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Taking action in the first five years to increase career equality: The impact of professional relationships on young women's advancement

Abstract

- **Purpose** - The purpose of this paper is to examine how young women understand and make meaning of their status as early-career women in the creative communication industry, which is typically dominated by male leadership. It explores how professional relationships influence their transition into full-time employment and influences their career trajectories.
- **Design/methodology/approach** - Interviews with 31 women in the first five years of their communication careers provided insights into how they experience professional relationships in the workplace in relation to leadership advancement. Inductive coding, a feminist organizational communication lens and literature on mentorship and role modeling was used to explore the standpoint of these young women.
- **Findings** - Young women understand professional relationships are necessary for acclimation and professional development. Our analysis revealed an intersection of three distinct ways these relationships help young women cultivate a strong career foundation, positioning themselves for leadership opportunities.
- **Originality/value** - Developing a deeper understanding of women worker's realities, this research encourages industries to regard the entire career path, emphasizing the importance of beginning socialization experiences in the workplace. It offers actionable managerial practices, and it drives a new scholarly focus on a demographic critical to closing the leadership gender gap.
- **Practical implications** - This study provides insight into the experiences of early-career women, a group significantly overlooked by industry and research as a way to increase career equity. Findings from this study guide programmatic and socialization practices to help young women overcome barriers.
- **Keywords** - early-career, gender, feminism, mentorship, strategic communication, female leadership
- **Paper type** - Research paper

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Introduction

Gender inequality in the professional environment is not a contemporary issue; women have been fighting for fair treatment since they entered the workforce. Women earn just \$.79 for every dollar their male counterpart makes (“The State of the Gender Pay Gap,” 2019). A focus of many organizations and campaigns, the public light on this issue is bright and awareness is high. However, change is slow-paced and women are still struggling to keep up with their male counterparts. In particular, women remain significantly underrepresented in leadership roles (Lean In, 2021), where they would have the opportunity to have a deeper impact on gender issues impacting early-career professionals (those in the first five years of full-time employment). In the creative communication field, although women make up the majority of workers, just 29 percent hold senior leadership positions in advertising (The 3% Movement, 2017). In public relations, 60-80% of the workforce is comprised of women, while just 30% of agency leadership chairs are held by women (Arenstein, 2019).

The creative communication industry is just one industry which provides access to the lived experiences of women traveling a career path fraught with historic and systemic inequities (Dubrowski et al., 2019; Everbach, 2014; Place, 2012). These women navigate a career path along which they face many gendered barriers; these include, but are not limited to, falling behind male counterparts due to motherhood, the invisible labor of managing a household, and hegemonic environments favoring men with tasks and promotion (Grow & Deng, 2021). Women have historically used their power to service others or to empower others, rather than ascend leadership ranks in professional careers (Miller, 1982). The professional environment is more

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conducive to men negotiating a career path to leadership, and much research focuses on this gender inequity and the experiences of mid-to-senior level women facing those challenges.

However, little is known about how early-career women come to understand those barriers and how they can be successful as they travel a career path alongside their male peers. The first five years are crucial in setting women up to be knowledgeable about the industry so that they are aware of the power dynamics and the subsequent impact of those on their opportunities for leadership.

The first five years as a full-time employee shapes individuals' perceptions of their personal abilities, which impacts young professionals' outlook and influences their career paths in the future (Claes & Ruiz-Quintanilla, 1998; LaGree & Olsen, 2022; Manuel, 2003). Early-career experiences within organizational settings help young women understand opportunities or barriers to leadership development (Kowtha, 2013). Additionally, positive early-career experiences are associated with proactive skill development and career advancement (Claes & Ruiz-Quintanilla). These are all reasons why the early-career phase, the first five years of professional employment, is the focal point of the present study.

A key piece of this early-career experience includes meaningful professional relationships and role modeling as a means to effectively acclimate young women to an organization, equipping them with skills outside of those traditionally taught in onboarding practices and in undergraduate classrooms (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013). Research in this area lacks targeted sample groups, including those working in creative communication fields that have a clear gender diversity issue (The 3% Movement, 2017). Further, traditional quantitative methods do not allow for a deep exploration of those individuals involved, which is necessary to understand their perceptions and developmental processes (Merriam, 2002). Therefore, this study

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seeks to fill those gaps and address the critical, formative first five years for women working in creative communication roles.

