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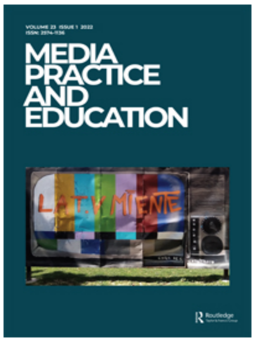

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Pitch imperfect: power relations and ceremonial values in the public relations pitching process

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ABSTRACT

Public relations (PR) agencies often win work by responding to competitive tenders for new business in the form of a presentation known as a 'pitch'. PR pitches are bound by few rules and there is often little or no transparency. Contracts can be awarded on intangibles such as 'chemistry'. PR practitioners may put many hours of unpaid work into pitches and not receive any useful feedback if unsuccessful. This article researches the practice of pitching through interviews with regional UK public relations agencies and an analysis of textbook advice. It views the process via the lens of ceremonial values to understand why a flawed business arrangement thrives in an occupation striving to be seen as a profession. The study demonstrates that the imbalance of power in the pitching process works in favour of the client. Agency leaders cited the human cost of pitching, the lack of transparency in the pitching process and the lack of feedback after a pitch as the main issues with the process. Textbook advice stresses the value of 'chemistry' and puts responsibility on the PR agency for making the relationship work which immediately puts the agency in a subservient position.

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Introduction

Public relations agencies often win work ('accounts') and contracts by responding to competitive tenders for new business. The response to this tender can be in the form of a presentation to the potential client known as a 'pitch'. Most common is a 'competitive pitch' where public relations agencies present an overview of their proposed communication approach or strategy to the prospective client. Crucially, this is usually conducted 'at no cost to the potential client' Barry (2002, 108) which means agencies bear the brunt of what can amount to weeks of unpaid work in preparing the pitch as well as the time and travel costs incurred attending presentations. The Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA) claimed: 'The average UK PR agency does 27 new business pitches every year, clocking up 1,674 h, and £11,000 in costs' (2022, online).

The pitching process has remained largely unchanged over decades of public relations practice and while many agencies are dissatisfied with the process (e.g. Brown 2022;

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Feldman 2017a) it is a recognised way for a client to appoint a public relations agency. Agencies supply services to clients such as: '[s]trategic advice, financial relations, crisis management and literature production' (Harrison 1995, 55) but in reality the remit can cover all aspects of communication work from the strategic to the routine.

While public comment and criticism of pitching remains relatively low-key, as will be explored in this article, there may be a step-change ahead. In January 2022 the British Public Relations trade association the Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA) carried out a survey and reported that the pitching process was 'out of hand' and that 'brands make agencies "jump through hoops" to win their business' (Brown 2022, online). It also claimed that it was going to be 'working hard on a global scale to sort this out' – demonstrating the scale of the problem. (However, at the time of writing this chapter – September 2022 – there had been no further activity from the PRCA in this area).

With this in mind, the purpose of this article is to explore, via interviews with public relations agency leaders in the UK and an analysis of pitching advice and perspectives public relations textbooks, the problems and issues with the pitching process and explore them through the lens of ceremonial values (Bush 1987) to understand why the pitching process is allowed to continue unchecked within an occupation striving for 'professional' recognition (L'Etang 2009; Mattinson 2014; Fawkes 2014). While there is a clear power imbalance between public relations agencies and clients during the pitching process, the reasons for it are not always clear and thus, this article uses writing on ceremonial values as a useful tool for unpicking working practices which seem to exist outside expected organisational norms. They 'provide the standards of judgement for invidious distinctions, which prescribe status, differential privileges, and master-servant relationships, and warrant the exercise and power by one social class over another' (Bush 1987, 1079). They are particularly useful for exploring client-agency relationships – working practices which are out of step with regulated institutional life (Mutiganda 2014) as ceremonial values are 'never subjected to any sort of test of refutability, they are accepted on authority and regarded as absolute' (Bush 1987, 1079).

This paper seeks to answer the following research questions. The first is straightforward: RQ1 – What are the main issues that practitioners experience with the pitching process? The second is one which can only be answered when we look at the pitching process against the backdrop of ceremonial values: RQ2 – Why is there an imbalance of power in the agency–client relationship during the pitching process?

Literature review

This literature review explores the issues and debates around the public relations pitching process as well as the writing on ceremonial values. It considers how time is used (and abused) as a way of gaining status and power within a relationship and the relationship between power and time is also discussed.

The pitching process

The organisational procurement or purchasing process is an established and recognised global function with its own guidelines, literature and professional associations. While a procurement team may lead on the purchase of public relations services (especially in the public sector or heavily regulated industries), contracts for public relations work may not involve any purchasing professionals due to the smaller sizes of the contracts and be carried out by sales, marketing, communications or management teams. In this literature review, we will consider the academic and practitioner literature on pitching in separate sections as while the academic literature explores the issues around pitching, the practitioner literature offers more of a 'how to' guide.

