

**From sending a message stick to having your message stick:  
A critical analysis of Indigenous Australian public relations, from the  
standpoints of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women**

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Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy**

Under the supervision of Professor Gawaian Bodkin-Andrews and

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## **Certificate of Original Authorship**

I, Treena Clark declare that this thesis, is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

This research is supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program.

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## **Acknowledgments**

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### **Supervisor Confirmations**

The research participants who joined as co-authors have provided confirmation of their co-authorship to the researcher. I have sighted email or other correspondence from all co-authors confirming their certifying authorship and endorse the above stated contribution of work undertaken for each of the published (or submitted) peer-reviewed manuscripts contributing to this thesis.

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## **Terminologies**

*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples* represents the two broad categories of people Indigenous to the country now known as Australia. Aboriginal peoples are originally from the mainland and Torres Strait Islander peoples are originally from the Torres Strait Islands. This term should always be capitalized, and it is commonly the preferred and culturally appropriate expression to use.

*Blackfulla* is a colloquial term referring to an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person.

*Blak* is a term that has been altered and appropriated from its historical use as a slur and in its contemporary form refers to being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. The artist Destiny Deacon first used the term in 1991 in the exhibition “Blak lik mi”.

*Colonization* refers to the process of invading and/or settling in a land that was previously established by Indigenous peoples.

*Colonial* or *Colonialism* relates to the acts and characteristics from and of a colony and its practice of colonization.

*Country* (with a capital C) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples describes the connections of family and ancestral origins with particular parts of the Australian landscape.

*Decolonization* describes the process of healing and restoring the damaging acts of colonization through ways of economic, cultural, political, spiritual, and psychological means.

*Decolonial* refers to the dismantling of Eurocentric and western knowledge production and episteme.

*Elder* refers to an Aboriginal person who is a respected and bestowed a cultural Knowledge Holder in their community. This term is not necessarily assigned to an older person.

*Eurocentric* or *Western* refers to peoples, cultures, or systems that hold European worldviews and practices.

*First Nations peoples* is a relatively new term that is embraced by many peoples and groups who are Indigenous to countries around the world. This term should always be capitalized.

*Indigeneity* refers to the connection, membership, and essence of being a person who is Indigenous or First Nations.

*Indigenous peoples* or *Indigenous Australian peoples* refers to all people of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent. There are contentions with using the term Indigenous, as the homogenization of the two are argued as disrespectful. Both terms should always be

capitalized. These terms will be used alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, however, throughout this thesis.

*Knowledges* is used to describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander beliefs and understandings.

*Mob* refers to an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander nation, clan, or language group.

*Nations* for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples refers to their group affiliation of their ancestral, Country, family, and community place(s) of connection.

*Post colonization* or *Postcolonial* refers to the aftermath of colonization and the rebuilding of a society following the departure of the colonists.

*Self-determination* in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts describes the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to determine their own economic, social, cultural, and spiritual practices, customs, and systems.

*Sisters* or *sistergirls* is a term used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women to demonstrate connection with each other as strangers, friends, or family. It can also refer to transgender Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.



## **Abstract**

This thesis highlights the practices of colonization and whiteness within the Australian public relations discipline and the processes of decolonization from the standpoints of Indigenous women working within the profession. Within this thesis, the specialization of Indigenous Australian public relations has been framed as a function that manages relationships between stakeholders, communicates for social change and self-determination, challenges deficit discourses, and is mostly built upon Indigenous cultural protocols and values. The practices within Indigenous Australian public relations have been utilized since time immemorial and are strongly evident within the protesting and campaigning movements that emerged from the invasion of Australia in the late eighteenth-century. Yet, within mainstream public relations there is a lack of acknowledgment of the historical and contemporary roles that Indigenous Australian public relations provides to the profession. Within the specialization of Indigenous Australian public relations itself, Indigenous women's standpoints and voices are absent within research.

This thesis, therefore, aims to decolonize the practices and paradigms of Eurocentric understandings within the Australian public relations profession. As an interdisciplinary body of work, this thesis is guided by conceptual frameworks of Indigenous and public relations decolonizing theories and intersectional and Indigenous women's models. Specifically, Indigenous Decolonization theory and Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory guide the positioning and research approach of an Indigenous storytelling methodology and Indigenous yarning method. Five Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

women from public relations and communications provide individual and collective themes and narratives through the Indigenous yarning interview data and thematic analysis.

The resultant findings of this thesis are disseminated within research journal papers and demonstrate theoretical and empirical understandings of the profession of Indigenous Australian public relations. The first paper examines colonization and whiteness in Australian public relations and the influence of Eurocentric narratives and paradigms. The second paper interrogates colonial and white historical public relations narratives and asserts decolonization through the identification of Indigenous public relations practices since time immemorial. The third paper provides insight into the practices of Indigenous Australian public relations and the development of a theoretical framework of this specialization. The fourth paper provides insight into the definition and role of activism practices within the personal lives of Indigenous women. The fifth paper explores Indigenous women's rationales and motivations of Indigenous Australian public relations as a career. Lastly, the sixth paper examines the positive and negative experiences as Indigenous women working within the profession.

## **1. Introduction and contextualization**

### **1.1. Introduction: Wombat, cultural rights, and white shaming**

One year ago, in early October 2019, a video emerged depicting an Aboriginal South Australian (Kokatha/Wirangu) man and police officer named Waylon Johncock. In this video, an off duty Johncock was seen stoning a wombat and excitedly reacting to its death, while a driver following him shines a light on the scene from his car. This video was subsequently published on the Wombat Awareness Organisation's Facebook page. Within several days the video had been shared over 400 times and the story was covered in the national and international media (Foster, 2019; O'Brien & Froelich, 2019). Wombat Awareness subsequently organized a petition arguing for an investigation of the incident under the *Animal Welfare Act 1985*, and obtained over 500,000 signatures (Wombat Awareness Organisation, 2019).

The RSPCA and group Wombats SA also condemned the incident and called for changes to the South Australian traditional hunting laws and a review of existing Native Title laws to ensure the humane hunting of animals (Olle, 2019). A further petition created by Christianne Barraclough (2019) was directed to the South Australian Police Commissioner (Grant Stevens) calling for Johncock to be fired from his job as a police officer. An ensuing criminal and internal disciplinary investigation into the incident was held and concluded that Johncock was acting within his cultural rights according to the *Native Title Act 1993 (Cth)*.

This situation subsequently escalated into an issue whereby the South Australian Aboriginal Far West Coast Association (which represents Kokatha, Wirangu, and Mirning peoples) issued a press release on the cultural and legal right of Mr Johncock to kill a wombat for food (Wood, 2019). Soon after, Aboriginal Elders from other nations in South Australia discussed their own cultural ways of killing animals for food, with some condoning Waylon Johncock for the manner that it had been done (ABC Radio Adelaide, 2019). Some Elders, such as Uncle Jeffrey Newchurch (Kaurna nation of the Adelaide Plains region) requested that Aboriginal communities and government departments negotiate on the traditional hunting practices and rights of Aboriginal peoples (ABC Radio Adelaide, 2019).

The response from various Indigenous peoples on social media were loud and vocal; supporting the right to practice Indigenous cultures, protesting the treatment of Johncock, and pointing out the lack of and hypocrisy of the media coverage. Many Indigenous peoples pointed out that farmers kill wombats callously (and often in the manner of pest control) and were not penalized for this practice. Two months after the video was first shared, a media article by South Australian (Wirangu/Kokatha/Mirning) Aboriginal man and *National Indigenous Television* (NITV) reporter, Douglas Smith, shared a statement from Waylon Johncock (addressed to the Far West Coast Aboriginal Community) apologizing for publicizing a private and cultural practice (Smith, 2019).

In the statement, Waylon explained: “I completely agree with our traditional Elders that the footage shouldn’t have been posted on social media because it gave the outside world a look into our traditional ways of living, and for that I am deeply sorry” (Smith, 2019).

Waylon also emphasized the personal toll of the incident:

*[a]s a result of this I have been under attack from the outside world and received hundreds of death threats. Some of these threats have been targeted at my family but the most disturbing of all were the ones written and targeted at my children (Smith, 2019).*

Since this apology statement, reporting on this incident has ceased within the media and on social media.

Consequently, if we put aside questions of whether a defenseless wombat should have been killed more humanely, or not killed at all, should we also conclude that this story represents racist white colonialism at its worst? Uncle Jeffrey Newchurch, compared the petition to acts of colonization, stating:

*[t]his has been highlighted where maybe it's gone out of the context, but to have 120,000 signatures signed against us, Aboriginal people, is what was done to us at the start of colonisation, where bang— “We don't like what the Aboriginal people do, you come be a Christian.”*

(ABC Radio Adelaide, 2019).

At the start of this media storm, Waylon was not asked to provide his own narrative about the situation. Many journalists were reporting on this incident from within Australia and internationally, but only one was an Indigenous reporter who privileged the voices of the family (Smith, 2019).

The media and various members from the white population once again dictated the narratives of Indigenous peoples and fabricated an unnecessary scandal out of a cultural and private situation. The near-termination of Johncock's employment, the scapegoating of one individual in order to propose changes to traditional hunting laws, and the trauma

of death threats issued to him and his family could have been avoided if print and social media spheres had not interfered. The sudden concern about a single wombat killed for food, rather than showing outrage over the treatment of Indigenous peoples themselves, does indeed speak volumes about both the mindset of the white public and the typical narrative framing that the media loves to indulge in (Moreton-Robinson, 2015).

The point of this story is not to justify the action of killing a wombat for cultural reasons and/or for food. For one, I am a pescatarian—the only “meat” I eat are fish and prawns; and two, I am against animal cruelty and was saddened by the suffering of the wombat. However, I raise this story in a particular context. I am a relative of Waylon and an Aboriginal Kokatha and Wirangu woman educated in the field of public relations. Although I am from the same Aboriginal kinships as Waylon, I grew up in urban Adelaide and am removed from many of my traditional cultural practices. However, I do believe that preserving traditional hunting rights is vital to preserve culture and can contribute to sustainable environmental management (Bodkin, 2013; Pascoe, 2013; Steffensen, 2019). I also believe that humane killing practices should be determined by Indigenous peoples themselves.

After hearing this story played out all over the media, I was angered by the whiteness and racism that permeated the media reports and social media posts. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are continually controlled within their own communities, pitted against each other, and belittled, as this example reflects. Research is emerging on the trauma that Indigenous peoples are constantly subjected to on social media (Carlson et al., 2017; Petray & Collin, 2017), as argued by Carlson et al. (2017, p. 5): “Online hate and harassment are very real issues for Indigenous people and constitute a form of ‘shared

recognition' whereby trauma is understood as a consequence of colonialism and the continued subjugation and vilification of Indigenous people".

Yet, after my anger (slightly) subsided, I realized that from an Indigenous lens and public relations standpoint, this situation could be explored and examined from multiple angles. For example, we could assess the following elements: management of crisis communication by Waylon Johncock and the Far West Coast Corporation; the activism and public relations strategies utilized by Indigenous peoples; the role of the mainstream media in their reporting of the incident; and the role of Indigenous journalists in self-determining media reports from the voices of Indigenous communities. This example of an incident where Indigenous cultural rights were infested by a white pathology (Moreton-Robinson, 2015) and unnecessary interference signals that public relations could exert an influence on other situations, from both sides of the equation. This is why I believe that public relations is an essential profession and needs to involve more Indigenous peoples who could work towards dismantling the white dominated media landscape and contributing to social change.

This example illustrates that the mainstream public relations profession needs more knowledge and understanding of Indigenous cultural protocols. Within the media industry there are various handbooks purporting to educate journalists and presenters on their reporting of Indigenous peoples and communities (see Janke & Guivarra, 2006; Media Diversity Australia, 2018). Yet so far there are no such manuals in the field of public relations. Therefore, inspired by this example, and in response to the various ways that public relations can influence a positive or negative narrative of Indigenous peoples, communities, and cultures, I hope that my thesis provides a valuable academic

contribution toward the much-needed Indigenous knowledges that are currently invisible within the discipline and the profession. I hope to highlight the perpetual whiteness and racism that is endemic within the profession and instead privilege the practices and strategies of Indigenous peoples working in public relations today and in the future.

## **1.2. Privileging Indigenous voices / closing the research lens gap**

The wombat narrative has demonstrated that colonization is evident within both the Australian public relations profession and wider society. The negative narratives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by the media and suppression of Indigenous representations of and engagement within their own communities are issues that need to be addressed. This thesis aims to highlight and critique these public relations approaches and instead privilege Indigenous voices as a movement toward decolonization. To inform and guide our Indigenous ways of conducting public relations research, this thesis will position an Indigenous Decolonizing framework (Laenui, 2000; Muller, 2014) and draw on Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory (Moreton-Robinson, 2013) to center Indigenous women's voices within the field of public relations. In focusing on the roles and experiences of Indigenous women working within Australian public relations, this thesis poses the following questions:

1. How can we build a process to decolonize Australia's public relations industry by utilizing Indigenous standpoints?
2. What is Indigenous Australian public relations in practice?
3. What are the narratives and roles that Indigenous women have provided to the development of Indigenous Australian public relations?



To answer the first question, we need to explore the colonizing strategies within public relations that have been endemic from the colonial period and into contemporary times. As understanding the effects of colonization is an important step towards decolonization (Muller, 2014), this aim will explore the process of decolonizing Australian public relations' historical narrative and theoretical base. For example, what evidence is there of public relations practices within Indigenous nation groups prior to colonization? And what role did public relations play in pre-colonial Indigenous events and campaigns? Further questions will ask how Indigenous theoretical frameworks and Indigenous research methodologies can assist with decolonizing Australian public relations.