Feminist organizational communication theory (Buzzanell, 1994) provides a lens through which to study these relationships, ultimately informing the industry on how to create an environment that supports young women, setting them up for success in ways it has historically always set up young men. By examining the presence and subsequent impact of professional relationships and the role they play on the development of early-career women (ECW), we can begin to understand how ECWs should leverage themselves to pursue continued promotion, ultimately advancing to senior leadership positions further down their career paths. Equally important is the impact these findings can have on current industry leadership, a group that should recognize the powerful role they have in influencing and advising future leaders in creative communication.

Literature Review

Gender Issues in Creative Communication Fields

While women are increasingly common as midlevel managers in the workplace, they rarely reach positions with the most power (Eagly and Karau, 2002). Current research reveals the lack of investment in gender diversity and a disconnect in resources being invested to improve the lack of belonging new hires feel (The 3% Movement, 2017; Lum, 2019), suggesting that the industry needs additional resources to implement impactful programming aimed to address this issue. Additionally, gender is an integral part of adapting to and integrating into organizational life (Acker, 2006; Naukkarinen & Bairoh, 2022; Nyström, 2010).

Gregory (2016) reported that the experiences of women in advertising's creative departments revealed hostility, that women were unwelcome, and men creative directors and

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clients who were men provided an anti-women sense in the agency. In both advertising and public relations, the traditional gender roles of men show them as dominant, sales-oriented, and encouraging of other men, while women take on a more subdued, supportive role. Windels (2008) noted that most male creatives in leadership positions have wives who stay at home, allowing them to make their work roles a primary day-to-day focus.

For the women who are able to achieve senior leadership positions in creative communication fields, support systems and other female role models are necessary to negotiate a professional path to leadership (Olsen, 2021). Conversely, many women at the cusp of senior levels of management have chosen not to take leadership positions because they want more balance and less stress (Belkin, 2003). A U.S. poll indicated that a third of women described “significant conflict between work and family and a need to make sacrifices involving hours, travel, and stress in order to advance professionally” (Conway, 2005, p. 594). A study on women managers and executives in public relations concluded that women use specific strategies for overcoming the glass ceiling including leveraging mentorship, working hard(er), demonstrating expertise, and taking control of their own futures (Wrigley, 2002). The same study explained that women work to empower themselves to take control and gain access to career advancement.

Although gender roles have developed and changed over time, Harrison and Lynch (2005) found, “descriptive and injunctive social norms help to maintain adherence to traditional gender roles” (p. 227). Gender-role stereotypes produce differential access to resources, including position power (Ragins and Sundstrom, 1989). Women in the United States continue to assume the primary caretaker responsibility of a household, while men continue to more likely assume the primary breadwinning responsibility (Bianchi, Robinson, & Milkie, 2006). These diffuse roles perpetuate existing social roles, which influence ways in which men and women

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view professional leadership opportunities. Expected gender roles can influence future goals of young women, including what they choose to study in their undergraduate years (Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000). As women transition from higher education to full-time employment, research does not address how they perceive factors impacting the development of their professional relationships and a career trajectory toward leadership.

While a portion of the gender gap can be attributed to the traditional social roles placed upon men and women, it can also be attributed to a lack of support for young women across genders in creative communication fields. By closely examining the experiences of early-career women, we can begin to understand how relationships impact their professional confidence, career outlook, and overall development as they prepare for a challenging path to leadership.

Impact of Professional Relationships in the Workplace

Research suggests that for young women to be successful after entering the workforce, they must receive mentorship and support (Bridgstock, 2009). Role modeling and access to a network of professional contacts early on in one's career opens doors to professional advancement opportunities (LaGree & Olsen, 2022; Lewis et al., 2018). Mentorship is defined as an "intense interpersonal exchange between a senior experienced colleague (mentor) and a less experienced junior colleague (protege) in which the mentor provides support, direction, and feedback regarding career plans and personal development" (Russell and Adams, 1997, p. 2). While the mentor can support the mentee in many different ways, Gregory (2006) described three specific functions of mentorship: career development, psychosocial support (Allen et al., 2004; Ragins and Cotton, 1999), and role-modeling (Burke, 1984; Lewis et al., Wallace, 2001). In creative communication roles, mentorship functions come from all forms of professional relationships in the workplace. Formal and informal relationships help young professionals focus

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on developing a forward-facing career trajectory early in their careers; the psychosocial support and role modeling can provide opportunities for soft skill growth in areas such as confidence and strategic problem-solving. All three functions can show young women how to perform their duties, in addition to the specific tasks they need to accomplish. A key tenet of creative communication roles and a skill necessary for promotion to management positions includes client relationship management. Understanding how to present ideas, problem solve, and communicate with clients and executives are all desired outcomes when designing a mentorship program in the creative communication field (Erzikova & Martinelli, 2020).

