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

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 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, paroding
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 (Adricans, 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’ Diary, both of which have as central protagonists female publicists or public relations practitioners, to illustrate the workings of postfeminism (see, for instance, McRobbie, 2004; and Isbister, 2008). 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.

However, despite these contradictions, postfeminism can offer critical understandings of the relationship between feminism and popular culture, and the role of media discourses in the representation of feminism. Indeed, scholars argue that postfeminism can offer critical insights as it can be used to tease out the ways in which feminism is simultaneously embraced and rejected (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). Postfeminism also offers a critique of the hegemonic values of neoliberalism through ‘ambivalence and contradiction’ and ‘humour, irony and overemphasising’
(Adriens, 2009, para 11). The use of irony and humour in popular culture makes studies based on assumptions about the unproblematic and uncritical representation of public relations activity highly troublesome. Gill argues this irony ‘hail[s] audiences as knowing and sophisticated consumers, flattering them with their awareness of intertextual references and the notion they can see through attempts to manipulate them’ (2007, p. 159). I argue irony and humour, designed to both engage and entertain media audiences, needs to be acknowledged in discussions of the representation of public relations activity in popular culture.

2.3. Vampires, *True Blood* and postfeminist Gothic

Vampires, in the Western tradition, are an obvious example of the other and consorting with a vampire suggests a major transgression (Williamson, 2005). For Auerbach (1995), vampires are ambiguous and mythological manifestations of collective anxiety; she argues vampires are ‘personifications of their age’ (p. 3) and ‘hideous invaders of the normal’ (p. 6). Vampires therefore offer rich material for analysis. To offer just a few examples of the diverse scholarship engendered by the vampire genre, *True Blood* has been written about from literary and cultural studies perspectives, exploring emotions and texts (Lindgren Leavenworth, 2012); from contrasting political economy and cultural studies perspectives, focusing on the commercial intertextuality used to market the series (Hardy, 2011); as a critique of capitalism drawing on globalisation and energy/cultural production (Atkinson, 2013); from multicultural perspectives drawing on the ‘outsider’ status of the vampire (Beck, 2011); and as a critique of post-race ideology, where vampires stand for the multiracial other (Rabin, 2010). Mutch (2011) and Amador (2013) argue that *True Blood* represents a contemporary Gothic genre, allowing the renegotiation of racial, sexual and national identities in a globalised world. The camp aesthetic of many screen portrayals of vampires, colloquially referred to as ‘vamp camp’, is subversive, in that it allows – and indeed encourages – the audience to see through the artifice (Weiss, 1992). Anderson argues the camp aesthetic in *True
Blood, citing the ‘flamboyant dialogue, costumes, and gestures; sustained irony; and a celebration of queerness’ as classic markers of a camp aesthetic, can offer critical insights (2013, p. 223).

In their discussion of postfeminist Gothic, Brabon and Genz argue postfeminism and Gothic have much in common: they both have the capacity to be ‘transgressive and boundary-defying’ and ‘embrace … pluralism’, resulting in ‘a multi-focal and contradictory spectrum of meaning that gives rise to their many permutations and manifestations’ (2007, p. 2). They perceive postfeminist Gothic allows scholars to move beyond female Gothic, associated with second wave feminism and simple binary oppositions:

In this way, Postfeminist Gothic becomes a site for the construction of meaning, a contentious location … It is this inherent fluidity and contradictoriness that ally postfeminism and Gothic in their mutual interrogation of binary structures and their ‘anxiety about “meaning” ’. (Brabon & Genz, 2007, p. 2)

Postfeminist Gothic is characterised by plurality, ambiguity and contradiction and works against any notion of stable identity or straightforward meaning. However, as Tyree notes, the transgressive nature of vampires has ‘a tricky political side’ (2009, p. 31). Whether the irony of camp can offer a political strategy for postfeminism is debatable; the depiction of women in ‘skimpy latex costumes, micro-minis and leather bustiers’ in camp TV drama is a superficial and exploitative representation of women (Brown, 2011, p. 155). True Blood contains graphic scenes of violence and plays with themes of deviance, fetishism, voyeurism and sexual violence as well as sex as romantic love; in line with a shift in recent representations of vampires in popular culture, including True Blood, vampires are increasingly portrayed as ‘attractive, romantic heroes’ (Lindgren Leavenworth, 2012, p. 36; see also Beck, 2011; Mukherjea, 2011; Tyree, 2009).