The second question, "What is Indigenous Australian public relations in practice?" aims to theorize Indigenous Australian public relations, articulate its connection to activism and narrate experiences of Indigenous roles within the profession. Given that there is a minimal amount of existing research on Indigenous Australian public relations, this aim will question how Indigenous women collectively consider the practice of Indigenous Australian public relations. Specific sub-questions will ask: What are Indigenous women's common strategies and tactics in public relations? How is activism connected to Indigenous Australian public relations? And what does the career of public relations represent for Indigenous peoples?

The third question, "What are the narratives and roles that Indigenous women have provided to the development of Indigenous Australian public relations?" aims to privilege Indigenous women's voices in public relations and activism. Specifically, this aim will focus on the positive and negative aspects for Indigenous women working in Australian public relations, including the question of Indigenous women's motivations and

rationales for working in the industry. It must be emphasized that rather than providing an explicit critique of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men, this aim will instead challenge the Eurocentric patriarchal structures within the Australian and global public relations disciplines.

To address these questions and examine the foundation of Indigenous public relations practices from the standpoints of Indigenous women, understandings of both Indigenous Decolonizing theory and Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory will be outlined and grounded as twin conceptual frameworks.

### **1.3. Conceptual frameworks and positionings**

#### *1.3.1. Introduction*

Since its arrival in 1788, British-led colonization continues to impact on Indigenous peoples, and its effects are reflected within the various statistics and reports that the Australian Government uses to control our lives (e.g., Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017; Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2020 - the *Closing the Gap* report). From the historical structures and practices of dispossession (forcible removal from lands), cultural genocide (extermination of cultures and languages), physical genocide (massacres), and blatant or covert racism, intergenerational trauma continues today (Muller, 2014). For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, colonization has meant Eurocentric patriarchal control and the multi-layered oppressive forces of gender and ethnicity (Behrendt, 1993; Huggins, 1987). In grounding an Indigenous women's decolonizing position, this thesis utilizes Indigenous Decolonization theory (Laenui,

2000; Muller, 2014) and Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory (Moreton-Robinson, 2013) as frameworks to guide the methodology, research data collection, data analysis, and research translation.

The arrival of the colonizing settlers disrupted the social order of traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lives. Gender roles within Indigenous cultures has long been an important issue (Huggins, 1987; Fredericks, 2004), and now we face a constant struggle against Western norms that impose binary and oppressive constructions of gender. For instance, Bidjara/Pitjara, Birri Gubba, and Juru woman Jackie Huggins (1987, pp. 78–79) has stated: “Male dominance was, and is, a major ingredient in the culture Europeans brought with them to Australia.” In traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, Aboriginal woman Bronwyn Fredericks (2004) affirmed that there were many respected roles that Indigenous women, men, and children could fulfil within the broader community. Fredericks (2004, p. 1) stressed that “Aboriginal women were valued and respected and were not of lesser value to men or men a lesser value to women”. Today, Indigenous feminism and Indigenous women's standpoints have emerged as forces of decolonization and assert resistance toward the ongoing effects of colonization (Behrendt, 1993; Fredericks, 2010; Huggins, 1987, 1994; Moreton-Robinson, 2000, 2013). Indigenous feminism and Indigenous women's standpoints can be an empowering source of strength for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who seek to reverse the impact of Eurocentric patriarchal constructs.

### *1.3.2. An Indigenous framework for decolonization*

The process of decolonization within Australia is not simply the eradication of the inequities and inequalities that Indigenous Australian peoples and communities are forced to endure but it is the breaking down of privileged systems of whiteness that perpetuate these inequities and inequalities (Martin, 2008; Moreton-Robinson, 2013). The current impacts of colonization have reduced the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population to 3.3% of the Australian population (798,400) (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2018) and resulted in a life expectancy that is nine to ten years lower than for non-Indigenous Australians (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2017). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples comprise of approximately 27% of the prison population (ABS, 2016) and are likely to experience very high levels of mental distress (Walker, Dudgeon & Boe, 2020). The purpose of decolonization is to not only break down the dominance of colonization itself, but to repair and heal the effects of colonization and empower Indigenous Australian peoples and communities to determine their own histories, identities, cultures, research, and futures (Dudgeon & Walker, 2015; Muller, 2014; Smith, 2012).

When undertaking Indigenist research it is essential to understand how Indigenous scholars may initiate decolonization themselves. As noted by Martin (2008), to comprehend decolonization one must understand its purpose, the processes that shape it, and the specific contexts in which a decolonization framework may be applied (e.g., education, public relations). There are multiple Indigenous Australian scholars and allies in diverse professions, including nursing, women's health, education, journalism, and psychology, who have initiated multiple decolonization processes and frameworks (Dudgeon & Walker, 2015; Muller, 2014; Sherwood & Edwards, 2006; Sweet, et al., 2014) and have engaged with the foundations set in the five-stage decolonizing process

of Hawaiian scholar Poka Laenui and others (Martin, 2008; Muller, 2014; Walker et al., 2013). Therefore, inspired by Poka Laenui's (2000) foundational Indigenous Decolonization theory of five phases, and Aboriginal Australian woman Lorraine Muller's (2014) updated approach of six stages (see below), this thesis will be guided by the following stages of decolonization:

- Rediscovery and Recovery
- Mourning
- Healing and Forgiveness (Muller, 2014)
- Dreaming
- Commitment
- Action.

The first stage of *Rediscovery and Recovery* advocates becoming aware of the impacts of colonization before one can rediscover, recover, and understand what worldviews, beliefs, and practices may be threatened or lost. This stage is the subsequent, but also continuation, of Laenui's (2000) five interrelated stages of colonization of denial and withdrawal (1); destruction/eradication (2); denigration/belittlement/insult (3); surface accommodation/tokenism (4); and transformation/exploitation (5). Through both Laenui's (2000) colonization theory and this first stage of Indigenous Decolonization theory (*Rediscovery and Recovery*), an understanding of the varying stages of colonization within a country, or, in the case of this thesis, a profession/discipline, can be examined.

Within research contexts, this stage may occur in response to encountering horrific knowledges and stories of the impact of colonization. This first stage is not static but is

rather an ongoing learning process in the context of the true stories of colonization in Australia. In a study concerning an Indigenous Women's Wellness Program Project (Walker et al., 2013), the Indigenous women research participants collectively followed the five stages of decolonization and discussed their experiences and encounters of colonization. This study involved and outlined the processes and alignment of Indigenous Decolonization theory to prepare an Indigenous Women's Wellness summit (Walker et al., 2013).

This is then followed by the second stage of *Mourning*, where Indigenous peoples must be given the time and space to understand their wounds and begin to heal. This stage can cause an entrapment for some people who are so angered and saddened that they are unable to move forward in healing (possibly falling into a sense of hopelessness). In the Walker et al. (2013) study, the Indigenous women research participants experienced the importance of the *Mourning* stage through sharing their approaches in moving forward from their grief and loss due to colonization.

The third stage developed by Muller (2014), *Healing and Forgiveness: Reclaiming Wellbeing and Harmony*, involves arranging and honoring the time to regather strength and engage in self-care to prepare for the next stages of decolonization. Muller (2014) emphasizes that this stage is not about explicitly forgiving or forgetting what has been discovered and learnt from the first two stages but is about strengthening personal wellbeing and renewing spirit. Within research contexts, it is important to take time out, practice self-care, and monitor mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual distress.

The fourth stage of *Dreaming* is the period of strengthening one's cultural philosophy and values and planning and evaluating decolonization strategies. It is a stage when time, power, and resources allow the development of Indigenous aspirations, of dreaming, where Indigenous peoples can reevaluate, correct, and even create social structures (e.g., economic, judicial systems) to assist in decolonization itself. For the Indigenous women in the aforementioned research, they spoke about the ways in which to further Indigenous women's wellbeing, for example, the significance of women's gatherings and dedicated conferences on Indigenous women's health (Walker et al., 2013).

The fifth stage of *Commitment* refers to building a strong constant strength to continue the decolonizing journey. It is committing to "a direction in which society must move" (Muller, 2014, p. 56). This stage is about respecting the diverse voices of Indigenous peoples and committing to a sense of solidarity of purpose amongst all Indigenous representatives. For instance, in observing the research stages of Walker et al. (2013), the collective commitment of an "Indigenous Women's Wellness Summit" saw to the researchers and the Indigenous women participants submitting and winning a funding application to develop their event.

The sixth and final stage of the decolonization process is *Action: Decolonizing knowledge*. Action is not defined by a reactive, survival response to colonization, but rather the proactive steps taken by Indigenous peoples to achieve self-determination. Muller (2014) champions the stage of Action through the conceptualization and process of Indigenous research methodology, methods, and cultural ethics. In the case of the Indigenous Women's Wellness Summit, this gathering was held in Brisbane on March 9,

2012, a significant day preceding the date of International Women's Day (March 8) (Walker et al., 2013).

From these brief examples by Muller (2014) and Walker et al. (2013), decolonization can be utilized within research contexts. In aiming to dismantle the privileged systems of whiteness within public relations, these six stages of decolonization will be applied and experienced throughout this dissertation. These stages may not be linear and may traverse back and forth during the course of the thesis. This challenge to Eurocentric patriarchal hegemonies means adopting a strong position of Indigenous feminism and Indigenous women's research, and this, as an accompanying conceptual framework, will help to assert and validate my research methodologies and methods (Moreton-Robinson, 2013).

### *1.3.3. Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory*

There are many Indigenous women who have pioneered their voices against the layered oppressions of gendered and cultural discrimination (Behrendt, 1993; Fredericks, 2004, 2010; Huggins, 1987, 1994; Moreton-Robinson, 1998, 2000, 2003, 2013). Indigenous women are also contrasting the role of Indigenous feminism against that of mainstream/white feminism and finding similarity and sisterhood with other Indigenous women, both nationally and globally (Behrendt, 1993; Fredericks, 2004, 2010; Huggins, 1987, 1994; Moreton-Robinson, 1998, 2000, 2003, 2013). Within research contexts, pioneering Quandamooka woman Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2013) developed a specific Indigenous women's theory to represent the unique positioning of Indigenous women living within Eurocentric patriarchal Australian society. This vital Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory emphasizes and advocates that the perspectives, experiences, and



knowledges of Indigenous women be recognized and understood (Moreton-Robinson, 2013).

The foundation of Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory was inspired by the approaches of existing feminist and Indigenous standpoint theories and their lack of Indigenous cultural dimensions and gendered/women's positions, respectively (Moreton-Robinson, 2013). The pioneering feminist analyses of women's positions and opposition to patriarchal constructs and oppressions saw to notions of varying feminist standpoint theories (see Dorothy E. Smith, 1974; Nancy C. M. Hartsock, 1983; Patricia Hill Collins, 1986; Sandra Harding, 1993; Donna Haraway, 1988) (Moreton-Robinson, 2013). Standpoints and self-positionings within feminist research ensures that women's worldviews are discussed and contextualized against the patriarchy and their experiences within a patriarchal society (Moreton-Robinson, 2013). Within broad feminist standpoints, however, the separation of Indigenous women's holistic connection to Country, ancestors, and living beings was identified as a significant omission (Moreton-Robinson, 2013).

Feminist standpoint theory is partly reflected in Torres Strait Islander man Martin Nakata's (2007, p. 215) Indigenous standpoint theory, which aims "to better reveal the workings of knowledge and how understanding of Indigenous people is caught up and implicated in its work." Yet, within this generalized Indigenous standpoint, Nakata's (2007) emphasis on the inclusivity of all genders has been criticized for its homogenization of Indigenous men and women and for omitting the uniqueness of Indigenous women's lived experiences (Moreton-Robinson, 2013). Indigenous men and women are indeed interconnected with cultural understandings and backgrounds;

however, Indigenous women encounter and experience different cultural knowledges and unique oppressions that involve both racial and gendered types of discrimination. From these strong platforms and evident gaps, Moreton-Robinson (2013, p. 332) articulated Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory, which she said offers both a "perspective ... [and] a socially situated subject of knowledge."

Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory informs the approach of a methodological framework for Indigenous women researchers, and it can be reconfigured to suit the specificities of the varying cultural and social locations of Indigenous women. Moreton-Robinson (2013, p. 339) specified that "as Indigenous women our social location within hierarchical relations of ruling within our communities and Australian society also factors into our standpoint as researchers within the academy, as does our different disciplinary training". Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory positions Indigenous women's ways of being and belonging (ontology), ways of knowing (epistemology), and ways of doing (axiology) (Moreton-Robinson, 2013).

Ways of being and belonging (ontology) is what we are born into, our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations and groups, our Country, our sites of ancestral learning. Ontology is how we connect to one another and the Country we are on. Ways of knowing (epistemology) is how we were raised, what we were born into, our wisdom from our knowledge base of life experiences, learnings from our culture, family, and community, and our knowledges, both culturally-inherent and Western-based. Ways of doing (axiology) is informed by our ontology and epistemology and represents our values and morals, how we live our lives (both personally and professionally), our Indigenous and/or spiritual morals, and the ethics we live by. For example, Amber Kwaymullina (2017), she

centered her Indigenous women's standpoint when articulating her worldview as an Aboriginal woman and place in society as a storyteller.

Within this thesis, Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory will likewise contextualize my worldview and knowledges to inform the study's positioning and methodology (Morton-Robinson, 2013). As an Indigenous woman, my positioning and representation within a modern patriarchal and Eurocentric nation is unique and intersectional. Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory will therefore be integral in critiquing Eurocentric patriarchal constructions of public relations and centering the positions and voices of Indigenous women within the profession. From this stance, it is important to develop a research approach that will privilege Indigenous women's stories and allow a non-biased approach to data analysis and the discussion of findings.