Professional workplace relationships during the early career phase. Young workers in creative communication fields seek trust and strong relationships with those who manage them. These relationships help them feel empowered to take on more impactful projects and help them realize their leadership potential (Gallicano, Curtin, & Matthews, 2012). Young women in the field rely on their professional relationships to learn *how* to get promoted and be influential at work. A study on how early-career women are socialized into their communication roles concluded that young women viewed their managers and women leaders as role models and paid attention to how they communicated with others in positions of power; they used their relationships with advocates to learn to negotiate upward mobility (LaGree & Olsen, 2022). Further, professional relationships can be extremely influential in impacting early-career women's perceptions of motherhood and work-life balance. Modeling effective work-life balance is something young women seek in female managers, and it provides them with examples of tools and resources that can be used to navigate that path in the future (Eason et al., 2014). Young women who realize the power of professional relationships may leverage them for

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the aforementioned support behaviors, learning how to navigate the workplace and build a skillset to overcome barriers to leadership they may face in the future.

Feminist Organizational Communication Theory

At its core, feminist theory seeks to understand the nature of gender inequality (hooks, 1984). It examines and advocates for women's social roles, their experiences, and their ability to achieve leadership in the workplace. According to Weiler (1991) feminist theory, "validates differences, challenges universal claims to truth, and seeks to create social transformation in a world of shifting and uncertain meaning" (p. 449). Feminist organizational communication theory recognizes the deeply embedded gendering of organizational processes and experiences (Buzzanell, 1994). The connections between organizational power and gendered societal roles provide a deeper context and understanding of how women function within a work organization (Acker, 1990). As women try to break through glass ceilings to reach senior leadership roles, it presents a threat to the masculine culture of organizations (Kottke & Agars, 2005). With an increase in female leadership, there is potential for the integration of feminine leadership qualities and characteristics.

Furthermore, routine professional interactions impact how young women view themselves and form their professional identities; they also provide the young women with a sample set of skills necessary to overcome gender barriers. Narrowing the scope of the study to the first five years of their careers helps to make meaning of beginning professional relationships and experiences, during a time critical for the women to become educated and aware of gender issues while at the same time creating a foundation for professional leadership later in their careers. Feminist organizational communication theory provides a framework to understand the

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unique workplace experiences of ECWs in an industry that favors leadership advancement for men, and it provides leaders with insight and tools to combat the masculine hierarchy.

Study Details

A review of the literature found connections between gendered experiences and lack of female leadership in the creative communication field, the impact of professional relationships on early-career development, and barriers to female professional advancement and leadership. However, there is no evidence that these areas have been studied among women in their first five years of employment in creative communication roles. These women are experiencing a pivotal phase in their professional journeys that influence upper-level advancement, and they are starting in an industry proven to be more supportive of men achieving leadership than women. This in-depth, qualitative study sought to address this gap in the research and ultimately inform all industries on how ECW can be set up to earn leadership positions, ultimately improving career equality for women.

The primary research questions guiding this study include:

RQ1: How do early-career women in creative communication roles experience professional relationships during their first five years in the industry?

RQ2: How do early-career women in creative communication roles perceive the impact of relationships within the workplace?

Methodology

Participants

As previously discussed, the first five years of professional employment (the early career phase) is a poignant phase in one's career journey that is associated with proactive skill

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development and relationship development that opens doors for career advancement (Kowtha, 2013; LaGree & Olsen, 2022; Manuel, 2003). Therefore, women in their first five years of full-time employment in creative communication roles were recruited using snowball sampling. The women represented a variety of areas within the industry, from account management to creative to strategy (see Table 1 for a complete list of areas). A total of 31 participants were interviewed; twenty-five were white, four were Latina/Hispanic, and two were African-American. Participants resided and worked in locations across the U.S., including major markets such as New York and Los Angeles, as well as locations such as Denver, Kansas City and St. Louis. All participants graduated from strategic communications, public relations, advertising, marketing, or journalism university programs within five years prior to the research occurring. They were employed in those respective fields and worked for a variety of organizations including agency, corporate, government, and nonprofit. The women worked as freelancers, in small shops (2-10 employees), as well as for large corporations (10,000+ employees).