Although True Blood appears to transcend gender stereotypes, in its presentation of multiple and shifting gendered sexual identities and powerful female roles, it is worth noting the hypersexuality and insatiability of vampires, and indeed of the many non-vampire characters, and the
heteronormative values in the dominant love story, are problematic from a feminist perspective. As Rabin (2010) notes in relation to race, although the narrative accepts difference, it does not resolve inequality; even as True Blood creates a multicultural society, it subtly critiques its underlying ideology. Similarly, Tyree argues that despite its liberal approach to sexual diversity, sexual identity, and gay rights, True Blood is full of ‘paradoxes and contradictions’, citing the centrality of a heterosexual love affair and its ‘gay-friendly conservatism—the vampires who reject assimilation are rather nasty’ as examples (2009, pp. 32, 34). In a show that appears to promote tolerance, diversity, and indeed a feminist agenda, True Blood nevertheless highlights the problematic and contradictory dilemma of postfeminist texts as feminism and anti-feminism uncomfortably coexist.

3. Discussion

3.1. ‘You are nothing like you are on TV’: the PR practitioner

A postfeminist reading of True Blood might focus on the central protagonist: the virginal, girly, feminine and (mostly) human Sookie Stackhouse who has romantic liaisons with vampires and other supernatural creatures. However, as my interest is the representation of public relations, I consider specifically the portrayal and role of the vampire rights activist and AVL spokesperson in the first four series. Flanagan conforms to the stereotypical female public relations practitioner in popular culture: single, white, childless, middle class, and attractive. However, rather than performing low-level, technical public relations activity, Flanagan appears to drive the AVL campaign seeking equal rights for vampires through the passing of the VRA. We are introduced to Flanagan in a television debate in the opening episode. Flanagan is groomed, educated, well spoken, dons corporate wear and is the consummate media performer. Postfeminist texts often use the female body to convey the mental interior of a character and ‘a sleek toned controlled body is normatively successful for conveying success’ (Gill, 2007, p. 150). Using smart, attractive Flanagan
to debate bigots presents an opposition between the rational, fact-based position of the AVL and the emotional and vitriolic opponents of the VRA.

However, duplicity and identity are key themes in *True Blood*. Many, if not all, characters are not what they seem: multiple and hidden identities abound. Even Stackhouse, the telepathic (human) protagonist, discovers in Series 4 she is part-fairy. Typically in the vampire genre, there is a slow revealing of vampires’ ‘true’ identity or nature (Lindgren Leavenworth, 2012); however, in *True Blood*, we already know they are vampires because of the revelation, which followed the invention of synthetic blood. Nevertheless, hidden identities and character traits for most characters are revealed as the series develops. In conversation with teenage vampire, Jessica Hanby, Flanagan unsympathetically states she sometimes thought about ‘put[ting] my career on hold and becom[ing] a maker. But these last several hours with you have erased those doubts for ever’ (2011, 4:9, ‘Let’s get out of here’). Hanby tearfully responds: ‘You are nothing like you are on TV’. It is worth noting that Flanagan does not appear to be a love interest, unlike the stereotypical portrayal of female practitioners.