#### *1.3.4. My Nunga Weena Wanggan-Mirn positioning/Indigenous women's public relations standpoint*

Nunga Weena Wanggan-Mirn means Aboriginal woman talking and listening or, in the case of my research positioning, Indigenous women's public relations standpoint. The word Nunga is a general term that describes an Aboriginal person from South Australia, while the combination of Weena (woman), Wanggan (talking/yarning), and Mirn (listening) originate from my mother's two cultural groups from the West Coast of South Australia (Kokatha and Wirangu). My Nunga Weena Wanggan-Mirn positioning is guided by my ways of being and belonging (ontology), ways of knowing (epistemology), and ways of doing (axiology) (Moreton-Robinson, 2013). My Nunga Weena Wanggan-Mirn positioning guides how I will contribute back to community and privilege the voices

and stories of my fellow Indigenous sisters/women research participants. The purpose of this standpoint is to assist in the decolonization of public relations by asserting my unique voice and reflecting on my cultural and woman's point of view to understand further about how my worldview was analyzed and considered in this research and findings.

*Ways of being and belonging (ontology)*

Within this research, ontology is how the Indigenous women research participants and I situate ourselves in the Country we are on, our own cultural nations, our relation to each other, and our connections with our fellow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and men. My ontology is that of a Kokatha and Wirangu woman (from my mother's side), with family ties to Gurindji, Warumungu, Warlpiri, and Yankunytjatjara Countries (through my father). I was born and raised in Adelaide, but often travelled to Alice Springs, Tennant Creek, Darwin, and Hobart for family visits. I had an urban upbringing, which has both been an advantage and a disadvantage; the advantage being close to most of my family, schools, universities, and the airport, and the disadvantage being that I was not born and raised on Country.

My parents met at the national, Indigenous-focused university entry program, *Aboriginal Task Force*, in the 1980s. The program was based in Adelaide, on Kurna land (Anderson, 2015). Aboriginal Task Force was the first national program dedicated to transitioning Indigenous people into university and it led to many individuals moving away from their homes to further their education (including my father). One prominent former student includes Kungarakana Elder Dr Tom Calma AO, who was the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner from 2004 to 2010 and is currently a co-chair on

the Senior Advisory Group of the Indigenous Voice to Government (National Indigenous Australians Agency, n.d.). After my father passed away when I was four, I was raised by my single-parent mother, who studied psychology part-time while working a full-time job. She now has her doctorate and is a researcher in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health.

Both my parents came from families who experienced the racist and colonial practices of the Stolen Generation era (see the *Bringing them Home* Report - Australian Human Rights Commission, 1997). The term Stolen Generation refers to an Australian policy that entailed the forcible removal of Indigenous children from their families to achieve a supposed assimilation into non-Indigenous society from the period 1910 to 1970 (van Rijswijk & Anthony, 2012; Behrendt, 2009; McMillan & Rigney, 2018). Most of my grandparents suffered the experience of removal from their parents and placement within children's homes, or else had their own children removed. The Stolen Generation policy and era did not result in a loss of Indigeneity or kinship for my parents' families, and both families have given me strong Aboriginal role models who have demonstrated resistance and self-determination to give back to community. These strong and pioneering role models include my Auntie Lowitja O'Donoghue (my paternal grandfather's cousin) and my mother, Yvonne Clark. My Auntie Lowitja is a well-known figure within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities as she is a pioneer of Indigenous rights and was the founding chairperson of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) from 1990 to 1996 (Rintoul, 2020).

I was born and raised on Kurna country – a different country belonging to my ancestors, and I was not raised to learn my cultural stories on Country. Because of this I feel

comfortable living in varying locations and on different lands as I don't experience a yearning for my ancestral Country. I have solely lived in urban environments and that is generally where I feel most comfortable. My worldview is that of an urban-raised person and the experiences that can come with that, including mixing with all different Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural groups, non-Indigenous peoples, and differing forms of racism and discrimination to those in regional or rural areas. For a long time, I felt a connection to being around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples rather than returning to Country (for example, the people make the place and the atmosphere for me). However, visiting my homelands recently has ignited a new yearning to return and spend time on Country, and learn cultural stories and activities with my extended family.

#### *Ways of knowing (epistemology)*

My epistemology and my ways of knowing were formed through my Aboriginal upbringing and the encouragement I received from a young age to attend university. Through my many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family, community, personal, and professional connections, I learnt and centered the Indigenous values of “community, collectivism, strong sense of family, respect for elders, co-operation, reciprocity and cultural pride” (Behrendt, 1995, p. 60).

I had many passions but chose public relations to give back to community and to contribute to dismantling the deficit discourses and negative narratives that circulate about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. I had originally organized a career entry into journalism but after learning about public relations as a profession, and how it

has the potential for transforming social change, I decided to follow that path. I acquired Western knowledges and theories through completing Bachelor of Public Relations and Bachelor of Arts (Honours) degrees at the University of South Australia. I worked toward understanding Indigenous Australian public relations through my Honours project. This research explored the balance of Aboriginal cultural competencies and public relations qualifications/knowledges in the public relations staff working at Aboriginal Community Controlled organizations (ACCOs).

From the very start of my study, I envisioned working eventually for a government department on Indigenous communication campaigns, followed by educational promotion. This ambition motivated me to complete my undergraduate studies when it sometimes seemed too difficult to do so. The jobs that followed taught me further about my profession but about the complexities and intricacies of working life and the politics in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds. My epistemology has been altered through my time living in Sydney and meeting more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and understanding decolonizing and Indigenous feminist theories.

#### *Ways of doing (axiology)*

My axiology, my ways of doing, is based on my community values and morals and how I conduct my personal and professional life. My axiology has steered me towards a career that gives back to Indigenous community, advocates for Indigenous self-determination, and acknowledges our ancestors and the tireless work that they have done. I am a proud Kokatha and Wirangu woman and I embrace and maintain my Indigenous values, despite the colonial forces that have sought to erase them.

My axiology is influenced by the relationship between my cultural knowledges and my Western education. My work in public relations, prior to academic study, included positions within government, university, and Indigenous organizations. These included community roles within public relations and project management and professional campaign positions. One goal of mine was to assist with promoting the importance of education to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth, a goal which I eventually fulfilled when I was able to work with the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME). Based at the University of South Australia, my role at AIME involved organizing the program as the inaugural program manager for South Australia, and the northern suburbs of Adelaide, and facilitating mentoring and educational sessions.

Within a public relations context, axiology informs the work that we do, the organizations we work with, how we communicate with our publics, how we develop our campaigns, and how our values drive our work. This includes the values and strategies that Indigenous people can center in public relations, such as collaboration, giving back to community, and activism. For me, situated in public relations academia, I greatly value, and attempt to engage with decolonization narratives, community collaboration, community ownership, and Indigenous storytelling.

#### *1.3.5. Conclusion*

I consider myself an Indigenous feminist and this research reflects this ideology and lens. My worldview of my culture, gender, and life experiences will hopefully be understood through my research approach and the centering of storytelling from not only myself but



my fellow Indigenous women research participants. Ultimately, this thesis is a way to give back to my local and national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and to provide insight into Indigenous Australian public relations. Through this dissertation, I aim to assert Indigenous standpoints within public relations practices to deconstruct and decolonize the dominant patriarchal public relations theories and professional practices. I also aim to educate current and future non-Indigenous public relations professionals by disseminating these research findings, which I hope will be integrated within university curricula. Indigenous Decolonization theory and Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory will be embedded throughout this thesis—from the privileging of Indigenous research methodology and methods of data collection to the narratives, roles, and contributions of the Indigenous women participants.

#### **1.4. Research approach**

##### *1.4.1. Introduction*

The conceptual frameworks of Indigenous decolonizing theory and Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory inform my Indigenous research methodology and the associated methods for data collection and analysis. By centering the research approach from an Indigenous woman's standpoint and using Indigenous Decolonization theory, I aim to give back to my fellow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and international First Nations communities, and to contribute value to the emergence of knowledge of Indigenous Australian public relations in theory and practice. Indigenous research methodology advocates for Indigenous self-determination, communal contributions, and the decolonization of research directions and methods (Wilson, 2008). It provides a

direction for the conceptualization of the research project, from the choice of topic to the dissemination of findings. Canadian Opaskwayak Cree scholar, Wilson (2008, p. 107) describes the approach this way:

*I see Indigenous scholars putting into practice being accountable to our relations in four different ways. The first is through how we go about choosing the topics we will research. The second is in the methods that we use to “collect our data” or build our relationships. The third is the way in which we analyze what we are learning. Finally, we maintain relational accountability in the way in which we present the outcomes of the research.*

#### 1.4.2. *Indigenous research methodologies*

The area of Indigenous research methodology reflects not only a process of decolonization from Western foundations, but also the reviving and centering of Indigenous knowledges that privileges Indigenous cultural values and protocols and contributes positively to Indigenous communities (Foley, 2003; Kovach, 2010; Martin, 2003; Moreton-Robinson, 2013; Moreton-Robinson & Walter, 2009; Nakata, 2002, 2007; Rigney, 1997, 1999; West, 1998, cited in Foley, 2003, p. 47; Wilson, 2008). Indigenous research methodologies have a global reach, as there is a (re)emergence of diverse First Nations peoples around the world. Particularly within the Western colonized countries of the United States of America, Canada, New Zealand and Australia there is a strong collective movement of collaboration, engagement, and sharing of research epistemologies and techniques while also respecting the contextually-specific

environmental, spiritual, and cultural knowledges deeply embedded in our sense of place and Country.

The pioneering book *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples* by Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai-Smith (1999, 2012) is a significant work that critiques the history of Western research and advocates for the need to decolonize and self-determine our own research. This is highly relevant to Australia as, until recently, the majority of research on Indigenous peoples was conducted by non-Indigenous researchers (Fredericks, 2008). Indigenous researchers are now extensively discussing and committing to Indigenous research methodologies that resist Eurocentric colonial research practices (Foley, 2003; Martin, 2003; Moreton-Robinson, 2013; Moreton-Robinson & Walter, 2009; Nakata, 2002, 2007; Rigney, 1997, 1999; West, 1998, cited in Foley, 2003, p. 47; Wilson, 2008).

A substantial characteristic of Indigenous research is the contribution to decolonization, self-determination, community responsibility, and autonomy. Narungga, Kurna, and Ngarrindjeri scholar Lester-Irabinna Rigney's Indigenist research approach (1997, 1999) provides a framework to decolonize research by committing to a resistance toward oppressive Western research practices and advocating for the self-determination of Indigenous research frameworks. He emphasizes that Indigenous research should be an act of emancipation that privileges the political integrity and community responsibilities of research undertaken by Indigenous peoples, and centers the voices, perspectives, and standpoints of Indigenous peoples and communities across all stages of the research itself (Rigney, 1997, 1999). The processes of Indigenous Research Methodologies are generally advocated as incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing (epistemology), ways

of being and belonging (ontology), and ways of doing (axiology) into research frameworks (Martin, 2003; Rigney, 1997, 1999). This means positioning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standpoints and principles as the guiding voice for research to ensure cultural, spiritual, ethical, and personal contextualization to the research (Martin, 2003; Rigney, 1997, 1999). Rigney describes Indigenist research approaches as “...research by Indigenous Australians whose primary informants are Indigenous Australians” (1997, p. 119), yet he emphasizes that Indigenous researchers don’t represent or speak for all Indigenous peoples.

Canadian First Nations (Opaskwayak Cree) man Shawn Wilson’s approach of an Indigenous Research Methodology considered research as a ceremonial process, stating that the “research that we do as Indigenous people is a ceremony that allows us a raised level of consciousness and insight into our world” (2008, p. 11). He provides this insight through contextualizing his position as an Indigenous man, the significance of storytelling and developing a relationship with the reader and sharing the varying processes and knowledges of Indigenous research (Wilson, 2008). His storyteller positions within his work embed personal stories in the form of letters addressed to his children and extracts of conversations with other world Indigenous peoples (friends/co-researchers) on their thoughts and experiences in Indigenous research approaches (Wilson, 2008). This significant work provides detailed research processes that not only demonstrate Indigenous research methodologies but also Indigenous storytelling approaches.

The nature of an Indigenous Research Methodology is to be an overarching commitment and framework to guiding Indigenous values and ethics; it does not represent any single research method (Rigney 1997, 1999). It is up to the researcher to determine secondary

methods to determine data collection and analysis. For this dissertation, an Indigenous storytelling methodology will guide the process of centering narratives in all facets of the research and dissemination of results.

#### *1.4.3. Indigenous storytelling methodology*

The role of storytelling is significant within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2016; De Santolo, 2019; Kwaymullina, 2017; Martin, 2008) and a tool for decolonization (Sium & Ritskes, 2013). Storytelling is a way to decolonize non-Indigenous research and self-determine the respectful and culturally appropriate ways to conduct and gather research and knowledges (Iseke, 2013). Storytelling assists in the broader Indigenous movement to decolonize Western/Eurocentric power and control (Sium & Ritskes, 2013) and is a shared process that is important for individuals, families, and wider communities (Bodkin-Andrews, et al., 2016). Many Indigenous scholars have highlighted and stressed the importance of storytelling within Indigenous Research Methodologies (Archibald, 2008; Archibald et al., 2019; Iseke, 2013; Kovach, 2010; Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008) and, as a broad concept, can involve different approaches, for instance, from “Storying” (Phillips & Bunda, 2018); to “Storywork” (Archibald, 2008; Archibald et al., 2019).

Within non-Indigenous research, storytelling is predominately approached through and termed Narrative Inquiry (Trahar, 2009). Narrative Inquiry is emerging within public relations research and practice in the forms of organizational narratives, campaign storylines, and means of crisis communication (Elmer, 2011; Eschenfelder, 2011; Kent, 2015; Lee & Jahng, 2020). Both constructs of narrative inquiry and Indigenous

storytelling gather narratives from people and communities and seek the meanings within these stories. Yet in Indigenous contexts, Sium and Ritskes (2013, p. vi) transform this approach and emphasize that “Stories and storytelling are political, always, more than personal narratives”. Geia et al. (2013) and Kwaymullina (2017) extend the notion of Indigenous storytelling to also involving the narratives and life experiences of family and community members. Storytelling in Indigenist research contexts honors the narratives of Indigenous research participants and holds their stories as truth (Smith, 2012).