Academic literature on pitching

McCollough argues 'no scholarship on pitching clients exists in the current public relations education literature' (2018: online). Public relations textbooks (as will be explored later) do discuss the pitching process but largely with an instructional rather than critical approach; many fail to mention the pitching process at all. Academic texts, meanwhile, are a more fertile ground (e.g. Pieczka 2006; Edwards 2006; L'Etang 2009).

The pitching process has been a part of public relations agency life since the 1960 s or earlier (L'Etang 2009) and there has been development in how pitching is discussed, moving from narratives of practice in the 1980 s towards a critical turn in the early 2000 s.

Bourland reviewed articles on agency–client relations from 1980 s editions of Public Relations Review and found that pitching was seen as a 'selling' process. Activity which today is ethically questionable such as '[u]sing the best staff only for pitching the accounts' (1993, 392) was seen as unproblematic in the 1990s (today, using high calibre staff to present a programme of activity which would then be carried out by junior staff is seen as poor practice e.g. Butterick 2011). L'Etang notes that at the Public Relations Day conference in 1960 '[t]here was discussion as to whether the speculative and competitive business presentations (pitches in our current terminology) should be paid for as they took up a great deal of time and expense' (2009, 113) – a debate that continues to the present day.

Gabbott and Hogg (1996) suggested that '[p]itching is frequently regarded as an essential aspect of the [public relations] purchase decision' (441). Although the authors cite two business-related articles which comment on the problematic side of pitching these concerns are not developed in their writing leaving the criticisms under-explored. The pitching process has, however, been explored critically by writers such as Pieczka (2006) who points to the claims that pitches can be won by 'chemistry' (Smith 1996, in Pieczka 2006) and by Sissons (2015). Pieczka observed that chemistry can be used 'as a substitute for detailed, expert advice' (2006, 306) thus reducing an agency's status and power. Piecczka also pointed out that using chemistry to win a pitch meant that the pitching process became an exercise in impression management. Despite the obvious research directions that Pieczka laid down, there has since been little theoretical development in this area although there are exceptions (e.g. Yeomans 2016). Since academic writing does not prioritise the lived experience of public relations practitioners (as observed by e.g. Bridgen and Vercic 2017; L'Etang 2009) it is inevitable that the pitching process receives scant attention despite the fertile theoretical ground that it uncovers in terms of debates around organisation routine, ethical practice, professionalism, trust, and power relationships.

Desai (2012) touched on pitching for new business when writing about the 'people' traits needed for a career in public relations and likewise Yeomans drew on the concept of emotional labour to describe the use of the personal in public relations practice. Yeomans (2016) reported that an interviewee viewed her personality as part of the service that clients purchased in a business pitch (2016) supporting Pieczka's views that chemistry is seen as more valuable that professional advice.

Pieczka believed that part of an agency's role is to educate the client on public relations practice before selling their expertise. This leads, observed Pieczka, to a tension between the two parties as the client judges the agency on areas it little understands. It is inevitable therefore that

> given the expense of mounting a pitch, the pitching consultancy will be focused on minimising the risk. The attention seems to be focused, some might say paradoxically, not on the expert substance of what is proposed, but on presentation skills and beyond, on impression management. (2006, 306)

Thus, public relations pitches are often more about *how* something is presented rather than *what* is presented.

Textbook and practitioner literature on pitching

Public relations is a global occupation, albeit one with significant differences between cultures, and is carried out in a formal or informal basis across the world. Instruction in public relations can be through university or college courses, 'on the job', through peer learning or learnt from books, websites and other sources. Thus, public relations textbooks serve a dual purpose; they educate students studying public relations qualifications and act as a guide for practitioners. In addition, public relations magazines, and social media forums activity provide commentary, thought leadership, and news about the industry. Public relations textbooks written in English tend to carry either a US or European perspective on public relations; while there are some differences in approach, the experiences and instruction on pitching are similar.

The textbook discourse on pitching usually focusses on explanations of the process (e.g. Broom and Sha 2012), how public relations agencies can improve the process (e.g. Feldman 2017a, 2017b; Dhindsa 2018; Smith 2017) and how to win pitches. Questioning the process is rare. For instance (and highlighting a theme mentioned in the academic literature reviewed above), Dhindsa points out 'emotions have a big part to play in our buying decisions and fundamentally, people do business with people they like and can work with' (2018, online) without a consideration of the risk of decisions based on conscious or unconscious bias. Other textbooks follow a similar theme and focus on the importance of the immeasurable 'chemistry' (e.g. Morris and Goldsworthy 2012 ; Leigh 2017).

In most textbooks, regardless of the country of origin, the role of the public relations agency is subservient to the part played by the client – in essence the client makes decisions and the agency's role is performative and flexible. While some literature speaks of a partnership approach, it is the agency's role to make this relationship work (e.g. Morris and Goldsworthy 2012). Most textbooks focus on the recommended behaviour of the agency; very little attention is given to explaining how the purchasers of public relations services should behave (Leigh 2017).