Flanagan’s media persona is therefore revealed as a fiction. There are unspecified references to shadowy factions within vampire politics and a flashback to the 1980s shows Flanagan instigated a concerted and revolutionary campaign to undermine the ruling vampire monarchies. Indeed, despite her public statements regarding Tru Blood (the synthetic blood) providing sufficient nutrition, in one scene Flanagan leaves a television studio to bite the femoral artery of a female (human) companion in the waiting car (2010, 3:9, ‘Everything is broken’). By late in Series 3, Flanagan is revealed as more than simply a spokesperson for the human-friendly AVL and morphs into an enforcer for the shadowy and faceless vampire Authority. As such, Flanagan is initially represented as the rational and human-like AVL spokesperson, before becoming the irrational and frankly dangerous, Machiavellian string-puller working behind the scenes to disguise the real power in the
vampire world. It is not difficult to draw parallels with public relations’ dark side, in terms of a lack of transparency, faceless corporations and deception, along the lines of greenwashing (Atkinson, 2013). Worse, Flanagan turns really bad, and appears to employ a military-style commando force as her heavies, before being slaughtered at the end of Series 4, just after she admits to having been sacked by the Authority. Her corporate wear gives way to menacing black leather, riot guards and armoured vehicles.

3.2. ‘I am a tax-paying American’: the PR campaign

The AVL public relations strategy presents vampires as no threat to humans, promoting their human (indeed, American citizenship) qualities and pointing to the cruelty and violence of the human race:

In True Blood, vampire spokesperson Nan Flanagan appears on Real Time with Bill Maher and when asked about vampires’ alleged “sordid history of exploiting and feeding off innocent people,” turns the tables to human history, “We never owned slaves, Bill or ... detonated nuclear weapons” (2008: 1.1 “Strange Love”). ... In the text world there is thus a conscious strategy on the part of the vampires to on the one hand downplay the threat they pose and represent themselves as victims, on the other to relativize the threat they do pose. (Lindgren Leavenworth, 2012, p. 39)

A crucial element of the campaign is to demonstrate that vampires conform to notions of American citizenship, using the key message: ‘We’re citizens, we pay taxes, we deserve basic equal rights.’ (2008, 1:1, ‘Strange love’). The campaign promotes mainstreaming, a dominant concept in queer circles in the mid-1990s to mid-2000s used to promote ‘the normal gay citizen’ who sought ‘access to mainstream culture through the granting of equal rights’ (Richardson, 2005, cited in Johnston & Longhurst, 2010, p. 116). Indeed, in promoting the VRA, the AVL draws on the rhetoric and discourse of civil rights, feminist, and gay rights movements.

A major dramatic device occurs towards the end of Series 3, in what amounts to a far-reaching crisis for the AVL’s campaign. Two scholars describe the assassination of a newsreader, broadcast
live during the evening news by an unstable vampire king, Russell Edgington, and its significance in undermining the AVL’s public relations strategy:

Mocking the American Vampire League’s public relations campaign for vampire equality, Russell claims that vampires and humans are alike only in terms of their narcissistic pursuit of individual profit and satisfaction. Russell berates the human viewing public … In contrast to the “friendly faces” put on by the AVL in the superficial aesthetics of mass marketing, Russell counters with a graphic illustration of vampires’ predatory nature: “Mine is the true face of vampires! Why should we seek equal rights? You are not our equals. We will eat you after we eat your children.” (Atkinson, 2013, p. 223)

A backlash of a more concrete kind comes towards the end of the third season of *True Blood* as Russell Edgington rips the spinal column out of a newscaster on live television, effectively undoing the careful PR strategy presenting vampires as unharmful neighbours next door. … His attack has interrupted a news segment about the increasing support for vampire rights, through the work of the American Vampire League and he finishes off by referring to their perpetuated smoke screens, as king: “Why would we seek equal rights? You are not our equals. We will eat you after we eat your children” (2010: 3.9 “Everything is Broken”). (Lindgren Leavenworth, 2012, p. 48)