(Insert Table 1 from separate file per author guidelines)

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using NVivo qualitative analysis software to identify key codes and organize codes into common themes. Atkinson (1998) explained the interview as a personal method of data collection, one that could provide a practical and comprehensive methodological approach for the sensitive collection of personal experiences. Therefore, the interviews served to probe the participant's experiences in the areas of self-development and leadership development as they were impacted by mentorship. Glaser and Strauss's (2017) constant comparative method of qualitative analysis guided the manual coding process. Researchers completed initial coding independently, paying close attention to phrases,

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words and trends that aligned with the research questions. Content not fitting within those parameters was also studied in accordance with the exploratory nature of the study. Next, codes were organized into themes based on the level of saturation of a topic across the majority of participants. Intercoder reliability between coders was strong, with an overall Cohen's unweighted kappa coefficient of .86 (Lavrakas, 2008). Finally, researchers reviewed identified themes in addition to each researcher's interview notes and memos. A female organizational communication lens allowed the researchers to learn and understand the ECWs experiences from the perspective of a subordinated gender. That is, these young women were working to make meaning of their careers and their future leadership goals in an industry that inherently provides their male counterparts with a support system unequal to the systems afforded to young women. Additionally, the ECWs were learning about the barriers they may face in the future and finding role models who overcame those barriers, which is a learning experience and understanding that is unique to women.

Findings

The impetus for this study was recognizing that women in their first five years should be an industry focus in creating career equality for women. ECW's experiences suggest that not only should they be a pivotal demographic on which to focus, but the details from their first five years can also provide deep insight to develop industry practices to combat a historical system that favors men over women. The current study suggests that for ECWs, the most important, overarching theme preparing women for their professional journeys is impactful professional relationships. These professional relationships, most often informal, are positive in nature and direct the ECW to the support and confidence needed to overcome gendered barriers.

The professional development process as a Bermuda Triangle

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The Bermuda Triangle is characterized as an area in the ocean where unexplained disappearances have occurred; many work continuously to research potential explanations and solutions (History, 2018). Similarly, industry leaders and scholars alike attempt to define solutions to the professional gender gap. Findings from this study indicate that one possible solution is a focus on a key demographic, ECW, and the professional relationships that surround them. These relationships produce what we will refer to as the Bermuda Triangle of Professional Relationship Development (*see Figure 1*), an intersection of (previously unknown) powerful experiences that help to equip young women with a strong career foundation early on, opening doors to leadership opportunities and professional advancement. The three areas ECW credit to impactful professional relationships are: (1) The art and power of advocacy; (2) Access to high profile work opportunities; and (3) Effective role-modeling from women who have demonstrated career navigation and work-life balance.

These young women acknowledge issues of gender diversity and inclusion, yet they also describe a strong desire to be understood for the talent and skills they bring to the industry. The ECW who described feelings of career satisfaction and optimism for future leadership opportunities recognized the role of professional relationships in upward mobility. One participant described this as “people you work with make a huge difference in how you like your job and the type of work that you do,” meaning that workplace relationships play a significant role in helping ECW understand the path to advancement. Finally, findings from this study provide an argument for the industry to move away from a focus on traditional mentorship as a tool to combat the leadership gender gap. Rather, ECW should be encouraged to utilize a variety of professional relationships based on their individual skills and needs, and that proactivity should be a key area of focus for both managers and ECWs

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Part 1 of the Bermuda Triangle: The Art and Power of Advocacy*Outcome: Young women learn to self-advocate*

For a majority of the young women interviewed, formal mentorship programs were not a part of their early-career experience; informal professional relationships were most common and also the most reflected upon by the ECW when articulating how they make meaning of their careers. They described feelings of support from professional relationships with females, while professional relationships with males were attributed to being challenged and pushed out of their comfort zone. Female mentoring relationships were easier to come by for the participants, and often resulted in meaningful friendships: “I just really look up to women who have gotten where they have in their careers...I have a lot of great male coworkers, but that super close, intimate mentorship feels like it comes more easily with women.”