Practitioner texts point to the lack of transparency in pitching proceedings and an opaque selection criteria. Feldman (2017a) observed that public relations agencies often receives '[p]oorly written briefs with prohibitively short turn-around times that limit the ability to deliver thoughtful, creative proposals'. He also highlighted the lack of budget guidance and the large numbers of firms invited to pitch, believing five to be too many. Butterick (2011) noted '[s]ometimes the eventual decision about which consultancy to hire and the reasons behind it can […] appear inexplicable. The main reason usually given is that the losing consultancies have not demonstrated sufficient understanding of the new client and their business and have not translated the brief into a comprehensive PR programme' (123) demonstrating the post-pitch feedback which will be discussed below. Overall, the European (specifically British) textbooks tend to be more critical of the behaviour of clients and less accepting of the status quo.

The lack of transparency in the process means that the weeks of work involved in the creation of a proposal may be wasted as the agency simply was not given sufficient information – and feedback to the unsuccessful bidders was then scant. In some cases, proposals are barely acknowledged, or rejected at the last minute. Intangibles such as 'relationship' and 'chemistry' become as important as the actual work and can form the basis upon which the contract is awarded (Morris and Goldsworthy 2012; Moss and De Santo 2011; Leigh 2017). 'Chemistry' is difficult to quantify when used as a tool for comparing one organisation against another but Morris and Goldsworthy (2012) explain its use saying 'people make choices based on their head and heart, their reason and their emotion. They have got to trust you and, ideally, like you' (15) while adding that the term 'chemistry' 'is really a way of making an emotional decision sound scientific'.

This lack of definition or scalability of 'chemistry' means organisations may be making choices based on their own conscious or unconscious biases but avoid accusations of favouritism, cronyism, bias or prejudice against an agency or person because they can foreground 'chemistry' as a reason for selection. Thus, public relations practitioners may put in many hours of unpaid work to pitch for a potential client and stand little chance of success, however good their work. Put simply, the lack of transparency in the process means public relations agency may not know that there is a preferred or incumbent agency, that there may be a lack of rigour in the contract process, or the brief may lack crucial information such as the size of the budget or desired outcomes.

The issue of the human and financial cost of pitches in terms of the time and emotion spent (Thomas 2016) is rarely discussed. Butterick (2011) is a rare voice in discussing the financial cost of pitches in terms of opportunity loss and financial cost and Broom and Sha (2012) provide the only clear guide in the literature reviewed to costing a public relations programme. Most discussions (rather than instruction) around pitching focus on (1) the mistakes made by agencies (rather than the organisations purchasing their services) and (2) the 'theft' of pitch ideas from the losing agency by the potential client. There is little writing on the human or emotional cost of losing a pitch and having weeks of hard work dismissed or stolen, although this is a regular discussion point among practitioners (Hickman 2019). The focus of practitioner literature is usually around learning from mistakes and doing better next time – articles questioning the actual process (e.g. Kannenberg 2018; Feldman 2016; Leigh 2017) are in the minority. Feldman claims '[m]ost clients don't seem to care too much about agency gripes [their view is that] if you don't like the process, there are other firms that would eagerly take your place' (2016, online). Barry (2002) also writes from the client's perspective but while she talks of the financial cost of pitching, her discussion largely focusses on how to run a successful pitch and work well with public relations agencies.

Textbook discourse around pitching centres largely around the art of winning pitches, with much of the 'blame' for a lack of success going to poorly prepared agencies and their lack of research into a client's needs. The voices that state that the process is opaque, open to abuse, immeasurable and at odds with the industry's drive to professionalism seem to stop at practitioner level – these views are mostly ignored by professional associations and key industry thought leaders.

Power and time

It is clear from the discussion above that the relationship between agency and potential client is unequal and we will now explore how this is allowed to happen. Levine (1987) describes waiting (in the case of pitching for feedback or decisions after a pitch presentation) as a power game. He states that time is power, and power allows you to control other people's time. This concept is discussed in much literature about power and time, with Lukes (1974, 2005) in Mutiganda (2014, 130) observing '[p]ower is the capacity of a person or organisation to influence the thoughts and actions of another person or organisation'.

Clients often demand practitioners to respond to briefs at short notice – or keep them waiting many weeks or months for a decision. As Pringle (1998) observes, the more important you are, the longer people should expect to wait for you. However, there is a paradox at play here: While Pringle notes that we dislike waiting, we tend to value more what we wait for. So the client who demands something from an agency – or makes them wait for a decision – is showing the value of her/his time and the lack of power of the public relations agency to effect change.

Time carries symbolic meaning with van den Scott (2014) noting '[i]n both the opera world and the tattooing world, members use time as a legitimation resource to attain the status of expert [and thus the client is making a claim for legitimacy by forcing people to wait]. Time can be used against another person or group when time is taken from them as they are forced to wait' (482) and although potentially a public relations agency could redress this power imbalance by insisting on a schedule to protect their time (Zerubavel 1982) they may also not have the power to do this – and as a result would risk upsetting the client and not being allowed to continue with the pitching process. It appears that because public relations agencies are beholden to the timescales of others they are seen as unequal partners. This has repercussions that follow the agency beyond the pitch – even if successful in securing a contract their advice not as valued as those requesting their work.