Indigenous storytelling methodologies are emerging in various contexts and applications. Stol:lo Nation woman Jo-ann Archibald (Q’um Q’um Xiiem) (2008) contextualizes a form of this as Storywork, which she outlines as the importance of First Nations stories in education and pedagogy, often through traditional or life experience stories. Storywork emphasizes making meaning through stories and as a methodology centers the seven principles of respect; responsibility; reciprocity; reverence; holism; interrelatedness; and synergy. These principles attend to deeply understanding the story and establishing pedagogical contexts and concepts. Storywork has been expanded upon by other First Nations peoples and utilized within professional applications and Indigenous research contexts, including environmental and legal applications (Archibald et al., 2019). An additional term of Storying also enacts storytelling as meaning making and a form of educational practice (Phillips & Bunda, 2018). Non-Indigenous woman Louise Phillips and Ngugi/Wakka Wakka woman Tracey Bunda (2018, p. 43) outline five principles of storying as 1. “storying nourishes thought, body and soul”; 2. “claims voice in the silenced margins”; 3. “storying is embodied relational meaning making”; 4. “storying intersects past and present as living oral archives”; and 5. “storying enacts collective ownership and authorship.”

Indigenous storytelling foregrounds teaching and learning. Although there is a lack of storytelling precedents in Indigenous Australian public relations research, this research aims to be foundational in developing storytelling, furthering decolonization, and progressing our own pedagogy in the Indigenous Australian public relations space. Inspired by the varying notions of life experience stories as a form of storytelling, this dissertation privileges a collaborative effort with the Indigenous women research participants and aims to contribute to the Indigenous body of literature. This thesis aims to convey academic stories that are guided by the research participant's own words via their quotes. Storytelling as a methodological approach extends into Indigenous or culturally aligned methods, particularly that of Indigenous Yarning method (Geia et al., 2013; Kovach, 2010) and thematic analysis (Gibson et al., 2020).

#### *1.4.3.1. Indigenous yarning method*

The research tool of Indigenous yarning centers Indigenous values within the research approach (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010). Within Indigenous nations around the world, Indigenous "interview" approaches aim to gather information in an organic and culturally respectful and appropriate manner and allow trust to build with Indigenous research participants (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Carlson & Frazer, 2018; Geia et al., 2013; Gibson et al., 2020; Kovach, 2010; Mooney et al., 2018; Murrup-Stewart et al., 2020; Ober, 2017; Walker et al., 2014; White, 2010). Indigenous yarning honors Indigenous values of giving back to community, collaboration, co-researching, and respect, and can be a decolonizing tool that advocates the delineating of Indigenous research methodologies away from Western forms of research (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010).

Based on the seminal work of Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010), the stages of Indigenous yarning follow a structure initiated by social yarning, followed by research topic yarning. The first stage, social yarning, prioritizes developing rapport and maintaining connection with the research participant. It is the building or maintaining of a relationship through social conversation and the researcher establishing who they are, who their Indigenous groups/communities are, and why they are doing this research. Next, stage two moves into research topic yarning; this aims to introduce the research themes and suggests possible semi-structured questions to discuss. This phase is performed in an organic and supportive manner with the Indigenous research participants and is about hearing the stories for the research purpose. Or as Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010, p. 40) describe it, "Research topic yarning is a conversation with a purpose."

The outcomes from research topic yarning can also involve concurrent and subsequent stages of collaborative yarning and/or therapeutic yarning. Collaborative yarning can involve the sharing of stories and collaboration of ideas and themes, sometimes leading to new understandings within the research. Therapeutic yarning may involve the research participant disclosing personal and emotional stories to the researcher. Yet, during therapeutic yarning, the researcher maintains the role of a listener and never acts as a therapist. Both collaborative and therapeutic yarning stages can provide greater awareness and connections for both the researcher and research participant. Therapeutic yarning can provide the researcher with increased awareness of the role as a listener and collaborative yarning "can empower and support the participant to re-think their understanding of their experience in new and different ways" (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010, p. 41).



Indigenous yarning method is increasingly utilized within Indigenous research contexts and spans across the many disciplines. Many scholars are utilizing this form of a culturally appropriate collection method, including Walker et al. (2014) in their decolonizing research. Their yarning method approach was utilized in the Indigenous Women's Wellness Program Project to explore concepts of wellbeing by the Indigenous women participants and to strategize for the Indigenous Women's Wellness summit (Walker et al., 2014). In this Project, Indigenous women Elders and two of the Indigenous women researchers were the yarning leads/interviewers with the Indigenous women research participants, and included two additional forms of yarning - familial yarning (identifying family connections and contexts) and cross-cultural yarning (shifting between Indigenous research and Western approaches) (Walker et al., 2014).

These two additional elements of an Indigenous Yarning method were also utilized in the study of Gibson et al. (2020) to understand the social and emotional wellbeing service needs of older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in New South Wales. In this research, Gibson et al. (2020) received approval and endorsement of Indigenous yarning and worked with community members and their older Aboriginal research participants to develop the study design, yarning themes and questions, and approval of data analysis. They emphasized that Indigenous yarning "allowed members to discuss and connect with their own life experiences, the life experiences of their families and ancestors, as well as with other members of the research yarn" (Gibson et al., 2020, p. 483).

Indigenous Yarning method is increasingly utilized as an Indigenous research methodology in varying professions and disciplines. The lack of specific utilization of

Indigenous yarning in Indigenous public relations research means that the discipline has often followed Western standards of investigation and is not fully decolonized. The following demonstrates how this thesis/study has followed Indigenist and decolonizing research approaches to ensure culturally respectful, communal, and collaborative processes and outcomes.

#### *1.4.3.2. Research ethics*

The approval of research ethics for this study was obtained through the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC, 2018) (ETH17-2055). The approval aligned with the updated ethical requirements of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies [AIATSIS] (2020) Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research. The AIATSIS Code of Ethics (2020) outlined four principles for research with Indigenous peoples and communities, including Indigenous self-determination; Indigenous leadership; Impact and value; and Sustainability and accountability. As alluded to previously, Behrendt (1995, p. 60) emphasizes Indigenous values as including “community, collectivism, strong sense of family, respect for elders, co-operation, reciprocity and cultural pride.”

Along with the AIATSIS Code of Ethics (2020), I endeavored to always apply these principles respectfully and appropriately within this study. For instance, I presented various gifts to the Indigenous women participants, as signs of gratitude, cultural respect, and reciprocity. When preparing the research data, I communicated with the Indigenous women participants on their desired level of commitment to fact checking and co-authorship of the empirical journal articles. This thesis is intended to benefit Indigenous

communities and I attempted to ensure that I was transparent about both my Indigenous positioning and my research aims and that the Indigenous women participants were comfortable with sharing their stories.

#### *1.4.3.3. Indigenous women research participants*

This research centers Indigenous women's voices in Australian public relations and the participants in this study included five Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women working in public relations and communications. The Indigenous women originate from areas all over Australia, and thus they identify with many different Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups/nations. They live in mid-to-large sized Australian cities, and work/have worked in consultancies, universities, and Indigenous organizations. Several approaches were utilized to source the women as research participants, however there were limitations to participant numbers and successful contacts,

The Indigenous women were sourced through my existing networks and knowledges of the Indigenous Australian public relations practice, and were contacted by phone, email, and via LinkedIn. With some of the women I had prior personal, community and professional relationships. This small sample size was largely due to the underrepresentation of Indigenous women in the profession and the difficulty in obtaining more participants. There were numerous other Indigenous women in the public relations space that I had contacted but didn't hear back from. As a result of this limitation, I collected seven extra voices and narratives (from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women from outside of the communications sector), but ultimately chose not to utilize them once the dissertation became public relations centric. Hence, the five participants

voices were centered, regardless of the minimal size of the data, as the findings in an undeveloped area such as Indigenous Australian public relations field were significant.

It is relevant and significant to declare that the women were living in urban environments, and although their locale was not discussed as impactful within the data, it is a limitation that needs more discussion. As articulated in my Nunga Weena Wanggan-Mirn, it is important that I position myself and my own urban upbringing for understanding into my worldview and frame of the study. Because of this, my knowledges of other urban-based Indigenous women working in public relations is greater than those in regional or remote areas. Excluding the women who I know personally or professionally, I have a greater understanding of those in public relations who work in capital cities. Therefore, this is a limitation in the study in terms of an urban-based view and perspective and a lack of variation to voices from regional or remote areas.

Further, it is important to express that I was also one of the research participants, a strategy that was considered before participant recruitment. From the beginning, I aimed to approach the study with an auto ethnographical account (inspired by public relations post-colonial feminist and Filipino woman Marianne Sison, 2016) to weave in my own story as another Aboriginal woman from the public relations profession. However, I decided not to write an auto ethnographical account and instead be interviewed by my male supervisor and given the same interview questions as my fellow Indigenous women research participants. When I was interviewed, I aimed to ensure validity of this method whereby when I was influenced or intrigued by a comment made by one of the research participants I mentioned it to my interviewer and said how I found their statement interesting. During the analysis stage, I looked at the data equally in terms of the themes

I was noticing – particularly as I utilized the theoretical approach within thematic analysis (whereby the data was categorized according to the research questions and themes). Overall, my voice in the form of the quotes in the empirical journal articles were utilized the least (given that I was nervous about undertaking this approach and centering my experience too often). The context of my role as an interviewee and voice was not vocalized to my fellow research participants as the study was anonymous and they only knew of their independent involvement.

This section has outlined the Indigenous women as research participants in this study, including how they were sourced, their locations and work experiences, and shortcomings in this research process. It is important to articulate one’s position and worldview so that understanding and transparency of the research approach can be obtained and validated. Therefore, there are limitations in terms of sourcing research participants and the potential bias of research in relation to an urban location and urban standpoint of working lives and professional practices. The following sections of this chapter details the methods of data collection, data analysis, and research translation.

#### *1.4.3.4. Indigenous yarning sessions / data collection*

Indigenous yarning was essential and appropriate in conversing with my fellow Indigenous women in public relations. I was transparent about my Indigenous cultural background and professional positioning to provide an informal, relaxed, and safe environment where myself as researcher and the Indigenous women participants “journey together visiting places and topics of interest relevant to the research study” (Bessarab & Ng’andu, 2010, p. 38). This was in line with Indigenous Research Methodologies and

Indigenous ethical principles, which strongly assert the need for positioning of self, cultural connection, and research process (Martin, 2003; Moreton-Robinson, 2013). Significantly, Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory was important within an Indigenous woman research and Indigenous women participants in our connections, relatedness, and rapport.

The communication of the research prior to the yarning session involved providing the Indigenous women participants with consent forms outlining the collaborative role of the research, the recording and use of their stories and knowledges, and the steps for maintaining approval throughout the research journey (see Appendix A). Consent forms also reflected the values of Indigenous Research Methodologies in that Indigenous "participants are the owners of the knowledge, not the researcher" (Foley, 2003, p. 50). At the beginning of the yarning sessions, I felt immediate rapport with us being both Indigenous women and the knowledge that this was an Indigenous women focused study. The yarning sessions started off with a social chat and an introduction when I didn't know the participant too well. This involved the stages of social yarning (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010) and the additional stage of familiar yarning (Walker et al., 2014), generally lasting five minutes. Following these yarning stages, the ethical components were discussed as was the yarning plan. Once the participants confirmed their involvement, we discussed what they would be comfortable to speak about, how they would like their voices and stories told, their opportunity to become co-researchers, and whether they wanted to be listed under pseudonyms.

A yarning plan was provided outlining the themes that might emerge and the type of unstructured questions that might be discussed (see Appendix B). The women's right to

ensure their voices and stories were correct and appropriate was adhered to in the process of the gathering of stories, the translation of stories, and finally, the approval of content. The yarning sessions were undertaken one-on-one, audio-recorded on an iPhone 7 or Mac laptop and held in locations that were convenient for the women. These included face-to-face at coffee shops, meeting rooms, in their homes, or via phone calls. At the beginning and end of each yarning session, a pair of Indigenous-made earrings (brand: *Haus of Dizzy*) and a \$50 shopping card were gifted. This represented and symbolized social yarning, collaboration, gratitude, and Indigenous women's solidarity.

In using a yarning plan, I was guided by a set of themes and semi-structured questions to allow the Indigenous women participants to share as much as they wanted and to allow their stories to naturally unfold. The yarning plan included the following themes:

- Roles, strategies and tasks in Indigenous Australian public relations;
- Self-determination and activism;
- Sexism and racism in public relations and activism;
- Indigenous feminism;
- Differences between Indigenous Australian public relations and Western public relations;
- Crossovers into other areas (marketing, social marketing, health promotion, media, campaigning, journalism);
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture; and
- Women's issues.

Once the participant agreed to go forward with the yarning session, I turned on the recorder. When the questions were asked, I tried to make it as relaxed as possible by not

using formal words and being as transparent as possible. I additionally aimed to ask few follow up questions to allow the conversation to flow organically. My aim was to let the participant dictate their answers by asking the three main questions rather than multiple questions. A limitation of this was my inexperience with sourcing more information while still allowing an organic and casual process in line with Indigenous Yarning.

Building on the foundations of my personal, professional, and communal connection with each of the women, stronger relationships were further established through the follow-up and updates of research papers. For instance, from our first published research paper, I received an update from one of the women on their recommendation of our paper to a university. I have also been offered potential collaborative work. I feel that I have developed strong bonds with the women, as they trusted me to privilege their stories in a positive way and not manipulate the research for my own benefit. I tried to ensure and continue an Indigenous Decolonizing women's research approach through the continuation of culturally aligned methods in the form of thematic analysis and storytelling through the findings.