In contrast, participants who were mentored by males described being “challenged” and mentioned more specific areas of growth they experienced as a result of having a male boss or mentor:

I was quiet and now he’ll throw me in a client meeting where I have to lead or present, and he’s just there for support. It’s those situations that have really helped me become a leader...I know that when he gives me things, he has a purpose for it, and that is one of the biggest things that I appreciate. He’s honest; he’s always transparent. *He leads and lets me lead too.*

Another participant credited her male mentor with providing specific examples of how to manage emotions and provide feedback:

He’s helped me especially grow my confidence in the agency environment, which can be extremely harsh. At the end of the day, he’s my biggest role model for sure.

Recognizing the difference between male and females in her organization, this participant credited focusing on the male characteristics as helping her deal with conflict:

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[My boss] is a male and I've seen the way he can lead and make people listen in a meeting. I think I've been able to take his characteristics of how he leads and how he can take over a room. I try to take on those same characteristics, which has helped me especially in situations where I have seen some negative gender discussions.

Another participant credited the feminine qualities of a female manager as helping her feel supported, which in turn gave her confidence in professional situations.

She became a friend, which was really important. I would have been more timid...I would ask her if I can help with certain things that I usually wouldn't help with...for example, the VP at the company was a little intimidating. Whenever I would have to help her with something, if [mentor] Brittany wasn't in the room, I would feel a little more intimidated because I felt I didn't have someone to vouch for me or just be there.

Despite different experiences based on the gender, a majority of the ECW who described professional relationships recall feelings of advocacy—both feeling advocated for by the mentor—and learning the art of self-advocacy through experiences as a result of their professional relationship. Participants expressed advocating for themselves and feeling advocated for as a key piece of their confidence-building, which resulted in a positive career outlook. Many recognized the importance of self-advocacy as a method through which they can assert their roles and, ultimately, prove their worth to their organization.

The term “advocate” was mentioned organically by 12 out of the 31 participants and a total of 27 times throughout the study. One participant reported that her mentor taught her to advocate for herself “because sometimes people would be asking her to do things and she would have to speak up for herself and say, ‘Hey, I have these 10 other things that I need to do today. This needs to wait until another time.’” Modeling self-advocacy correlated with the participant enacting it, which also resulted in increased confidence and job satisfaction in their roles.

It seems [name omitted] really understands the entire business... It looks like she has a direct influence [on decisions]. Just observing her, her confidence was probably the main thing that I saw and was like, she looks like she knows what she's doing. She pushes back internally if she feels a certain way. That was something that took me a really long time to feel comfortable to do.

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Part 2 of the Bermuda Triangle: Access to High Profile Work Opportunities

Outcome: Confidence, adaptability, and proactivity learned from leadership opportunities

Another emerging theme was the power provided to ECW through leadership opportunities presented through their professional relationships. Confidence, adaptability and proactivity were the top three areas in which ECW felt most empowered as a result of learning from their professional relationship(s). Further, strong professional relationships with those in more senior positions allowed ECW to strengthen those soft skills that are necessary for women to feel knowledgeable and confident in all professional situations. Fletcher (1999) described this as “mutual empowering” behavior, when leadership actions are understood through the lens of gender and power. For the ECW, this behavior included encouraging teamwork and a minimization of power and status differences in the workplace.

Study participants mentioned being challenged to speak in front of audiences, both within the organization and in front of clients, and to provide strategic recommendations in situations where they initially felt uncomfortable. In addition, participants used parallel descriptions for both leadership opportunities and positive professional development. One woman described “feeling level-headed and feeling calm” as a result of leadership opportunities provided to her. She also identified stress management and feeling more adaptable as important pieces of her professional development which improved after experiencing specific opportunities to focus on her leadership skills.

Using characteristics such as “go-getter,” “self-starter,” and “proactive with time management,” this ECW recognized skills and attributes that will be necessary for them to maintain a career path equal to their male counterparts (Parkinson et al., 2018). Another woman

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in her second year as a digital marketing manager said that the support and opportunities provided by a supportive manager helped her to “flip a switch,” that she “wasn’t giving myself nearly enough credit” in her professional duties.

These mentoring relationships allowed the ECW to feel confident when faced with challenging situations. Participants were more satisfied with their job situation and career outlook when effectively mentored. Confidence in their job skills also allowed them to be more assertive in various agency settings, disputing the traditional social role of men maintaining control of conversations and group meetings.

Part 3 of the Bermuda Triangle: Effective Role-Modeling from Women Who Have Demonstrated Career Navigation and Work-Life Balance

Outcome: Young women develop vision for future leadership roles

ECW who described impactful professional relationships with mid-to-senior level managers were provided with examples of women who achieved promotion to leadership levels despite obstacles traditionally faced by women.