Power, time, and ceremonial values are closely connected and mirror each other (Tool 2000) with ceremonial values the 'bastion of the status quo and the social hierarchy'

Ceremonial values

This article uses the concept of ceremonial values (Bush 1987) and their link with power to unpick and made sense of the existence and continuation of pitching as a business activity in an industry which also has a rigorous drive towards professionalism. Ceremonial (and instrumental) values have their basis in the work of late nineteenth/early twentieth-century economist Thorsteinn Veblen who articulated the central role of institutions in economic life. He observed that

> institutions derive from two broad bases of legitimation or valuation: 'ceremonial' and 'instrumental.' Ceremonial institutions are inherited beliefs which socially legitimate social status, class, and distribution of power, via a naturalized logic of invidious distinction. Instrumental institutions are the beliefs and systems which legitimate and motivate problem-solving action or skills acquisition — the source of technical progress, industriousness, and inquiry. (Harrington and Ferguson 2001, online)

Ceremonial values 'lead to patterns of thought and action that prescribe the status, reinforce principal-agent relationships and legitimise the use of power by one group of people over another when there are "sufficient reasons" or "plausible arguments" to do so' (Bush 1987; in Mutiganda 2014, 133) and work within society and organisations to 'keep existing power-relationships intact in order to protect the status quo at the expense of the community' (Mutiganda 2014, 130).

Ceremonial values are used to describe activities in the banking sector (e.g. Harrington and Ferguson 2001) but have also been used to understand the impact of e.g. artificial intelligence on the workplace (Garcia-Murillo and MacInnes 2019), the evolution of Bitcoin (Papadopoulos 2015) and public sector competitive tenders (Mutiganda 2014).

Within any organisation both instrumental values and ceremonial values can be found, each with its own logic. Veblen (in Jo and Henry 2015) made the distinction between the useful instrumental practices and ceremonial practices (which only progress status hierarchies). However, while they both exist separately and are intertwined as they help groups maintain power (Garcia-Murillo and MacInnes 2019). Ceremonial values respect hierarchies and make comparisons regarding people and their worth within the community or organisations (Bush 1987) and are thus a valuable lens through which to understand pitching and the power relations within the activity.

With instrumental values, the best available methods, people, skills and knowledge are prioritised to run an organisation or solve its problems with Tool (2000) describing them as 'the voice of progress' (55). However, as Figart (2017) observes, Veblen also developed the concept of ' invidious distinctions to describe status hierarchies based on factors other than merit (6). If progressive change is desired, instrumental values should trump ceremonial values as they allow an organisation to progress. But because progressive change disrupts status hierarchies and power structures via the redistribution of power and resources, it does not benefit all parties and can result in a loss of power or resources from people or departments. This is because unlike ceremonial values, instrumental values do not always replicate power relationships as they prioritise those with the required knowledge and skills. Importantly they are justifiable, measurable and objective – in contrast to ceremonial values which cannot be easily quantified and whose existence is difficult to question due to existing power structures.

While it would be sensible for the pitching process to develop and progress alongside the growing maturity of the occupation of public relations, seen through the lens of ceremonial values this is unlikely to happen due to a process known as ceremonial encapsulation. This is where there is little incentive to replace ceremonial practices, particularly if a group of people feel threatened by what may take its place (Hielscher, Pies and Valentinov 2012). Hielscher *et al* argue that change from ceremonial to instrumental can happen if people act cooperatively but for that to occur they need to agree on common interests which is unlikely in a fragmented and unregulated industry such as public relations where clients come from many sectors and organisational types. They add that 'ceremonial value as the reason for social conflicts makes these conflicts irreconcilable in view of its tendency to perpetuate the existing social order. Thus, whatever interests are served by ceremonial value, they can certainly not be designated as the common interests of humanity; they are necessarily limited to narrow elite groups' (781–782) – and it is these groups who are unwilling to instigate change.

As Bush observes, ceremonial values are 'beyond inquiry' and are not subjected to 'critical scrutiny' and while they may be rationalised through argument, 'they are never subjected to any sort of test of refutability. They are accepted on authority and regarded as absolute' (1987, 1079). Thus, the pitching process is not questioned by clients (organisations) as they hold the power in the relationship and the pitching process replicates and validates this power – setting the tone for the ongoing unequal relationship between agency and client (Garcia-Murillo and MacInnes 2019).

It is difficult to discuss ceremonial values without an analysis of power relationships within the workplace. The work on power in public relations frequently places the discussion in the context of power as a force to change or affect the way people think, or to reinforce existing ideologies (e.g. Motion and Weaver 2005) but we are looking at unequal power relationships between client and practitioner which is written about less frequently in public relations scholarship (although there are exceptions e.g. Edwards 2018).