#### *1.4.3.5. Thematic analysis of research*

Indigenous research frequently utilizes thematic analysis alongside its Indigenous methodology and method yarning as a culturally sympathetic Western approach (Gibson et al., 2020; Murrup-Stewart et al., 2020). The yarning sessions and interview data underwent thematic analysis to explore the themes that emerged from the transcripts. The aim was to center and privilege the narratives of the women through the rich use of their quotes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017; Nowell et al., 2017). Nowell



et al. (2017, p. 2) note that “Thematic analysis is a useful method for examining the perspectives of different research participants, highlighting similarities and differences, and generating unanticipated insights.”

Thematic analysis followed a six-phase process, where the lead author first becomes (1) familiar with the data, (2) generates initial codes, (3) searches for emerging themes, (4) reviews themes, (5) defines themes, and (6) conducts the write-up (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). In determining the processes for thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest a decision-making process, including inductive or theoretical analysis and looking for semantic or latent themes. For a theoretical thematic analysis, coding stems from specific research questions and is based on a theoretical position, while inductive analysis is “coding the data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher’s analytic preconceptions” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83). The additional decision to be made involves determining whether the analysis will be surface level (semantic) or will examine explicit underlying themes and understandings (latent).

Thematic analysis was essential in ensuring an approach that aligns well with Indigenous research values and is flexible to perform with a yarning and organic style of inquiry. Various scholars working in Indigenous research note the absence of an Indigenous analysis and frequently utilize thematic analysis as a coinciding Western approach (Gibson et al., 2020; Murrup-Stewart et al., 2020). Murrup-Stewart et al. (2020) asserted that thematic analysis provided a respectful and interpretive approach, particularly in their direction of an inductive method. Likewise, Gibson et al. (2020) updated Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis with extra steps to further align within an Indigenous culturally respectful approach. These two extra steps involved community consultation

of the analysis priorities and the sharing of initial findings and interpretations with their research participants. This approach further ensured Indigenous research methodologies and ways of doing were positioned across Western methods.

I commenced the thematic analysis by creating a step-by-step plan, transcribing the data through both an online transcription program (Otter, 2019) and professional service, and authenticating by careful personal listening to the audio. During this initial validation of the data with the audio, I noted some emerging themes. Following this step, the transcripts were uploaded into NVIVO, and the identities of the women were removed, and they were allocated pseudonyms. A detailed investigation was initiated and themes within the transcripts were highlighted to pattern the key terms, practices, explanations, and movements. The examination of the findings followed a theoretical analysis, in that I coded the data to the themes of the yarning plan. Data was coded to the Yarning plan themes of their roles, strategies, and tasks in Indigenous Australian public relations, as minimal research in this field exists and rich findings emerged under these topics. These resulting topics were further developed and refined into common themes and categorized into main headings and subheadings.

The transcripts were examined numerous times and the themes in NVIVO were compared and validated throughout. This allowed me to search for overlooked themes that had emerged within the other transcripts, validating accurate placement of themes, and correcting potentially biased quotes. As an additional element of validation, my two supervisors viewed the analysis in NVIVO and made any relevant recommendations. The themes were eventually organized into four broad topics. One overarching theme categorized the definitions, roles, and challenges of public relations, including the

strategies used within Indigenous Australian public relations. One theme described their definitions of activism and their practices of activism within their personal lives. Another theme outlined their career choices of public relations and their preferences of roles within the profession. The final theme looked at Indigenous feminism in a broad sense, crossing over into their careers and personal lives.

These findings and four main themes were interpreted and disseminated through the development of journal articles (see chapters four to seven) to advocate for and promote the knowledges and lived experiences of the Indigenous women participants. This also allowed overarching decolonial and women's narrative to emerge throughout the overall thesis.

#### *1.4.3.6. Research translations and co-authorships*

The twin conceptual frameworks of Indigenous Decolonization theory and Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory and the Indigenous storytelling methodology guided the research interpretations, dissemination, and co-authoring through the empirical papers (see chapters four to seven). Co-authoring is an integral component of Indigenous research methodologies in that the participants are the owners of their knowledges and collaboration is key. Ensuring that the research contributes to decolonization, centers Indigenous women's voices and narratives, and attempts to tell a story through the findings was a guiding force.

The write up of the papers involved two decisions in terms of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These involved determining whether to provide a rich description of the

entire dataset or a detailed account of a particular theme within the findings. For example, rather than providing a detailed analysis of the body of findings within each article, only certain themes were expanded upon in greater detail—themes that usually came from the Indigenous yarning questions. During the write-up of the findings, the main themes and sub-themes were often relocated (once the narratives emerged), and certain quotes were included to emphasize the experiences of the Indigenous women participants and to preserve the essential truth of their voices and narratives. The method of balancing the number of quotes to reflect all the Indigenous women participants was at times difficult to manage, and I often visited the NVIVO program to double-check for emerging inconsistencies. For example, within the papers, some of the women would have more quotes than others, or some would only be detailed in one section of the research paper findings. However, Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 83) do argue that “[p]art of the flexibility of thematic analysis is that it allows you to determine themes (and prevalence) in a number of ways. What is important is that you are consistent in how you do this within any particular analysis.” As a result, I chose to treat the Indigenous women’s voices as equitably as possible.

Cherokee woman Emily Legg argued that her “dissertation is a story” (2017, p. 128) and, relatedly, I took on this same philosophy. My storytelling was conducted in how I conceived Indigenous storytelling to go. My guiding principles of storytelling were in line with decolonizing Eurocentric teachings and how best Indigenous women’s experiences and narratives could create a stronger impact. I was additionally inspired by Wilson’s Indigenous storytelling approach in alternative thinking toward the presentation of findings. The Indigenous women participant’s stories are personal and contribute to public relations pedagogy and I concluded that journal articles would be a successful

approach in contributing to decolonizing the public relations profession. From this, I decided to undertake this thesis through a publication approach, rather than the traditional route of chapters and conversion to journal articles, chapters, or books. Therefore, the placement of the empirical journal papers within this thesis aim to tell a story, from the broad narrative of the colonizing actions in the Australian public relations industry to the continued whiteness as experienced by the Indigenous women themselves.

There were four empirical papers that resulted from the yarning data. First, the paper titled “Asserting an Indigenous Australian theoretical framework in public relations” was predominantly resultant from the public relations-specific question and provides a broader view of Indigenous Australian public relations through a theoretical framework. Second, the paper “‘I want to create change; I want to create impact’: Indigenous Australian PR women’s narratives and framings of personal activism” came from the activist questions and the women’s individual framings of activism. Third, the paper “‘I liked that it could create social change and do good’: Indigenous Australian women’s motivations and perceptions of public relations as a career” resulted from both the public relations and activist questions. Lastly, the paper entitled “‘We’re not treated equally as Indigenous people or as women’: the perspectives and experiences of Indigenous women in Australian public relations” was developed from the public relations, activist, and feminist questions and explored the women’s experiences and reflections of whiteness, gender, and mental distress.

All the Indigenous women participants were provided with pseudonyms and anonymity in research translation phase, with only some opting to be a co-researcher in the resulting journal articles. All the Indigenous women participants gave their approval for

publication once each paper was finalized, a process that included adjustments to quotes, wording, and/or context of their stories. For example, I performed a consensus approach whereby I removed anything wasn't agreed upon or approved. Our four empirical papers were published and/or accepted for publication in international public relations publications. The two literature review papers were submitted in Indigenous and Australian public relations journals. I opted not to communicate the findings through blogs or online articles nor through dissemination in the Indigenous social media sphere. The papers were however shared through my LinkedIn page and gained traction and traffic through ResearchGate.

#### *1.4.4. Conclusion*

The concept of an Indigenous Research Methodology is that it advocates for and contributes to Indigenous self-determination through a decolonization of Eurocentric systems whilst simultaneously respecting the rights of the Indigenous research participants and wider Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The overarching conceptual frameworks of Indigenous Decolonization theory and Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory, and the research methodology of Indigenous storytelling informed the overall voice of the thesis, and its research aims. The Indigenous storytelling methodology provided a significant overarching framework for the research tool of Indigenous yarning and the resulting thematic analysis of the findings. The significance of collaboration with each Indigenous woman participant was key; the Indigenous women were invited to be co-authors in the research papers and were reimbursed financially (through gift cards and Indigenous-style earrings). A thesis may not be attainable or noteworthy for everyone, and so I hope that the research papers within this thesis can be

influential within both the public relations and Indigenous fields of academia and be developed further. From this work, I hope that my Indigenous women research participants/co-authors view our shared work and joint endeavor favorably and impactfully. In moving forward to privilege Indigenous voices and stories within public relations, this thesis presents themes and findings from five strong Indigenous women participants. The structure of the thesis is outlined below.

### **1.5. Structure of thesis**

The structure of my thesis is guided by the formats of both a PhD by Publication and a PhD by Compilation, wherein published research papers replace traditional chapters. The format of my PhD thus presents six papers that address the conceptual frameworks of Indigenous Decolonization theory and Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory, along with literature on both colonial public relations practices and Indigenous strategies within public relations. The six journal articles are central to this thesis, and connect the overall dissertation aims with storytelling narratives from Indigenous women public relations practitioners. The Conclusion and discussion chapter finishes by summarizing the entire dissertation within an Indigenous decolonial storytelling framework and offers directions for useful future research.

The thesis includes two theoretical journal articles and four empirical research papers. The literature review papers of "Colonization and whiteness within Australian public relations" (Chapter 2) and "Reconceptualizing public relations since Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander time immemorial" (Chapter 3) interrogate whiteness and assert the value of Indigenous narratives within Australian public relations. The empirical papers

“Asserting an Indigenous Australian theoretical framework in public relations” (Chapter 4), ““I want to create change; I want to create impact”: Indigenous Australian PR women’s narratives and framings of personal activism” (Chapter 5), ““I liked that it could create social change and do good”: Indigenous Australian women’s motivations and perceptions of public relations as a career” (Chapter 6), and ““We’re not treated equally as Indigenous people or as women”: the perspectives and experiences of Indigenous women in Australian public relations” (Chapter 7) outline Indigenous public relations practices, rationales for public relations as a career, and experiences of working within the profession.

Chapter two initiates a discussion of the colonization of Australian public relations through critical, postcolonial, and Indigenous decolonial theoretical positions. Specifically, in utilizing Poka Laenui’s (2000) five stages of colonization theory, Eurocentric examples of Australian public relations practices are examined. This paper argues that the discipline of public relations is complicit in the ongoing process of colonization and marginalization of Indigenous Australian communities and traces the historical and contemporary uses of public relations. These include the use of racist propaganda from the Australian Government, media coverage in framing Indigenous stories as deficit, public relations organizational strategies, and lack of Indigenous engagement. The overall aim of this paper is to provide the Australian public relations industry with a foundational framework for future decolonizing approaches in dismantling the impact of colonization and reconceptualizing the discipline.

Chapter three reconceptualizes the narratives about the historical foundation of Australian public relations and adopts the argument that Australian public relations is a Eurocentric-



dominated industry. This paper explores critical, postcolonial, and decolonial public relations theories and critiques the narratives of public relations histories that contribute to maintaining and perpetuating whiteness within the discipline. By providing an overview of the current histories of Australian public relations, this paper argues that public relations practices were evident within the many Indigenous nations of Australia since time immemorial. From a contemporary standpoint, this paper also argues that Indigenous people's utilization of public relations and activism was evident within the Frontier Wars and could be considered the first public relations strategies in modern Australia. The result provides theoretical and historical context for non-Indigenous public relations scholars and decolonizes Eurocentric narratives by asserting Indigenous cultural practices and campaigns as examples of public relations.

Chapter four asserts an Indigenous theoretical framework for Australian public relations and provides coverage of the Indigenous Australian public relations professional literature thus far. Statements from the five Indigenous women provide insight into their experiences as workers within Indigenous Australian public relations contexts. There are seven key themes identified: a versatility of roles; strong emphasis on Indigenous protocols and philosophy; public relations as a springboard for Indigenous social change and activism; the pivotal role of storytelling; using diplomatic strategies when working between Indigenous and non-Indigenous contexts; maintaining two-way communication and engagement; and a fundamental role in ensuring that Indigenous narratives within their work are positive and do not contribute to deficit discourses of Indigenous stereotypes. The result summarizes Indigenous practices in the Australian public relations profession and calls for further literature in the field to continue promoting Indigenous ways of being and doing.

Chapter five provides insight into the personal lives of the five Indigenous women and their personal practices of public relations and activism outside of their professional roles. This paper contextualizes activism within public relations by exploring critical, postcolonial, women, and Indigenous Australian examples of public relations activism. The role of activism has significance within the specialization of Indigenous Australian public relations as a strong strategy for creating change and giving back to Indigenous peoples, culture, and community, and the women's statements contribute to this concept. The findings suggest Indigenous culture is a living embodiment of activism, with its connections between personal and professional activism practices, along with fashion as a communications tool of activism. This paper builds upon public relations' existing notions of activism and demonstrates the power of public relations to bring social change for Indigenous peoples and activists.

Chapter six considers the five Indigenous women's motivations and rationales for working within Indigenous Australian public relations. Through contextual literature involving intersectional women of color within Western/American public relations and minority women's voices within Australian public relations, the research findings connect to these similar minority women's voices and assert Indigenous philosophies and positions. The findings demonstrate that although public relations as a career was chosen for its ability to create change and give back to Indigenous communities, the lack of Indigenous representations and protocols within public relations is still obvious. In considering these findings, this paper determines and suggests ways to increase the number of Indigenous practitioners, promote public relations as a career to Indigenous peoples, and embed Indigenous protocols within Australian public relations theory and

practice. Specifically, this paper calls to action first, an establishment of an Indigenous Australian public relations association; second, a campaign to promote public relations as a career to Indigenous peoples; and third, an increased emphasis on Indigenous protocols within mainstream public relations.