One participant described two different women she worked with in varying capacities, both of whom were mothers and used traditionally female characteristics to lead their organization:

They [two different female advisors] had very maternal energy and very maternal instincts. However, that did not compromise their ability to get shit done...so often we were told to downplay emotion and empathy in order to get work done, and those women just completely shattered that because they built really warm, caring relations with our clients and our co-workers...their energy was really, really important for the whole organizational health.

Many conversations surrounding the examples of other women in the organization led to describing their own professional development as a reflection of those women seen as effective

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leaders. For example, one woman in her third year working in account management said, “No job is not yours, especially when you’re younger.” She described her thought process as a result of watching other women around her:

Even if you feel like it’s below you or above you, if it’s below you and you do it, it probably wasn’t the funnest, but you got to do it. Then if it’s above you, when you do it and you do it good, people realize what you’re capable of doing and it can help you move up faster.

Another participant recalled that a female leader in her organization recognized her as a leader, proactively calling out the ECW for her work on a particular project. She mentioned that type of comment and support made her feel proud, “like I’m a very valuable asset,” and that she felt “good that people do recognize me as a leader.” This championing by a female leader provided the ECW with feelings she holds close and believes she will use as she moves into future leadership positions. When reflecting on a similar experience, one woman described her desire to be supportive to those around her due to experiencing the same support:

I’m here to make the company better. If someone can give me an idea to take and run, then it’s a win-win for everybody. I just think it [the professional relationship experience] has helped me to be really nice to everyone and just support them and want them to professionally succeed and not just put my needs above everybody else’s.

Discussion

This study identified the early-career phase as a critical time period in which industries should focus to cultivate the next generation of leaders. It also presents a key finding that professional relationships have the power to support women as professionals in workplaces historically conditioned for men to succeed over women. These relationships have the capability to educate ECW as well as retain them in industries facing high levels of turnover, an issue prevalent among today’s workplace environment (LinkedIn, 2021). Research shows that a large

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percentage of Gen Z graduated during the Covid-19 pandemic, taking the first job they could find for security. As industries adjust and the pandemic is past its peak, the same Gen Z early-career professionals are focusing more on the quality of work, which includes having access to mentors and experienced managers (Bizouati-Kennedy, 2021). Further, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reported that a record number of employees voluntarily quit their jobs during the pandemic (2021). News outlets have coined this phenomenon “The Great Resignation,” and industries are presented with an opportunity for policy implications to counterbalance these pandemic-related shifts impacting their employees (Malmendier, 2021). The impact of professional relationships on early-career professionals is a critical piece for leaders to consider during this decision-making process.

In this study, professional relationships informed young women about potential barriers to career advancement, creating awareness and subsequent preparedness for times they may face the same gendered obstacles. In addition, professional relationships were key for effective acclimation within organizations (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1993). While participants described feeling supported and advocated for by female managers, the participants who described being mentored by men referred to the challenging experiences and trust given to them by their male mentors. Ultimately, some participants sought out support and guidance from both male and female professionals because the two, varying perspectives combined offered robust career navigation mentorship. Additionally, the idea of relationship-building is not traditionally included in onboarding measures within the creative communication field. Categorized as a soft skill, the importance of relationships during women’s first five years in the industry was emphasized repeatedly by young women satisfied with their professional situation. These women felt empowered, supported, and that they had someone to advocate for

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them. By proactively building relationships from the very beginning of their careers, young women can cultivate a network of supportive individuals who can provide advice and counsel as they move up the professional ladder.

Results also reveal a startling lack of formal mentorship programs implemented by organizations. However, consistent with a majority of the study's participants was the importance of *informal* mentorship, which was most often a result of proximity and team organization. This finding provides the industry with a unique opportunity to create a new focus on professional guidance across management levels. ECW reported increased opportunities for leadership development, personal career planning, and confidence building as a result of informal professional relationships.

Mentorship is a common industry term, one used by many leaders and subject matter experts. Research tells us that it is a key piece in forming well-rounded employees who feel confident and equipped for leadership roles (Eason et al., 2014; Middlebrooks & Haberkorn, 2009). However, this study shows that organizations are not cultivating their mentorship programs in ways that benefit young women. It is not enough to create a mentorship program and assign mentors to new, early-career employees. All employees must be educated and provided with tools to understand the impact of meaningful support and guidance; they must understand how to create a relationship that is specific to the early-career professional's situation, personality and niche interests.