In response, Flanagan distances vampires from the brutal killing on live television, calling Edgington ‘an extremist and a terrorist’ (2010, 3:10, ‘I smell a rat’) and much of Series 4 addresses the ramifications of this crisis. The AVL responds with a significant increase in public relations activity, including the production of public service announcements and participation in various community outreach events. For example, Eric Northman, one of Stackhouse’s vampire lovers, films a public service announcement where he seductively positions himself as ‘a tax-paying American and small-business owner’ and punning ‘who would you rather trust: a vampire or a politician?’ (2011, 4:1, ‘She’s not there’). The AVL organises a Festival of Tolerance, with the tag line ‘say no to hate’. Despite warnings, Flanagan refuses to cancel the festival, stating ‘right now, crews from CNN, VTV, Fox News and bloggers from across the country are already outside’; vampire Bill Compton tells her ‘beyond tomorrow’s headline, you are a blind person’ (2011, 4:9, ‘Let’s get out of here’). The festival turns into a bloodbath when vampires under the influence of a witch attack the human audience. Flanagan is acutely aware of the implications for the VRA campaign, saying to Compton at the bloody scene ‘Bill: Image!’, and later suggesting ‘the spin we’ll give it’ in the terms of violence and the civil rights movement (2011, 4:10, ‘Burning down the
house’). But throughout *True Blood*, cynical attitudes towards public relations are revealed in dialogue. A festival audience member films the event in order to share the ‘vamp bullshit’ online (2011, 4:9, ‘Let’s get out of here’). In his discussion of the AVL campaign, Atkinson likens the AVL campaign to corporate greenwashing and argues the use of irony and camp allows a critique of ‘greenwashing, the now routine practice in marketing and public-relations campaigns of giving eco-friendly makeovers to corporations with poor environmental track records’ (2013, p. 224).

Even in the first series, Northman tells ‘rednecks’ he suspects of killing vampires: ‘Do not let the pretty blonde lady on television [Flanagan] make you feel too comfortable. We have not retaliated. Yet.’ (2008, 1:9, ‘Plaisir d'Amour’).

3.3. ‘Popcorn television for smart people’: the audience

In this paper, I recognise the drama series as primarily a mode of entertainment aimed at a media-literate audience. As I have discussed, the use of irony in postfeminist texts and the vampire genre plays to a knowing audience who understands the intertextual references and generic conventions. According to Ball, he ‘pitched *True Blood* to HBO as “popcorn television for smart people”’ (Ball, 2008, as cited in Hardy, 2011, p. 5). The narrative therefore unfolds in part through the media, with radio and television news and feature programs reporting vampire activities and the progress of the VRA; live crosses with journalists take place from various events; and citizen journalists film and upload videos to the web to expose vampire activity. There are many in-jokes that play with media genres; for example, a tabloid front page headline reads ‘Angelina adopts vampire baby’ and a child is told she is ‘too young to watch scary movies on HBO’. There are also intertextual references to other vampire texts, such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (2008, 1:3, ‘Mind’). As Lindgren Leavenworth notes, the subversion in contemporary vampire narratives works precisely because it ‘presupposes associations characters, readers and viewers have in common’ (2012, p. 45).
It is in the context of a highly mediatised narrative that we need to understand the representation of public relations. Elements of the campaign are visible in the narrative, through the television debates and news reports, and later through public service announcements and community outreach events. The audience understands the genre of ‘spin’: promotion, persuasion, and public relations. The ability of vampires to ‘glamour’ or mesmerise humans into obeying vampire commands or to remove memories or knowledge can be likened to *True Blood*’s representation of public relations activity as a kind of glamouring or manipulation, but to a mass audience. There are references throughout the series to the capacity, and indeed willingness of humans to be manipulated. In an early conversation, Compton says to Stackhouse: ‘No offence Sookie, but humans are shockingly susceptible to every form of thought manipulation’ (2009, 2:10, ‘New world in my view’). In Series 4, references are again made to the capacity of humans to be manipulated. In relation to the intensifying of the AVL campaign, Flanagan says: ‘I have proof. Scientific. People are far dumber than they realize’ (2011, 4:1, ‘She’s not there’). However, the audience shares the joke. In this way, viewers are not unlike Stackhouse, who is resistant to being glamoured; the audience understands public relations and its techniques, and is not going to be manipulated.