Chapter seven examines the ramifications of working within public relations for the five Indigenous women. This paper provides a strong interdisciplinary approach to the literature review by exploring the decolonizing influence of whiteness within Indigenous Australian public relations contexts, sexism within Australian public relations, and the multi-layered oppressions of racism and sexism that Indigenous women bear. From these contexts, the five Indigenous women describe their experiences involving whiteness and the patriarchy and the potential for trauma and emotional distress. The women all stressed the rampant whiteness that is evident within the media and public relations industries and how this affects their experiences with white men in their work situations. These findings further emphasize the potential for emotional distress and burnout for Indigenous women working within what are often sexualized, racialized and oppressive contexts. The aim of this paper is to provide further understandings of intersectional identities, insight into the reality and effects of whiteness and racism, and contribution to the decolonization of public relations.

Lastly, the “Discussion and conclusion” (Chapter 8) connects the overarching aim of this thesis, the chosen theoretical frameworks, and the Indigenous storytelling methodology to the content of the findings/research papers. By summarizing the papers under the headings of “Dismantling colonization and whiteness within Australian public relations”, “Self-determining Indigenous practices and protocols within Australian public relations”,

and “Indigenous women’s motivations and experiences working within Australian public relations,” this final chapter reassesses the centering of decolonial ideas and processes and reiterates the privileging of Indigenous women’s narratives. Some limitations of the research methodology are explained and finally the chapter makes key recommendations toward a decolonizing framework for Australian public relations.

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## **2. Colonization and whiteness within Australian public relations**



**Preamble:**

Racism is an issue that I have personally experienced, whether involving me or vicariously through other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Particularly, during my undergraduate degree (Bachelor of public relations), the core public relations students and I were required to undertake a compulsory subject on Indigenous communication practices. This course lectured on the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communication and media practices, representation, racism, self-determination, and protocols.

I was excited for this course, as, to this day, there is still a paucity of subjects that teach Indigenous communication practices for public relations and journalism students. Yet, many of the public relations students were not happy with this subject nor the requirement of mandatory attendance. I know this because I mainly kept to myself (albeit, I did have a small group of friends in this degree), and, as a result, the majority of the public relations students did not know that I was Aboriginal. Given, that I didn't look "Aboriginal" to them, they apparently felt like they could converse with discriminating and racist dialogue in front of me.

Once, waiting for the start of a public relations lecture, I overheard some of the students discussing this Indigenous communications subject and the injustice that it was compulsory. Comments ranged from "why do we have to study about Aboriginal people; all they do is sniff petrol?" to "yeah, all they do is drink alcohol and get drunk, this subject sucks!" My blood started boiling as I overheard this; but I just sat there, paralysed and imagining what I would say back to them. My silence was not about holding back aggression, but it was the fear to stand up for myself, my peoples, and our Ancestors.

It has been eleven years since that incident, and I can still remember it clearly. I have regretted, but forgiven myself, for this silence and wish I were the strong Aboriginal woman then that I am today. Ultimately this experience opened my eyes to the racism that is endemic within the profession of public relations.

The following chapter outlines numerous examples of colonisation and whiteness within the Australian public relations profession. This chapter examines the examples of colonisation and whiteness through the five stages of colonisation framework, and reflects on the ways that Australian public relations is still complicit in perpetuating these actions. The end goal of this chapter calls for a decolonisation of the industry in order to fully function as a profession and to contribute to society in a meaningful way.

I hope this chapter highlights the endemic colonial mindset imbedded within Australian public relations, and highlights that real discussions can take place on the role that public relations plays in today's society. I also hope that through an analysis of colonisation and whiteness within the profession, upcoming Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have a stronger theoretical foundation in which to stand up to their classmates who are demonstrating racist rhetoric.

**Abstract:**

This paper argues that the discipline of public relations is complicit in the ongoing process of colonizing and marginalizing Indigenous Australian communities. Although the public relations industry primarily focuses on the management of communications, relationships and reputations within the Australian sector, there is an absence of positive strengths-based narratives regarding Indigenous peoples and a conspicuous lack of Indigenous Australian perspectives and voices. Drawing inspiration from Poka Laenui's five interrelated stages of colonization, this paper critiques the Australian public relations industry, from its early role in promoting colonization to its contemporary practice of marginalizing Indigenous peoples. Following a critical examination by Indigenous Australian authors, the paper aims to provide the Australian public relations industry with a framework for future approaches that might heal the trauma of colonization, create a more inclusive profession, and reconceptualize the discipline.

**Keywords:**

public relations; communications; colonization; whiteness; Indigenous; Australia

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## **2.1. Introduction**

The notion that whiteness is endemic within public relations is well established and critical conversations regarding race and the profession are already reconceptualizing the discipline (Dutta & Elers, 2019; Munshi & Edwards, 2011). As a social construct, whiteness can be described as an invisible “group membership” that provides unearned and normalized privileges to people of white descent (Moreton-Robinson, 2015). This maintains dominant power structures within all levels of society, including politics, governments, and media (Moreton-Robinson, 2015). Colonization is often synonymous with whiteness through historical acts of genocide and land theft, and ongoing acts of social control, oppression, and erasure that are exerted across many different countries and nations, including Indigenous Australia (Moreton-Robinson, 2015). Several public relations scholars argue for postcolonial and decolonial perspectives to both highlight and address the power imbalances that privilege white/European standpoints within the profession (Dutta, 2009, 2016; Dutta & Pal, 2011; Dutta & Elers, 2019; McKie & Munshi, 2009; Munshi, Kurian & Xifra, 2017; Sison, 2016).

Within Australia, current theoretical understandings of Indigenous perspectives in public relations provide accounts of Indigenous cultural protocols and Indigenous experiences of Australian colonial systems (Clark, 2012; Clark et al., 2019; Petersen, 2016; Sakinofsky et al., 2019). Scholars within the Indigenous Australian public relations space continue to call for further research, along with mainstream academics, who also highlight the need to reconceptualize the profession (Fitch, 2020; Macnamara, 2012b; Sison, 2016). This paper aims to contribute to public relations scholarship by building upon existing literature regarding notions of decolonization and Indigenization. To achieve this,

existing approaches and perspectives of colonial and Eurocentric practices within Australian public relations will be critiqued from Indigenous Australian standpoints. Adopting the framework of Poka Laenui's (2000) five interrelated stages of colonization, we argue that Indigenous Australian worldviews and practices need to be understood, integrated, centered, and celebrated within Australian public relations to begin addressing the "whiteness" that is endemic within the profession. As a result, this paper provides a foundation for a future approach to redefine and reconceptualize what should be (as opposed to what is) public relations itself.

## **2.2. Positioning the authors**

The two authors of this paper commit to several Indigenous research methodological frameworks, all of which advocate for the need for transparency in positioning the self within the research space to better understand Indigenous cultural standpoints (Martin, 2003; Moreton-Robinson, 2013). The authors are Indigenous Australians from the disciplines of public relations, and education and psychology. Although from Western disciplinary research backgrounds, the authors recognize their cultural knowledges and lived experiences as Indigenous Australians, and therefore seek to critique the public relations discipline with an Indigenous-oriented, decolonized lens.

The lead author is an Aboriginal woman, descended from South Australia's Kokatha and Wirangu Nations. She has acquired Western theoretical knowledges through her university degrees and experiences of working in public relations and community engagement in both Adelaide and Sydney. Her axiology and ontology (ways of doing and ways of being) are based on her community values and morals, such as community

collaboration, community ownership, Indigenous storytelling, and passion to contribute to the emerging knowledges of Indigenous Australian public relations, activism and resistance in theory and practice.

The second author identifies as a member of the D’harawal nation (south-west of Sydney), and has witnessed the silencing and erasure of D’harawal histories, dialects, identities, and even existence throughout all levels of his education (primary to higher degree). Although being raised within the D’harawal culture by his parents and community elders, he has been trained in both Western and Indigenous research methodologies (notably D’harawal Storywork and Indigenous quantitative methods) and has constantly sought to privilege the voices of Indigenous researchers within academia.

To further highlight the standpoints of the authors, this paper will first engage with Poka Laenui’s influential theoretical framework of the five interrelated stages of colonization, which explains the devastating impact of colonization on Indigenous peoples and their cultures around the world. From this critical foundation, examples of colonization and whiteness within the Australian public relations industry will be explored, underpinned by the pioneering scholarship of contemporary scholars who have interrogated power and whiteness within the profession.

### **2.3. An Indigenous framework of colonization**

In Australia, the process and legacy of British colonization from January 26 1788 continues to be felt today (Dudgeon & Walker, 2015; Heiss, 2003). Historical and contemporary practices of colonization include forced removal from Country (e.g.,

dispossession of lands); punishment for practicing Indigenous cultures and speaking Indigenous languages (cultural genocide, often denied as the so-called ‘black-armband’ view of Indigenous history), subjection to physical genocide (from documented massacres to the ongoing desecration of sacred sites and Country), and the ever present and complicated existence of racism itself across all dimensions and levels of Australian society (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016; De Santolo, 2019; Foley & Read, 2020; Hogarth, 2016; O’Sullivan, 2020; Whittaker, 2018). Colonization, whiteness, and racism are the perpetual sources of intergenerational inequities, societal stressors, and personal traumas that often confine Indigenous Australians to the lowest ranks of socioeconomic, health, wellbeing, and education indicators (Muller, 2014; Paradies, 2017; Smallwood, 2015; Wright & Kickett-Tucker, 2017). Given the traumatic and ongoing impact that colonization has had on Indigenous peoples, several Indigenous Australian and First Nations scholars around the world have argued that the effects of colonization can be better understood with Poka Laenui’s (2000) theory of the five interrelated stages of colonization (Martin, 2008; Muller, 2014; Walker et al., 2013).

- 1) Denial and withdrawal
- 2) Destruction/eradication
- 3) Denigration/belittlement/insult
- 4) Surface accommodation/tokenism
- 5) Transformation/exploitation

The first stage of colonization theory, *Denial and withdrawal*, represents systemic attempts to negate Indigenous people’s cultures and knowledges. In Australia, this stage was initiated as the denial by the colonists that Indigenous peoples owned the land (through the principle of *terra nullius*) and subsequent policies of removing people from



their Indigenous groups and communities. On invasion, the British government relied on the *doctrine of discovery* to claim possession of what is now called Australia ahead of other colonial powers (notably France). To achieve this claim, Australia had to be understood as vacant or having no recognizable structure of government (despite the existence of up to 500 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nation and Language groups - Behrendt, 2013). Miller et al. (2010, p. 175) explain that “[f]rom the accounts from [then lieutenant] Cook’s voyage, Britain viewed Australia as almost empty. In a vast continent with a small, nomadic population, there was land available for possession.”

The second stage of *Destruction/Eradication* is the forced destruction of all things relating to being Indigenous. This emerged through the colonists’ acts of destroying physical and spiritual elements of Indigenous cultures—for example, built structures and sacred places. Evidence of custodianship of lands as well as the mass murders that were perpetrated against Indigenous peoples all had to be concealed (Behrendt, 2016; Pascoe, 2014).

The third stage, *Denigration/Belittlement/Insult*, aims to ensure that Indigenous peoples are voiceless and their cultural ways of being and doing are devalued to the extent they are judged to be “barbaric,” “uncivilized,” and “subhuman” (Behrendt, 2016; Muller, 2014). This attitude infiltrated through the colonizing governments into Indigenous societies, then worked from the inside to continue destruction of Indigenous life and practices. Christian missionaries, for example, criticized and destroyed cultural traditions and language, which did not fit their religious doctrinal views. Another example would be the implementation of the Stolen Generation policy, which between 1910 and 1970 forcibly removed Indigenous children from their families with the aim of assimilating

them into mainstream society (van Rijswijk & Anthony, 2012; Behrendt, 2009). It is important to note that the colonial attitudes and practices leading to and perpetuating the Stolen Generation policy began much earlier, with the establishment of the Parramatta Native Institute (Locke, 2018; Sullivan, 2017) and extend well after the 1910 to 1970 date range, exemplified by the ongoing practice of Indigenous child removal (McMillan & Rigney, 2018).

The fourth stage of *Surface Accommodation/Tokenism* acknowledges and gives superficial attention to remnants of Indigenous cultures. Muller (2014) describes this as the stage of the “noble savage” stereotype, where Indigenous peoples are romanticized for what the colonizers deemed “primitive” culture that was ripe for ‘saving’ —yet only by submitting to and assimilating the mind-set of mainstream whiteness.

The fifth and final stage of *Transformation/Exploitation* draws elements of Indigenous cultures into wider society and exploits these cultural practices as hybrid versions of national pride (Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Smallwood, 2015). The hypocritical exploitation of Indigenous artworks and cultural practices through tokenistic tourism literature, purporting to showcase Australia as a country proud of its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, is a prime example of this final stage (Janke, 2018; Perkins, 2003).

The process of colonization is not simply “settling” in a country and establishing control over lands and peoples, but it is also the incorporation of an ongoing legacy of paternalistic practices that are enforced upon Indigenous peoples without their consent or cooperation (Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Smallwood, 2015; Wright & Kickett-Tucker,

2017). This involves silencing, demonizing, erasing voices, and perpetuating destructive practices toward Indigenous peoples' spiritual connections, cultural practices, languages, kinship systems, identities, stories, and their very rights to self-determination (Smith, 2012). Indigenous people endure the negative impacts of racism and discrimination on their physical and mental health, as well as socioeconomic disadvantage (Bargallie, 2020; Bodkin-Andrews, Clark & Foster, 2019; Brockman & Dudgeon, 2020; Moodie, Maxwell & Rudolph, 2019, Power, et al., 2020; Thunig & Jones, 2020) and deficit discourses about Indigenous peoples perpetuate inequity across all levels of society (AIHW, 2017; Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision [SCRGSP], 2018). In response to Laenui's (2000) five interrelated stages of colonization, Muller (2014, p. 44) argues that deeper understanding of our history can dismantle colonization; she encourages reflection on the five stages to "note the way these stages occur simultaneously, or sequentially." The ongoing impact of colonization needs to be considered within all professions and workplaces, but is particularly important in public relations because of the power and influence that the profession exerts across contemporary communication channels.