As Edwards (2018) observes, a discourse that tends to 'privilege a white, male workview because white males dominate and have vested interests' (50) entrenches their power and invades all aspects of organisational culture – from modes of dress to working hours. Since these practices promote and produce trust from other actors such as clients (Bourne 2013), change is resisted by those holding power as it would potentially reduce their dominance and ability to dictate practice.

Oliveira and Clegg (2015) argue that professionals (clients) can use technical knowledge to resist change in their organisations and thus avoid the consequences of change. For instance, finance teams and the 'C-suite' can withhold budgetary, business or technical knowledge from those attempting to purchase public relations services (who then withhold it from agencies) which means that the agency receives and incomplete picture of the organisation's requirements. Also, as will be discussed below, public relations agencies who question the client's strategy or approach often find themselves losing the pitch (Feldman 2016) and few public relations agencies, working on small margins and reliant on their clients to pay wages, can afford to risk upsetting a future client. This not only forces public relations practitioners to withdraw from putting their expertise on display (with the result that the claims for being a professional service are impacted) but also perpetuates the view that public relations are tactical on-demand service.

Methods

This article explores the public relations pitching process from two perspectives. It attempts to understand the issue through the lens of ceremonial values and agency–client power relationships by carrying out interviews with leaders of regional public relations agencies and then maps these interviews against textbook writing on pitching to discover the key themes or 'moments' about pitching in educational/informational texts for practitioners. Through these two methodologies, we can attempt to understand the unequal relationship between public relations agencies and the clients who employ them or ask them to pitch.

The analysis of textbook 'moments' attempts to draw together the professional literature aimed at students and practitioners. Over 20 public relations textbooks were reviewed, eight of which were found to contain advice or information on pitching (see Table 1) and this advice was analysed thematically to understand the book's approach to the practice. Textbooks were initially chosen on the basis that they were (1) published since 2010 and (2) were available to students either online or in print via the library of a large British university which taught public relations. A review of both index and contents was carried out to ascertain whether they contained details of pitching or the procurement process. A closer reading was then carried out to establish whether the information was instructional or information (in which case its contents are under review in this article and included in Table 1) or simply a passing mention or comment (in which case it was not included). This initial survey only presented five textbooks so the search was widened to 'any year' which brought the number of textbooks up to eight with the oldest being from 1995. Since pitching has changed little in the last three years, the advice and information contained in these books is still considered relevant.

The other aspect of the project involved interviews with senior management of regional public relations agencies to establish their view of the pitching process. The focus was on regionally based agencies and none of the agencies were part of a larger network. This was important as the stories told by the national public relations media (such as industry publication *PR Week*) and industry 'experts' on social media networks often only report the activities of large, London-based, agencies. Such agencies often have size, status, and high-profile leaders and thus hold more power in agency/client discussions and are in effect insulated from the worst of the purchasing practices and

Table 1. Public relations textbooks containing discussion on pitching.

Textbook author(s)	Year of publication (of edition reviewed)	Title
Shirley Harrison	1995	*Public Relations: An Introduction*
Trevor Morris and Simon Goldsworthy	2012	*PR Today*
Bob Franklin, Mike Hogan, Quentin Langley, Nick Mosdell and Elliot Pill	2009	*Key Concepts in Public Relations*
Danny Moss and Barbara DeSanto	2011	*Public Relations: A Managerial Perspective*
Rich Leigh	2017	*Myths of PR*
Keith Butterick	2011	*Introducing public Relations: Theory and practice*
Amanda Barry	2002	*PR Power*
Glen Broom and Bey-Ling Sha	2012	*Cutlip & Center's Effective Public Relations*

allowed to demonstrate their expertise and professionalism. The stories of smaller regional agencies (2–29 employees) are rarely told in professional or academic literature.

The interviews took place over a two-month period (May to June 2019) and interviewees were recruited through the author's business networks. To prevent the potential biases in a small sample of people belonging to social cliques and networks (Halrynjo and Lyng 2009) care was taken not to interview people from the same geographical area or who had overlapping social networks. This was to avoid talking to those who shared similar worldviews and in effect, having the same story repeated in each interview. (Despite this, however, most interviewees had a similar set of issues.)

In-depth semi-structured interviews were used – such interviews are idea for small, purposive samples in public relations (Broom and Dozier 1990) and a phenomenological approach was taken in that each interview provided knowledge and context which could be used in future interviews and when analysing interviews. A phenomenological approach is a useful tool to explore a central phenomenon (in this case, pitching) in an occupational setting when discussing actions and relationships between groups and/or individuals. Yeomans points out that '[m]uch phenomenological literature is found in clinical, and particularly nursing settings where relationships between nurses and patients are investigated' (2016 , 31) and phenomenological approaches have found to be particularly useful for investigating social and cultural phenomena and for analysing 'the essential structures of any lifeworld' Schütz (1970). In this lifeworld 'social actors make sense of their own actions and others through a common stock of knowledge that is learned through different socialising sources' (Yeomans 2016 , 32) which is what our interviewees are attempting to do. They all have a universal knowledge which is drawn from a myriad of sources (peers, professional bodies, magazine articles, education, etc.) and are trying to make sense of it within their working lives. This research approach does not attempt to produce a framework or model, this would be impossible anyway, but uses a phenomenological approach to increase understanding of an issue within the lived experience of the practitioners.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed and took place in person or online depending on the location and availability of each interviewee. Each interview lasted 40 min or more.