Evidence-based Action Items

This section identifies three industry action items to address key findings from this research. Recommendations have been informed by the study participants, the literature review, and the

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research team. By implementing the following action items, organizations will show their commitment to the early-career experience.

1. **Professional development for all employees to focus on DEI awareness and**

advocacy/support education: *Advocacy and positive career outlook credited to both*

male and female informal mentors. Young women are supremely impacted by

professional relationships that occur naturally, not by relationships organized by

onboarding programs. Therefore, industry focus needs to shift. It should be recognized

that professional relationships can occur between an ECW and anyone within an

organization. The development of these informal relationships should be encouraged;

however, organization leadership should prioritize educating the entire employee base on

not only the reality of DEI issues, including career equity, but also on the most effective

methods and tools to support ECW.

2. **Consistent access to experienced managers through consistent round-table/lunch-**

and-learn type gatherings: *Confidence, adaptability, proactivity credited to leadership*

opportunities. In order to recruit and retain quality employees, organizations must be

proactive about providing access to managers at all levels. This is especially important

for young women who learn from women in leadership about navigating and negotiating

through personal and workplace transitions.

3. **Organizational audit of policies and procedures to ensure women are not set back if**

they choose motherhood during their career trajectory: *Participants described*

effective role-modeling from women and men practicing work-life balance as impactful

on their career outlook. Improved professional relationship development resulted from

viewing women in senior positions feel career satisfaction and experience continued

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promotion. An examination of human resource policies and procedures can provide insight into major factors that influence a woman's professional path, such as paid time off and family leave. Maintaining a healthy work-life balance starts with the idea of protection, so that women can feel confident in protecting their family time with both partners and children (Olsen, 2021). In the creative communication fields, The 3% Movement (2017) can provide the support to carry out such an examination through their "3% Certified" program.

Limitations, Implications and Conclusion

Beyond the initial findings, this in-depth qualitative analysis serves to inform both academia and industry so we can address the industry gender gap in the earliest stages of women's career trajectories. The ultimate goal is to ensure equality at senior levels, and it is proven that the first five years in the industry can provide women with the tools necessary to grow and achieve this goal in the future. Although this study is the first of its kind, findings were informed by a sample size of 31, and the sample included just six women of minority ethnicity. Future research could ensure a sample population is representative of the industry's current makeup. Further, the creative communication fields must understand what is necessary to support young women as they begin their careers. Professional organizations such as the American Advertising Federation (AAF) and Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) can effectively reach this group and help young professionals understand the impact of professional relationships. Proactively seeking support both within and outside of one's organization should be a prerogative of those entering the creative communication fields. Most importantly, the industry needs to know how to implement effective practices during the first five years so all

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young women have the opportunity to learn how to build relationships, self-advocate and proactively network within and outside their organizations.

As Zimmerman and West reported in their groundbreaking “Doing Gender” (1987) research, we must understand the gendered implications of interactions in the workplace. Their critical assessment of gender describes the social control and social scaffolding created by the traditional male position of power, which perpetuates men in dominant roles and women in deferential roles. Men fulfill traditionally male-oriented roles in the workplace, and women tend to fulfill roles associated with mothering, such as providing emotional support and encouragement. While it is not a new idea, it is a notion that must be pressed upon those serving in advocacy roles as well as managers early in their careers. This, in turn, can impact inherent behaviors, policies and procedures so that they can change to benefit young women during their first five years of professional experience.

Continued research should expand this awareness and dig deeper into the benefits and drawbacks of a variety of professional relationships. While it may be dependent on the needs of the individual, there is a clear difference between feelings of support from male managers and female managers, and the industry must be strategic in developing more feminine advocacy characteristics in male managers, and more masculine advocacy characteristics in female managers.