#### **2.4. Whiteness and colonial strategies within global public relations**

The lingering effects of colonization, white privilege, Eurocentrism and systemic racism are evident in varying degrees within the public relations discipline (Dutta, 2016; Dutta & Elers, 2019; Munshi & Edwards, 2011). Colonial-era and racist public relations strategies underpin harmful stereotyping and negative framing of minority ethnic groups (Edwards, 2018; Munshi & Edwards, 2011; Munshi, Kurian & Xifra, 2017). These ongoing business strategies and the legacy of colonial imperialism continue to manifest

at every level through global power structures. This is evident from critical examinations of historical practices of public relations, corporate and capitalist endeavors, and negative media narratives.

Public relations scholars generally critique the corporate historical view of public relations, which claims that large corporations established the public relations profession (Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Weaver, 2018). They point to use of public relations strategies in the US by activist groups in the 1800s—arguing that the “first use” of public relations by corporations was in fact reactionary and in response to those earlier instances (Adi, 2018; Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Thus, corporations ultimately appropriated public relations strategies that had been initiated by activist groups. Arguably, this process continues today, as corporations wield power through their preferred policies and strategies. Further historical evidence reveals that public relations strategies stemmed from “dominant coalitions in colonial times,” such as during British rule in India when repeated propaganda campaigns were run by British authorities (Munshi, Kurian & Xifra, 2017, p. 372). Munshi, Kurian, and Xifra (2017) highlighted that these colonial-era campaigns sought to reinforce existing Indian hierarchical systems in order to divide and conquer the country for Britain’s own benefit. Because of this colonial influence, the hierarchical caste system of India continues to oppress and divide its peoples and communities today (Munshi, Kurian & Xifra, 2017). Encouragingly, calls to dismantle and decolonize whiteness and colonial strategies through the interrogation of public relations theory are emerging. Edwards (2018) argues that examining historical public relations is an essential start in the process of deconstructing whiteness and racism within the profession. Munshi, Kurian, and Xifra (2017) emphasize the dual importance within public relations of interrogating colonialist strategies and promoting the resistance efforts

of marginalized groups. Researching the tactics that have imbued historical narratives of public relations can lead to fuller understanding of the continuing constructs of whiteness and colonization that are dominant within current thinking and practices (Dutta & Pal, 2011; Munshi & Kurian, 2005).

In recent times, the public relations discipline has come under scrutiny for its privileging of Eurocentric worldviews, leading to work practices that implicitly reflect colonial oppression (Dutta & Elers, 2019). This thinking is evident in the Eurocentric dominant public relations theories, the organizational function of Corporate Social Responsibility, and the resultant minoritizing and/or exploitation of diversity and diverse audiences. Eurocentric principles are apparent in the Four Models (a set of communication tactics for transparent and ethical practice) and the Excellence theory, a later version of the Four Models (Grunig & Grunig, 2008; Vercic & Zerfass, 2016). These dominant paradigms have undoubtedly played a strong role in the theorization of public relations (Botan & Hazleton, 2006; Edwards & Hodges, 2011), yet have been critiqued by multiple scholars who highlight their lack of foundation for diverse audiences and tendency to homogenize cultural understandings (Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Edwards & Hodges, 2011; L'Etang, 2013; Pieczka, 2016). The organisational function of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) aims to address societal, environmental, and non-economical issues and relates to the public relations area by applying strategies for reputational protection and crisis management (Macnamara, 2012a). As a function of “doing good” for the benefit of the organization, CSR supports capitalist endeavors and perpetuates whiteness within the profession (Munshi & Kurian, 2005). For instance, Munshi and Kurian (2005, p. 513) explain that Corporate Social Responsibility “allows corporations to manipulate an image of environmental, social, and cultural responsiveness”. Edwards (2018, p. 188) also

argued that CSR is a middle-class sensibility in that “CSR is a luxury that is only undertaken once a corporate’s primary objectives of profit and survival are guaranteed.” CSR’s alternative term of “greenwashing” - which was originally coined in response to an environmentally conscious alignment and sustainability trend of organizations (Munshi & Kurian, 2005) - may now be argued as evolving into a current alliance and corporate association with the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) (Bellan, 2020; Weigandt, 2020).

On a global scale, the field of public relations historically prioritizes Western worldviews while marginalizing minority groups and Indigenous peoples. This prioritization has skewed historical narratives regarding the foundations of public relations and has also fostered strategies for dividing and conquering land and peoples. This continuation of past practices into the present impacts contemporary organizational theories, homogenizes diverse groups, and presents a false socially conscious façade. As a result, Western worldviews dominate the practice of public relations, providing an impetus for Indigenous Australian scholars to interrogate these colonizing strategies and tactics and self-determine positions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

## **2.5. Stages of colonization in Australian public relations**

This section draws on the five interrelated stages of colonization (Laenui, 2000; Muller, 2014) to describe the foundations of the public relations field in Australia. Particular attention is given to the historical process of colonization and its ongoing effects on Indigenous peoples. As explained by Muller (2014, p. 44), regarding the colonization of Indigenous peoples, “[t]hese stages are still evident in modern Australia, but are less

obvious than in the past.” By examining how colonial strategies and whiteness are practiced in the public relations discipline we can examine stages of colonization and begin to identify potential ways to counteract its influence.

### 2.5.1. *Denial and withdrawal*

Practices reflecting the *denial and withdrawal* stage in public relations are evident within the promotion of the principle of *terra nullius* in Australia (Turnbull, 2010). Citing historian Henry Reynolds (1987), Australian public relations scholar Turnbull (2010) agrees that the idea of *terra nullius* was based on propaganda. Reports on the denial by the colonists that Australia was already owned are not new, but accounts of the role that public relations played is often overlooked when discussing the profession’s historical foundations. There is little attention within Australian public relations paid to the discipline’s role in promoting the colonization of Indigenous peoples, communities, and cultures. This may have stemmed from a fundamental disregard of Indigenous perspectives within the fledgling Australian public relations arena or a disdain toward notions of propaganda.

This stage is also evident within contemporary narratives of Australia’s public relations historical beginnings. The discipline is assumed to have been established during World War II, when the US General Douglas MacArthur and his public relations team arrived in Australia and “introduced the term” (Fitch, 2016; Sheehan, 2007). Several public relations scholars have challenged this supposed foundational history and have offered alternative timelines; however, Indigenous practices of public relations are not recognized as initiators of the profession and are instead assigned superficial roles within the scope

of the industry (Macnamara & Crawford, 2010; Robertson & Crawford, 2018; Sheehan, 2007). For example, Indigenous peoples are credited as assisting with “issues and crisis management” functions during Australia Day celebrations, but their active roles in the protest events that they organized in 1888 and 1938 are ignored (Macnamara & Crawford, 2010). As a result, the very beginnings of public relations within Australia are only perceived through a “white lens” which overlooks the many generations of Indigenous laws and protocols governing respectful intergroup behaviors, for example, in Welcome to Country ceremonies (Bodkin-Andrews, Bodkin, Andrews, & Whittaker, 2016).

Both of these examples demonstrate elements of colonial storytelling—the covert strategy of whitewashing, removing, or minimizing Indigenous narratives and perspectives to better serve whiteness itself (Behrendt, 2016).

### 2.5.2. *Destruction/eradication*

During the colonial period *destruction/eradication*-type public relations tactics framed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as sub-human savages (Turnbull, 2010). For example, public relations and communication practices included media framing, governmental campaigns and propaganda to proclaim the “sub-human savage nature” of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Molnar and Meadows (2001, p. xix) remind us that “*The Bulletin* regularly promoted racist stereotypes, and on 7 May 1908 proclaimed openly under its masthead: “Australia for the white man””. Turnbull (2010) affirms that the horrific treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including massacres and land stealing, was freely discussed in the newspapers of the 1800s.



The media actively contributed to the government campaigns and propaganda, as did school teachings on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their cultures (Turnbull, 2010). Turnbull (2010) notes that these strategies and tactics “were typical PR methods ... based on framing and promotion” (2010, p. 163). Munshi and Edwards (2011) point out that colonial public relations tactics were also notorious in the promotion of white superiority through racist imagery printed on food and beauty product packaging. These colonial narratives and framings of Indigenous peoples have continued into contemporary times, albeit more subtly, in the form of deficit discourses and the continual presentation of negative themes and stories about Indigenous peoples (Thomas, Jakubowicz & Norman, 2019).

In a modern scenario, this stage can also be seen in the phenomenon of “dog-whistling”, whereby politicians disguise what are essentially racist messages to communicate to certain groups of voters (Fear, 2007). Fear (2007) provides multiple examples of dog-whistling relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities, which all seek to stereotype Indigenous peoples through subtle, indirect messages. The following example of dog-whistling quotes a statement from the then Leader of the National Party, Tim Fisher, in the early 1990s, following the Mabo decision. This decision related to the overturn of *terra nullius* by the Australian High Court and led to considerable scaremongering by politicians and news sources (see Behrendt, 2016; Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Smallwood, 2015 for seminal works explicating the ongoing destructive forces of colonization).

*At no stage did Aboriginal civilisation develop substantial buildings, roadways or even a wheeled car as part of their different priorities and*

*approach ... Rightly or wrongly dispossession of Aboriginal civilisation was always going to happen. White settlement of the Australian land mass was inevitable. [Leader of the National Party, Tim Fisher]*

*Ostensible meaning: Aboriginal people were extremely vulnerable to the superior technologies brought by early European settlers.*

*Hidden meaning: Aboriginal culture is backward and primitive, and therefore inferior to European culture (Fear, 2007, p. 19).*

### 2.5.3. *Denigration/belittlement/insult*

The stage of *Denigration/belittlement/insult* can be illustrated by an example from the Channel 7 breakfast program *Sunrise* and its attempt at issues and crisis management. On March 13, 2018, non-Indigenous panel members Sam Armytage (*Sunrise* host), Prue MacSween (former journalist), and Ben Davis (former sports presenter and current radio host) hosted their Hot Topic segment in response to a *Courier-mail* article headlined “Let white families adopt abused Aboriginal kids” (Hirini, 2018a). From this, host Sam Armytage posed the question “Should white families be allowed to adopt at-risk Aboriginal children?” This resulted in the panel all agreeing on the removal of at-risk Aboriginal children from their homes and families and placing them with non-Indigenous families (Hirini, 2018a). Prue MacSween proceeded to argue, “Just like the first Stolen Generation, where a lot of children were taken because it was for their wellbeing, we need to do it again” (Hirini, 2018a).

This particular statement was loaded, as the Stolen Generation was a notorious period in Australia's dark colonial history. The ramifications of the Stolen Generations vary from loss of cultural, language, and family connections through to physical, emotional and cultural trauma, not only at the individual level, but also causing intergenerational trauma for the children, grandchildren and extended families of those stolen children (Atkinson, 2002; Behrendt, 2009). However, the coverage of this issue by *Sunrise* was biased, and also inaccurate, as there is currently no restriction on non-Indigenous peoples caring for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out of home care (McQuire, 2018). In addition, it should be pointed out that the national rate of Indigenous children in care by Indigenous relatives and kin was 50.1% (dropping by 4.7% since 2008) while the rate for non-Indigenous children in care was only slightly lower at 49.2% (this figure has risen by 8.3% since 2008) (SCRGSP, 2018). Effectively, the original *Courier-mail* article was little more than hyperbole seeking to stereotype and demonize Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

Almost immediately, the backlash commenced and a few days later a large protest was held outside the *Sunrise* program windows. The location of the *Sunrise* studio is situated on Sydney's busy Martin Place, where fans and curious passers-by are encouraged to vie for a television spot in the background, and thus the protest gained national attention. Then, because the *Sunrise* team deemed the protest distracting and displaying "inflammatory language" (Plummer, 2018), the studio covered their window with a blind and screened previous exterior footage to censor, exclude, and silence the protest that was taking place in real time. (This led to some incredible memes that swapped their "previous footage" with historical footage to demonstrate the absurdity and insensitivity of the act). Over the next three days following the segment, the reputation management strategy

employed by *Sunrise* was to delete the segment clip from social media and to ignore NITV's (National Indigenous Television) calls for a response (Burton-Bradley, 2018). However, four days later, on March 20, *Sunrise* went into damage control by inviting onto their show an all-Indigenous panel:

*PR nightmare: It took six days of protests, community outrage, national criticism and a number of comedic parodies for Channel Seven's breakfast show to finally have an Indigenous panel on the program to discuss Indigenous issues after a panel spread wrong information and one [panelist] called for a second Stolen Generation.* (NITV, 2018).