Although only three interviews were carried out, they contained rich data and told a remarkably similar story. Boddy (2016) observes that research with small sample sizes often face criticism but the academic literature on qualitative sample sizes is actually sparse adding '[i]ndividual cases can […] provide a new, deep and nuanced understanding of previously unexplored phenomena. Furthermore, qualitative researchers have noted that often a researcher can (unknowingly) have all the data they need from their first piece of data collection' (online). Marshall et al. (2013), while pointing to the need to justify sample size, observe that very large samples may be difficult to analyse and thus are not always 'best'.

The agency managers interviewed were as follows (Table 2). They have been anonymised due to the highly personal nature of the discussions.

There was no ethnic diversity among the interviewees, possibly reflecting the low numbers of agency owners from ethnic minorities (according to the CIPR (2020) only 8% of practitioners are non-white). All were aged 30–55. While this sample has limitations, for a first look at agency–client relationships, it gives a valuable perspective on the issue.

Table 2. Agency leaders interviewed.

Name (pseudonym)	Agency type	Agency location (all UK)	Agency size
John	Public sector/mixed	Midlands	>10
Emily	Transport/tech/environment/general	Midlands	10–15
Simon	Consumer	South	15–20

Results and discussion

The issues each agency faced were similar. The agency leaders' responses, coupled with the scrutiny of textbook moments, highlight areas of concern which larger organisations or trade bodies are only just starting to address,

The analysis of public relations textbook 'moments' mapped against interview findings identified joint areas of concern but the main issues voiced by interviewees were largely unspoken or unmentioned by textbooks.

For textbooks, the main issues with pitching were as follows:

(1) ***The importance of 'chemistry':*** Chemistry, was never fully quantified but linked to likeability and charm. Only Morris and Goldsworthy (2012) linked it to competence.
(2) ***Excitement:*** The need to be exciting or excited when presenting to clients. This made public relations appear to be a 'bubbly' and tactical occupation. Considered action, thoughtfulness and strategy was not widely mentioned (Broom and Sha (2012) being the exception).
(3) ***Speed of response:*** Being able to respond quickly is valued above knowledge, consideration and counsel. Although Barry (2002) advised organisations to judge agencies on their expertise, one of her criteria for evaluating a public relations agency is whether they responded quickly.
(4) **Theft of ideas:** This was cited as a problem in textbooks (e.g. Barry 2002) and led to discussions whether it was possible to copyright or own creativity

The review of textbook moments confirmed that practitioners are in a disadvantaged position from the start, reliant on 'top tips' (e.g. Barry 2002; Leigh 2017) to help them navigate the process and 'play the game'. Advice appears to focus on helping the agency to avoid common complaints made by clients. Textbooks advise agencies to send the personnel who will be working on the account and that they should punctual. When Broom and Sha (2012) write about the process, it is clear who holds the balance of power.

> Clients occasionally call for a review of the firm's work or even reopen the selection process by requesting proposals from competing firms […] In some cases, clients call for reviews and entertain proposals from competing firms simply to remind the incumbent firm that the client's business should not be taken for granted or given anything less than prime attention. (90)

My interview findings revealed significant crossover with the textbooks but also identified significant areas which were not written about in textbooks but highlighted by practitioners. As public relations can be a craft practiced without formal training, the lore of pitching and expected behaviours are learnt within the workplace and become part of the organisational ideology.

The following dominant themes came out of the interviews, namely (1) The human cost of pitching; (2) The lack of transparency in the pitching process; and (3) The lack of feedback after the pitch.

Of the textbook moments mentioned above, none of the three main themes mapped against the interview themes (see Table 3) which suggests that textbooks do not manage to convey the reality of the pitching process.

(1) The human cost of pitching

Agencies aim for profitability but, for some, staying in business is the first aim. While agencies generally want to retain existing clients, client 'churn' means that agencies constantly seek new clients. Agency owners put considerable time and effort into new business development. This can include networking; acting on recommendations from business contacts; responding to 'application to tender' advertisements; subscribing to tendering portals; and cold calling. In addition, unsolicited enquires can come directly to the agency. In some cases, this new business development work will result in the agency developing a competitive pitch for business.

For small agencies, the human cost of pitching involves financial and human/emotional cost. For instance, as John observed 'I reckon we spend a week putting a pitch together – in our own time.' This is not 'free' time with Emily noting that 'the reality is that when (an opportunity to pitch) comes in it's always at the wrong time as it's always the week you heave deadlines for client or an event happening'.