To promote the early series, HBO developed an extensive marketing campaign, which included the development of fake websites, public service announcements and advertisements. These included websites for the AVL (see www.americanvampireleague.com/); Fellowship of the Sun, a fundamentalist church opposed to the VRA (see www.fellowshipofthesun.org/); and a citizen journalism site (see www.vamp-kills.com) (Boyer, 2011; Hardy, 2011). The AVL site originally included public relations texts such as media releases and public service announcements to be downloaded and shared. In addition, there are a number of public relations texts available as either extra features on DVDs or online. These texts include a White House press conference held following the revelation. The public acknowledgement of vampires leads to many marketing opportunities to develop and promote consumer goods and services, such as coffins and dating
agencies. Hardy defines this commercial intertextuality as ‘the production and interlinking of texts like blockbuster films or TV series with allied paratexts and products, such as spin-offs, reversionings, promos, online media, books, games and merchandise ... cultivating and exploiting audiences and fans’ (2011, p. 7). HBO made extensive use of social media and online platforms to market True Blood and engage audiences. In addition, fans created their own sites and Twitter accounts.

In an online, mediatised world, the boundaries between the television series and these other texts blur. Fan sites, and HBO-produced media texts, including mockumentaries and current affairs shows, extend the True Blood narrative. Further, the off-screen, real-life relationship of the show’s two leads has attracted considerable attention in the popular press and Jessica Tuck, the actor who plays Flanagan, is increasingly cast in malevolent roles. In an example that highlights the limits of commercial intertextuality in terms of fans’ expectations, HBO created a fake blog about vampires, BloodCopy.com, to promote Series 2. It was ‘sold’ to a media company, who used it as an ‘adverblog’ to promote its services; however, fans’ outcry over the ‘fake’ marketing led to suspension of the blog (Hardy, 2011). Hardy suggests this example:

highlighted broader issues concerning corporate speech masquerading as autonomous speech, and the boundaries between ‘interested’ and ‘independent’ speech. If the fake vampire advertisements were playful masquerades, the corporate masquerading of autonomous textual production was more troubling, marking the complex friction between top-down (corporate) and bottom-up autonomous media practices. (2011, p. 13)

As such, it appears fans distinguished between playful texts, which extended the series’ narrative and with which they willingly engaged, and straight advertising and corporate marketing (which, may, in turn, attempt playfulness drawing on True Blood themes), which they resisted.
4. Implications for public relations research

In this paper, I have shown that the fictional representation of public relations activity is not straightforward and cannot be understood in isolation from its narrative and generic context, or as a representation of the ‘reality’ of the public relations industry. Nevertheless, the playful representation of public relations in *True Blood*, and in the promotion of the television series, offers valuable insights into public relations in popular culture. In *True Blood*, the mediatised world and the role of public relations in meaning-making are prominent. The techniques of public relations are widely understood, and public relations texts extend the narrative beyond the series. This observation contrasts with findings from Miller (1999), suggesting public relations practice is opaque. It also highlights the redundancy of the anxiety around whether public relations is presented as a strategic managerial profession or as a technical or publicity role or as an accurate reflection of the gender breakdown in the industry. In *True Blood*, public relations is presented in terms of its broader societal impact and power. Initially, the AVL is aligned with civil rights movements, adopting the rhetoric of social justice, even as Flanagan, as the public face of the AVL, borrows the dress and mode of a corporate spokesperson. The audience is exposed to multiple discourses of public relations. However, the image of vampires as law-abiding citizens that the AVL campaign seeks to establish is constantly threatened and indeed undermined by alternate images, discourses and campaigns, pointing to the instability of meaning.

Central to *True Blood*’s narrative is a problematic understanding of identity. Traditionally, the vampire genre incorporates an unveiling or slow revelation of the vampire’s true identity (Lindgren Leavenworth, 2012). In *True Blood*, we already know Flanagan is a vampire, and one initially with a public face of human control and reason. However, in subsequent series, more and more of Flanagan’s shadowy character is revealed – as a revolutionary who has plotted for decades to overthrow vampire monarchies, and subsequently as a representative of a shadowy but powerful vampire organisation called the Authority, for whom it appears the AVL is a front. Flanagan
initially conforms to stereotypes of the female public relations practitioner in popular culture as white, childless, educated, and middle class before morphing into a camp parody of an out-of-control, power-hungry, military-like commando towards the end of Series 4. Given the gendered representation of public relations in popular culture, it is therefore interesting to consider the representation of a powerful female public relations practitioner, who – initially – appears to make autonomous decisions and direct a national campaign strategy. However, as the narrative unfolds and more of Flanagan’s character is revealed, public relations too is revealed as a dark or hidden force, used to disguise real power and an anonymous, corporate-like entity. With True Blood’s plot twists and narrative turns, it is increasingly difficult to suggest that there is a stable and unproblematic representation of public relations.