Finally, gender issues are not unique to the creative communication fields. However, creative communication professionals are tasked with creating and managing messages impacting much of society, including impressionable audiences. In an industry known as a historical good ol’ boys club, it should remain a top goal to improve upon diversity and representation at all levels. By offering insight into ECW in the midst of creating a foundation

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3 for their careers, we can construct the co-creation of knowledge among practitioners and
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5 scholars, ultimately offering solutions that are applicable across industries. We must continue to
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7 prepare new generations of women entering the workforce so that they are educated and
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9 equipped to tackle historical and systemic barriers.
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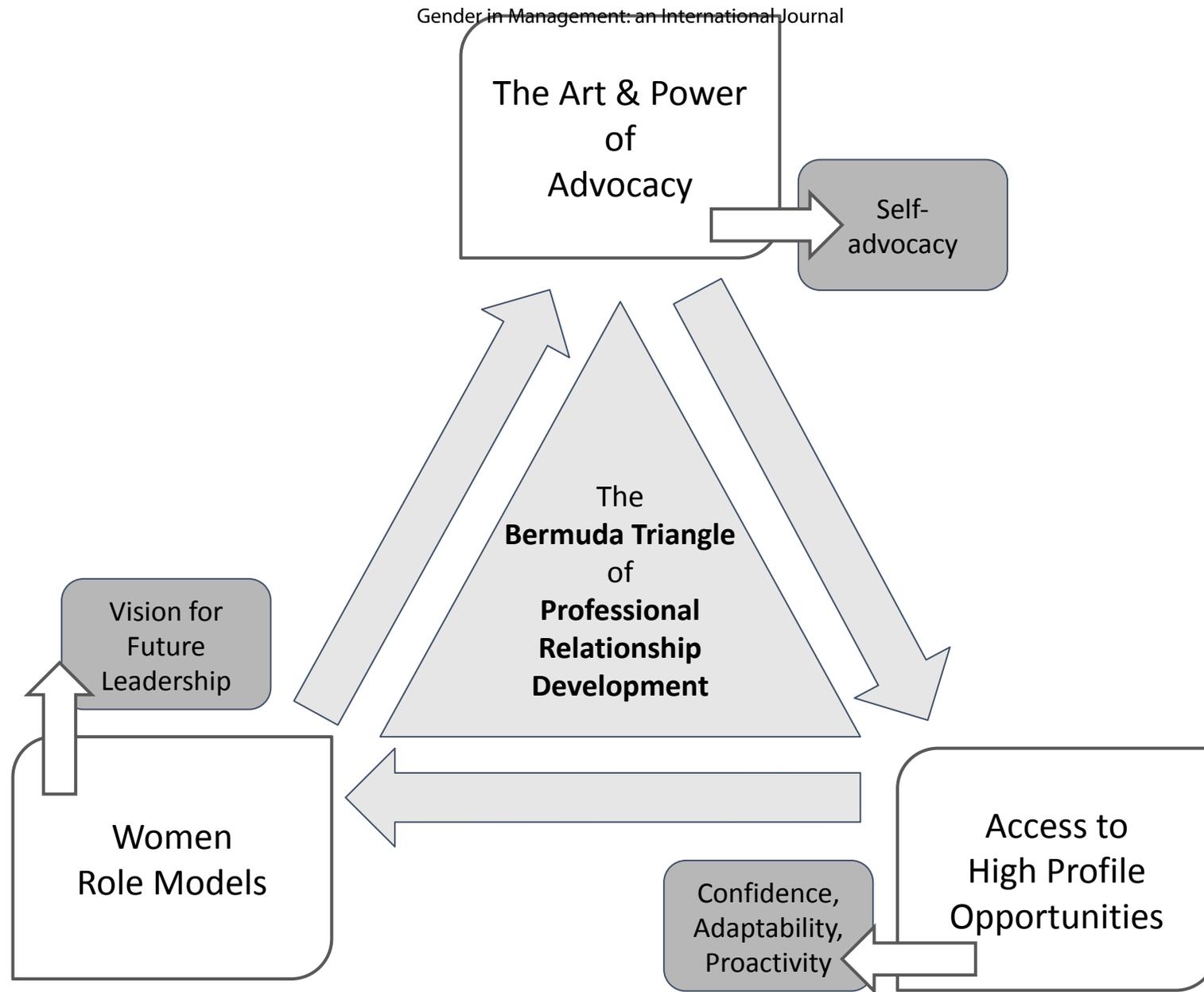
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Demographics of participants and agencies, ages 22-28 (n=31)

	Number of Women
Position Areas	
Account/Brand Management	11
Digital/Social Media	10
Design/Art	7
Strategy	3
Ethnicity	
Caucasian	25
Hispanic	4
African American	2
Agency Size (<i>ranges provided by LinkedIn.com</i>)	
10001+	1
5001-10000	3
1001-5000	6
501-1000	1
201-500	4
51-200	2
11-50	8
2-10	2
Freelance	4
Region	
Southeast	1
Southwest	5
West	2
Midwest	18
Northeast	5