Time taken to complete a pitch is at the expense of other work – or done in a person's own time and the agency is giving up their free time – unpaid – to the prospective client. This puts the agency in a subservient position as indirectly it is the client controlling how the agency spend their time (van den Scott 2014).

As Simon observed, agencies invest much emotional time in a pitch – through research, discussions, client meetings and product sampling – and if the account is not won, it can make management and staff feel that they or the agency is deficient. This feeling can manifest itself even if the selection process was poor and can have a negative impact on staff morale. Simon noted that junior staff felt the rejection particularly badly as they had yet to acquire a 'thick skin'.

Viewing the pitching process in terms of ceremonial values helps us understand the reason for poor client practices (and resulting human cost) and why these practices are unlikely to change; put simply because it benefits those with power too much. Agencies are unable to withhold their labour since they are dependent on the clients to stay in business and clients can run pitches badly, withhold information or 'steal' ideas

Table 3. Dominant interview themes vs. textbook moments.

Dominant interview themes	Textbook moments
1. The human cost of pitching	n/a
2. The lack of transparency in the pitching process	n/a
3. The lack of feedback after the pitch	n/a
n/a	The importance of chemistry
n/a	Excitement
n/a	Speed of response
n/a	Theft of ideas

because they will not be questioned. The public relations industry acknowledges that pitches cost agencies time and money (e.g. Barry 2002; L'Etang 2009) but industry calls for 'paid' pitches are weak and infrequent.

Edwards (2018) argues that discourses about professional identity and the perceived importance of the client produce professionals willing to work long hours and while the activities of the client may be questioned, there is an acceptance that 'put[ting] the pitches together in the evenings and weekends' (Emily) is part of what it takes to be a good public relations practitioner. So, while the client has the upper hand in business relationships, the agency's willingness to perform activity equating long hours and 'busy-ness' with professionalism allows damaging client-agency relationships to flourish and the ceremonial values to continue unchecked.

(2) The lack of transparency in the pitching process

The textbooks reviewed (see Table 3) did not discuss the imbalance of power (e.g. Garcia-Murillo and MacInnes 2019) in the pitching process despite the numerous obligations placed on the agency. The duty for getting the right briefing information was put on the agency, not the client (Butterick 2011), and information given to the agency was often scant.

The interviews unearthed rich qualitative data which revealed that, while many agencies do 'take a stand' and request transparency and clarity from prospective clients, this tends not to have a positive outcome for all but the 'top' agencies who hold power over a client due to their status. When the agencies interviewed questioned a client's approach, it rarely led to work being awarded. Offering professional counsel as discussed in e.g. Broom and Sha (2012) or providing a critique of the pitch documentation or the client's business activity, (which is what would be *expected* from a professional service) tended not to have a positive outcome. Consequently, many agencies are happy to accept a client's strategy or approach, undercut prices, or be complicit in inequitable (and potentially unethical) purchasing processes in the bid for business survival and the one-sided relationship partly caused by the desperation for business does nothing to help produce a mutually balanced relationship. This can be demonstrated in the following quote from one agency owner:

> There is a scope to ask questions but it's only at a pre-determined times … the answers go to everyone who's been invited to pitch … so you have to have a little bit of gamesmanship and check your questions because you don't want to reveal your hand. (John)

John's frustration suggests a power imbalance is known and recognised by many consultancies pitching for business; they adhere to its rules and if they try to game the system it is at the expense of other (equally powerless) agencies. John demonstrates an organisation using time to control a relationship (van den Scott 2014) but also a display of ceremonial values. There is no need for an organisation to withhold information from public relations agencies, provide vague briefs or hold elaborate and performative pitch events but this behaviour continues to thrive unchallenged in part because supplanting ceremonial values with istrumental ones is 'not necessarily a harmonious process and not one that occurs instantly' (Figart 2017, 10) – and while it exists, the client will always own the balance of power. Poor communication in the pitch process may of course be part of a wider issue in an organisation's culture and the vagueness of a brief directly related to an unsubstantial business strategy. These organisational failures are often hidden (deliberately?) by performative business practices (such as pitching process) and it is the agency which suffers from such behaviour rather than those in a leadership position. This can be demonstrated in Emily's interview where she explained that her agency 'pitched something before Christmas [May interview] and we still haven't heard if they are going to appoint and that was £15,000 worth of man hours'. Again, the desire to 'not upset the client' led to Emily not to push the client too hard for an answer.

Professional associations in the UK have only just started to highlight the pitching process as an area of concern but this may be because scrutiny of the process would damage the claims of the public relations industry to be seen as a strategic profession (L'Etang 2009).

(3) The lack of feedback after the pitch

Coupled with the lack of transparency, agencies complained about the lack of feedback after a pitch. Butterick (2011, 103) noted: 'It is common and good practice for the losing consultancy to go back to the company and get feedback on why they did not win' (not the other way around). However, feedback was not always constructive as pitches were often won on 'chemistry' (likeability) and there are few objective criteria for judging which agency is 'best'.