I argue that the representation of public relations in True Blood is complex and playful: it both conforms to and critiques stereotypes and expectations. Avoiding a simplistic analysis of its representation in popular culture allows public relations to be understood more broadly from socio-cultural perspectives and in relation to themes such as power, globalisation, neoliberalism, citizenship, gender, and identity. I suggest representations of public relations highlight and indeed problematise the ways in which public relations is popularly perceived. In particular, they reveal the limitations of readings based on the dominant paradigm for public relations, which are concerned with whether public relations is represented as a strategic management function or an ethical profession, or whether the representation of women in practitioner roles is illustrative of the reality of gender participation in the public relations workforce. Such approaches address neither the limitations of a narrow conceptualisation of public relations, founded on the industry’s professionalisation drive, nor the gendering of the industry. More significantly, these approaches do not allow public relations to be conceptualised in terms of its broader role in relation to society and culture. Further, they fail to acknowledge the considerable agency of the audience.
Therefore studying the ways in which public relations is represented in a fictional text concerned primarily with otherness, marginalisation and difference is revealing. Although public relations initially appears to be used by the AVL to promote social justice, in seeking equal rights for vampires, by Series 4 the audience is in no doubt that public relations is 'spin' and a manipulative tool to represent the interests of shadowy and unnamed powers such as 'the Authority'. Although the precise relationship between the AVL and the Authority is not revealed until later series, it appears the real power resides with the Authority and that the AVL is the 'front' organisation, used to promote the human face of vampirism and the potential of vampires to be U.S. citizens. Despite attempts to rationalise and justify the vampire cause – revealing all the tenets of excellent issues management – public relations ultimately deceives and serves to mask real power. This 'greenwashing' of the true nature of vampires aligns them with global corporations concerned with promoting sound environmental credentials (Atkinson, 2013).

5. Conclusion

Through the analysis of a fictional campaign to promote vampire rights, this paper offers new perspectives on the representation of public relations in popular culture and suggests the value of a postfeminist reading in developing theoretical insights. The first insight reveals that the use of irony in postfeminist texts plays to a knowing and media-literate audience. In True Blood, the audience 'knows' public relations and can resist its manipulation. Rather than a mysterious process, as identified in earlier studies, public relations techniques are revealed as widely understood. The second insight relates to intertextuality. Intertextual references are typical in both postfeminist texts and the vampire genre, and I suggested the knowing audience engages with multiple texts, but may be unwilling to engage in marketing texts, produced to capitalise on the show's popularity. I argue the agency of media audiences is not always recognised in previous scholarship on public relations and popular culture. In the third insight, I suggest a postfeminist Gothic reading of True Blood allows the themes of multiple and shifting identities and transgression to be applied to public
relations activity and practitioners. Flanagan highlights the contradictions and paradoxes in the representation of public relations and that there is no single ‘reality’ of public relations. Despite the representation of a powerful female practitioner, the limitations of second wave feminism are revealed as Flanagan is continuously reconstituted and transformed. The final insight identifies why understanding public relations in popular culture within the confines of the professional project and relying on descriptive statistics and themes in terms of how practitioners and activity are presented, is problematic. The representation of public relations in True Blood subverts normative expectations and confirms the need to understand generic and narrative conventions. If vampires personify their age (Auerbach, 1995), then Nan Flanagan is the public relations practitioner for a postfeminist, globalised world of social media and image, playing with multiple identities and adopting multiple discourses from social justice to corporate greed.

References


