protected category, and thus converted into a discrimination claim based on race, color, sex, or any other protected characteristic under civil rights laws.”

In Indonesia, discrimination based on physical appearance can be found every day through the hundreds of job ads for public relations positions that state ‘attractive appearance’ as one – if not the main – criteria for applicants. Another common criterion is ‘female’. Thus, despite of having been defined by forefathers Ivy Lee and Edward L. Bernays as “a management function, which tabulates public attitudes, defines, the policies, procedures, and interests of an organization...followed by executing a program of action to earn public understanding and acceptance” (Seitel, 2007), public relations practitioners in Indonesia are often regarded as mere frontliners of the company they represent, and are not part of the managerial function of the company (Ananto, 2003; Prayitno, 2001), and because they are regarded as mere frontliners, companies continuously require attractiveness from their applicants. This becomes a vicious cycle.

This article seeks to analyze the extent to which public relations practitioners in Indonesia – being identified by society, including employers, through their outer appearance – construct their own identity through their outer appearance. It seeks to find out what these practitioners and students think of the existence of lookism in their field. Therefore, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of PR practitioners and students toward the existence of lookism in their field?
2. Do public relations practitioners and students regard lookism as an effect of the feminization of the profession?

## Research method

In order to answer the research questions, data were gathered through the qualitative method of in-depth interviews. The researcher obtained a list of 100 public relations practitioners and educators based in the Jakarta area from the directory of a professional association. After contacting the practitioners via email, 50 practitioners agreed to participate in this study. All interviews were conducted in Jakarta because as the nation's capital, it is the center of the PR industry in Indonesia. In fact, more than half of public relations practitioners in Indonesia are based in Jakarta.

With the help of administrators from four private universities that offer public relations programs in the Jakarta area, the researcher also conducted interviews with 125 students majoring in public relations. The ages of the students range from 18 to 22. All interviews were conducted between the years 2009 and 2011. Both the interviews with practitioners and with students lasted an average of 30 min.

Public relations practitioners were chosen as respondents to explore their experience and perception about lookism in public relations and whether they perceive lookism as a gendered discrimination as an effect of the feminization of the industry. On the other hand, students were also interviewed because unlike experienced practitioners, students have only learned about public relations from the classroom. Therefore their knowledge about public relations may be strictly normative. Moreover, the vast majority of books on public relations used in universities come from the United States, thus the students are likely to envision public relations as described in their textbooks. Nevertheless, the notion that public relations is a feminine job and that it often requires attractiveness is commonly held in Indonesia, and the researcher has yet to encounter any textbook that links public relations to attractiveness. Therefore, the researcher is interested in knowing whether public relations students are aware of the existence of lookism in their future professional field, and what their perception is of such discrimination.

The interview transcriptions were then subject to content and interpretative phenomenological analyses based on the study's research questions. The researcher looked for main themes and supporting evidence of each of these main themes, which included: Views on the perception of PR as a feminized profession, views of lookism, views on the connection between gender and lookism, and personal experiences that may be linked to lookism. The questions asked to the practitioners were similar to the ones asked to the students, except, practitioners were asked about their experiences with lookism and other types of discrimination in the course of their career, while students were asked about what they know about public relations from the classroom and what they think of lookism and other discriminations that they may encounter upon entering the workforce. Direct quotes from participants were then cataloged under main themes, and evidences of lookism and the opinions of the practitioners and students were analyzed using a feminist theoretical perspective, and cultural discourses on attractiveness.

## Public relations in Indonesia

Many countries have adopted American or European public relations principles but still develop the public relations profession according to their own cultures (Josephs, 1990). Therefore, a mere explanation of international public relations, or even public relations in Asia, would not be sufficient to understand about public relations in Indonesia, as it is heavily influenced by Indonesian culture, politics, and socioeconomic background. Although numerous research studies are conducted yearly by Indonesian scholars, most of them focus on the public relations practice of certain specific organizations. Very few empirical studies have focused on Indonesian public relations principles.

Some argue that public relations began in Indonesia shortly after the country's declaration of independence in 1945, when Indonesia decided to publicize its independence to the world. Others, however, argue that modern public relations was introduced to Indonesia in the early 1950s when multinational companies entered the country (Ananto, 2003). The commonly used Indonesian term for public relations is

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