John noted that

> [organisations ask for agencies who have] relevant experience – what they do is recruit from people who have the same experience in that sector and they do the same tired old things […] it's really hard to break into new sectors because they have already decided that if you haven't worked in that sector you don't know what you're doing.

This also has issues regarding diversity – organisations recruit from a pool of 'people like them' and it's hard for an agency with radical ideas or from non-traditional backgrounds to break through (Edwards 2014 ; Bardhan and Gower 2022). The lack of feedback/transparency means that when a non-traditional agency is not selected it is difficult to know whether it is for 'objective' reasons or because of 'difference'. As Edwards (2014) observes, white practitioners are often not required to 'prove themselves' (73) which means that the selection process favours 'typical' public relations practitioners who fit certain occupational norms.

The reticence of companies to fully articulate the reason for an agency losing a pitch does not help an agency learn from losing a pitch or understand what they did 'wrong'. Emily pointed out that 'you have to be so resilient to go through the process and not take it personally'. The agencies interviewed were aware that many of the reasons for losing a pitch could not be explained rationally by a client anyway.

A clear and published scoring system may allow agencies to be judged more on their ability and less on likability but such transparency would potentially bring different or unwanted (for the client) outcomes to agency selection. The current process legitimises and maintains the use of power by one group of people over another (Mutiganda 2014) as clients can choose the agency they like best (and not necessarily who is best for the business).

Emily recalled that she was told by a company that 'you'd challenged our thinking a bit too much' with the result that her agency did not win the pitch. Emily's proposed work may have moved the client forward in terms of reputation or profitability but also could have undermined the client by questioning their business decisions. While some clients would be interested in receiving such counsel, for others it would have demonstrated a fault in the business direction and to be questioned by a service not seen as professional (L'Etang 2009) could be accepted by the organisation.

Conclusions

This research has revealed several complex and inter-related points which go some way to answering the two research questions:

> RQ1 – What are the main issues that practitioners experience with the pitching process?
>
> RQ2 – Why is there an imbalance of power in the agency-client relationship during the pitching process?

The practitioner interviews demonstrated that the main issues experienced were around the human cost of pitching, the lack of transparency in the pitching process and the lack of feedback after a pitch. All of these issues related in some way to the prospective client's behaviour and actions and the textbook advice was only how to respond to this behaviour and 'make it work' – not to challenge or change it.

This is article argues that while the pitching process exists in its current form, in the way described by practitioners above, public relations can never be treated as a strategic business process since the pitching process puts the occupation of public relations on an unequal footing with other business functions. Two interconnected reasons have led to this situation. Firstly, the client can dictate how the agency uses their time and is able to use this to consolidate power (van den Scott 2014; Levine 1987). Thus, the client is always in a more powerful position and the public relations agency permits them to hold power as to do otherwise would risk upsetting the potential client and losing the chance of working for them. Secondly, power relations allow ceremonial values to continue unchecked as while there is no tension in the system and agencies are unable to protest, there is little chance of instrumental values moving to the forefront.

Practitioner discussion on pitching in textbooks and articles focusses on working with the system, not against it although there are some exceptions e.g. Feldman (2016, 2017a, 2017b). Meanwhile, while practitioners recognise the description of pitching and adhere to advice discussed in textbooks, they voice many other issues – such as the human and financial cost of pitching and the lack of transparency in the process. The imbalance of power in the agency–client relationship during the pitching process (RQ2) is rarely discussed publicly for reasons described above and poor client behaviour is rarely challenged because of the 'not upsetting the client' mantra of public relations practice.

Simon noted that the extent to which the pitching process was open to abuse: Sometimes there was no intention to buy an agency's services but the promise of potential work led agencies to play along: 'They (potential clients) think they can just invite you in and have you parade around – they no intention of buying and I don't know why companies do this. It's frustrating.' He felt that companies did this just in case they saw something in an agency that they liked (and would then buy their services) but again this demonstrates organisations using but not respecting the time of a public relations agency. Time was seen as disposable and limitless and because the potential client never saw the impact of the agency using their free time in pursuit of a potential business win. To put a Marxian perspective on this, the agency's spare time is being used for the development of the potential client and is 'absorbed by his labour for the capitalist […] is a mere machine for producing Foreign Wealth' (Marx [1968] in Rojek [2013, 42]). The agency therefore has less free time not just to develop itself as a business but also to allow their staff to pursue their own creative, family or other endeavours.

Actions and contributions to knowledge

This article uses ceremonial values to explain why an occupation striving for professionalism allows an unregulated activity such as pitching to continue largely unchecked and outside the norms of practice. There has been little systematic research into the pitching process and the voices of practitioners are rarely heard as research into the lived experience of practitioners is still infrequent. The aim of this article is partly to raise awareness of issues and start a debate among a broader business audience but also for practitioners to understand the reasons for client behaviour and develop the knowledge and language to challenge poor behaviour.

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