This *Sunrise* "Hot Topic" special edition included Indigenous panelists Olga Havnen (CEO, Danila Dilba Health Services), Pat Turner (Chief Executive, NACCHO), and James Ward (Aboriginal health researcher) to re-examine the subject. Yet, ironically, once again *Sunrise* misrepresented the facts by inaccurately claiming that the protests were held in reference to the suggestion that Indigenous children be removed from situations of abuse and not in response to the *Sunrise* panelist's racist remarks (NITV, 2018). The overall backlash against *Sunrise* was damaging; the show lost out on a performance by the American musical group "Portugal. The Man", who cancelled their appearance in light of the scandal (Hirini, 2018b), and numerous legal battles ensued. Specifically, eight Indigenous peoples lodged a racial discrimination complaint to the Australian Human Rights Commission (Fryer, 2019) and the Australian Communications and Media Authority (2019) ordered a court-enforceable independent review on the *Sunrise* "Hot Topic" segment. Following this, a group of Indigenous peoples from Yirrkala in the Northern Territory sued Channel Seven for defamation and succeeded in gaining a confidential settlement and on-air apology from *Sunrise* (Mitchell, 2020). As

of June 2020, the original complaint lodged by the group of eight to the Australian Human Rights Commission collapsed and the group are now aiming to sue *Sunrise* in the courts for racial discrimination (Mitchell, 2020).

These public relations and activism strategies, employed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their allies, demonstrate Indigenous people's drive to resist whiteness. However, the *Sunrise* example also highlights two things: the continuing prevalence of racism within the media industry, and how inaccurate media stories can backfire and damage a media outlet's image. This is particularly evident when the media glosses over Australia's colonial beginnings and ongoing colonialist traumas by repeating inaccurate statements by non-Indigenous journalists. The *Sunrise* panel were all arguably uneducated on Indigenous Australian issues and grossly misrepresented the contemporary lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Resulting from this example, we question whether the *Sunrise* disaster was just bad public relations (issues and crisis management with activist groups) or whether it stemmed from a lack of Indigenous knowledges and engagement from both a Western journalistic and a public relations perspective.

#### 2.5.4. *Surface accommodation/tokenism*

The fourth stage of *Surface Accommodation/Tokenism* continues the discounting of Indigenous perspectives through tokenistic representations and generalizations. This stage is notably reflected through the absence of Indigenous diversity and engagement within the Australian public relations profession and exemplified by the discipline's

preference for Western-centric theory. Fitch (2016, p. 117) elaborated on this power and influence of the western-centric dominant paradigm of public relations:

*[...] the dominant paradigm influenced Australian understandings of public relations as a profession and continues to influence discourses around public relations, despite the recent emergence in alternative paradigms and critical public relations scholarship.*

This dominant paradigm of public relations, by way of the Excellence theory, has been criticized as a Western construct that discounts or superficially caters to the many cultural differences and nuances that exist outside of Eurocentric frameworks. The Excellence theory's focus on Eurocentric standpoints is manifest through an identified lack of engagement protocols and practices with Indigenous peoples, communities, and scholars (Clark et al., 2019; Fitch, 2020).

Eurocentric privileging is also evident within the Public Relations Institute of Australia's (2016) Diversity and Inclusion Policy, which calls for increased Indigenous representation but lacks reporting on meaningful recruitment targets for Indigenous public relations practitioners. Macnamara (2012a, pp. 244–245) has highlighted the lack of recognition of Indigenous cultures within the discipline:

*[...] in public relations theory and practice, Indigenous cultures have seldom been considered except in the context of “cross-cultural” and intercultural communication — and mostly only then with the objective of identifying how to communicate Western interests and values to these “others”.*

The current status of the Indigenous Australian public relations specialization is well described as a nearly invisible “other”, overshadowed as it is by the dominant Eurocentric

profession that ignores, discounts, minoritizes and homogenizes Indigenous perspectives. Indigenous Australian public relations is not a one-size-fits-all multicultural specialization, but rather a different approach to public relations honed by a complex and ongoing battle against a white-colonial oppressive history. Indigenous peoples and cultures represent hundreds of diverse nations and regions that require regionally and culturally tailored approaches. Within Indigenous and First Nations critical literature, the superficial thinking of “add-Indigenous-and-stir” has drawn sharp criticism, because Indigenous knowledges, protocols, standpoints, and sovereign rights have repeatedly been diluted and lost within Eurocentric mainstream discourses (Janke, 2018; Walter, 2018).

#### 2.5.5. *Transformation/exploitation*

The final stage of *transformation/exploitation* can be seen in the practice of “greenwashing”, used by the CSR movement (Munshi & Kurian, 2005), in its strategic aim to add what they think might be an Indigenous flair to enhance a company’s image and reputation. CSR aims to provide strategic, non-economic value to large organizations (Macnamara, 2012a) and its influence is strongly evident in some mining corporations and their attempts at community engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups (Sakinofsky et al., 2019; Synnott, 2012). Laenui (2000, p. 151) elaborated on the *transformation/exploitation* stage and the aims of Eurocentric organisations and strategies “[...] to support Indigenous causes within the general colonial structure may become the popular political thing to do, so the culture is further exploited.” The following two examples, involving the same woman (Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara woman Elizabeth Close), demonstrate poor social media communication from large corporations.

They also show a lack of cultural respect and engagement with Indigenous public relations knowledge.

In July 2017 Australia's national airline *Qantas* drew a public relations backlash when the company invited a well-known Indigenous artist, Elizabeth Close, to paint, free of charge, at an event they were holding in Adelaide, South Australia, during the national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander celebration week (NAIDOC). From the account later given by Close (2017), she was requested over the phone to paint Aboriginal totem designs on excess and surplus *Qantas* first and business class plate ware. In lieu of payment, "exposure" was promised. Declining this unpaid opportunity, Close (2017) posted an account of the situation on Facebook, where it went viral. Yet, this was not a public relations backlash in the usual sense; her post primarily went viral in the Indigenous (and Indigenous supporter) social media networks and beyond that was reported by three known media outlets, nine small news sites, and a few blogs. There was no acknowledgment issued by *Qantas* in their media releases, on their website or social media accounts, nor any public response to Close's actual Facebook post. However, the airline did provide a statement to National Indigenous Television (NITV):

*A spokesman for Qantas initially told NITV News that the incident was just a misunderstanding and no offence had been intended, but later confirmed Close had been approached to work for free by Qantas and that the team involved were to receive cultural training. "We spoke with Elizabeth yesterday and apologized. Elizabeth understood that no offence was meant to be caused," the spokesman said in a written statement. "We explained that while the staff member had good*



*intentions to mark NAIDOC Week, it wasn't appropriately handled."*

(Burton-Bradley, 2017).

The lack of social media communication and the belated response from *Qantas* indicate that the company needs to learn about cultural competency and respectful Indigenous community engagement. Although this example suggests that *Qantas* may have merely bungled its crisis management approach in one instance, the issue appears to have more to do with how *Qantas* engages in general with Indigenous Australian issues and communities. *Qantas* claims that it prides its organization on their Indigenous Australian initiatives and programs (for example, its Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) – *Qantas*, n.d.), however, from the words of Close (2017): “Whilst I appreciate that to them, their intent is good—the reality is that *Qantas* are seeking to exploit an Aboriginal artist to make themselves look culturally aware”.

In September 2019 Close was again prominent in the media, this time due to the National Basketball League team, the *Adelaide36ers*, and their request for her artistic services to embellish an Indigenous motif on their jersey in exchange for free game tickets and exposure (Nielsen, 2019). Echoing her response to the incident with *Qantas*, Close (2019) wrote a lengthy post on Facebook outlining the situation. Close’s (2019) Facebook statement mentioned there had been a regular business meeting which included her stipulated fee. However, the organization later retracted the funding allocated for the jersey and instead suggested payment for her services in the form of free tickets and social media exposure. In her Facebook post, Close raised two significant issues: first on the value of her artwork and the difficulty in setting a monetary value on it, and the second

on the original motivation of the *Adelaide36ers* in wanting her artwork to adorn a jersey.

Close (2019) stated:

*Why do the 36ers want an Indigenous jersey anyway? Do they want it because they believe in the spirit of Reconciliation and celebrating First Nations Australians in basketball? Or do they want it because it's the trendy thing to do? to look like you're culturally switched on, and use it for media opportunities?*

A day later, the *Adelaide36ers* issued a statement on their website apologizing for the way that they treated Close (Adelaide36ers, 2019); however, in their statement they printed her name as Rebecca Close instead of Elizabeth Close (Boti Nagy, 2019). Following this, they reissued their media statement, yet the media stories were already published, and ten days after her Facebook post, Close had 8,900 reactions, 1,200 comments, and 2,300 shares. In an interview with the Radio Adelaide channel *Yarnin' Country*, Close said:

*The fact that they, I don't think, could see the irony of exploiting an Aboriginal artist in order to achieve that just speaks volumes about the fact that this is just trendy, it's on trend, it's what everyone else is doing, and they're not actually thinking about why they're doing it.*  
(Crebbin, 2019).

This example, although not as extreme as the *Qantas* case, demonstrates how colonialist viewpoints (from profit-making entities) in the form of blasé community engagement and lack of respect for working artists can harm an organization's brand and reputation. Close's statement from the *Yarnin' Country* interview points to the irony of the notion that Indigenous promotion and Reconciliation might be achievable through trendy jersey

designs. This ties into the other public relations discussions regarding CSR and the blatant hypocrisy of choosing an issue to promote—whether it be environmental, Indigenous, or Black Lives Matter (BLM)—just because it is trendy.

## **2.6. Discussion and conclusion**

Two hundred and thirty-two years after the invasion of Australia, the effects of colonization (such as dispossession, cultural genocide, assimilation, and racism) are still experienced today through the denigration, exploitation, and erasure of Indigenous peoples and their communities. Australia has a long way to go in understanding and valuing Indigenous cultures and empathizing with the trauma of colonization. It needs to be recognized that Australia's public relations industry perpetuates the legacy of colonization. This is evident through the promotion of white-centric theories, lack of Indigenous diversity and engagement, silencing of Indigenous perspectives and voices (community or scholarly), and the homogenization of Indigenous cultures with other minority groups.

Evidently, Australia's public relations industry continues to operate within the colonizing stages of *denigration/belittlement/insult*, *surface accommodation/tokenism*, and *transformation/exploitation* (Laenui, 2000; Muller, 2014). This is reflected within the profession as it disregards Indigenous standpoints that mark the historical origins of public relations and it continues Eurocentric practices within its contemporary business strategies. These practices not only perpetuate ongoing colonization and racism but damage the wider practice of public relations.

This paper, in outlining the history of public relations and its relationship to colonization, has made explicit references to colonizing attitudes and acts within the Australian profession. However, it should be noted that these are minor examples, and further contexts need to be considered and critiqued. Muller (2014, p. 21) emphasized that “[...] understanding the process of colonization, how it works, is an important process in decolonization; it is part of the decolonization process” and this paper has made an important first attempt at decolonizing the Australian public relations profession. However, more research is needed, and this critical process of decolonization has been emphasized by other public relations scholars who call for further interrogation of whiteness within the industry (Dutta & Elers, 2019; Edwards, 2018; Fitch, 2020; Hodges & McGrath, 2011; Munshi & Edwards, 2011; Love & Tilley, 2014). Notably, Hodges and McGrath (2011, p. 92) argue that “PR has much to learn from communication theory that has emerged from the postcolonial context.”

Decolonization in practice is a movement to heal the ramifications of colonization and empower Indigenous peoples and communities to govern their own histories, knowledges, narratives, and practices (Dudgeon & Walker, 2015; Muller, 2014; Smith, 2012). In the context of Australian public relations, the application of Laenui’s (2000) conceptual framework for decolonization will be useful to guide the profession going forward (Muller, 2014). The industry of Australian public relations is entangled with colonialist and racist practices, both historically and to the present day. This paper provides a basis for further reflection and calls for more Indigenous-led and Indigenous-focused research to support decolonization of the Australian public relations discipline.

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**3. Reconceptualizing public relations since Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander time immemorial**

**Preamble:**

I am a huge fan of history; as a child I had many books on early English, Egyptian, and Roman times. I wanted to be an Archaeologist, and then later a Historian, to research and explore other cultures – but not my own. I felt that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures were static, unchanging, and backwards – definitely not what I thought as interesting when compared to European societies, architecture, fashion, and inventions.

As a teen, I asked my mother about this “lack of change” and “static effort” from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and she set me straight. She told me that our Ancestors didn’t need to create cities and have cars and develop different forms of clothing. For a group of people who have been able to live and survive in such a ‘harsh’ (at least from a colonial standpoint) country as Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been doing something right. She said our Ancestors knew (and know) how to live in harmony with the land and respect the land.

Since my mother told me this, I have been on a journey to free myself from Eurocentric conditioning and am embarrassed of my prior naivety and ignorance. I was younger then, and indoctrinated from my Western schooling of Australian history with teachings that gaslighted my Ancestors and family as “barbaric and backwards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.” Yet now, the sustainable and environmentally respectful ways of living by my Ancestors is becoming increasingly recognised and focussed upon as our planet is becoming ever more ill from imperialistic and colonial forces of ownership and extraction (Graham, 2008; Steffensen, 2020).

This chapter builds upon the previous chapter on colonial analysis by asserting our own ways and asserting our own ways with pride. This chapter argues that the notion of Indigenous Australian public relations has been in existence since time immemorial, and was a key manner through which rapport was established within and across many nation groups. This chapter additionally details the communication strategies following colonisation, and some of the communication structures that were in place to resist the white invaders.

This chapter is very close to my heart and far more needs to be written on Indigenous Australian public relations and communication practices. I feel grateful that I have been able to contribute a piece to this important knowledge and help to decolonise Western constructs of thinking. I hope that a key feature of this chapter showcases Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practices with pride; not an analysis that aligns our unique practices to Western constructs.

**Abstract:**

This paper argues that Australian public relations is a Eurocentric-oriented industry, demonstrated by its continued disregard of Indigenous people's significant historical contributions and narratives to the discipline. Long before Australia's colonization by the British in 1788, Indigenous traditional practices, including songlines and diplomacy, constituted early forms of public relations. Following colonization, Australia's first war, the Frontier Wars took place, and ensuing Indigenous protests were early forms of organised public relations activities. Although several Australian scholars have identified historical public relations activities, Indigenous historical practices are ignored. Through the lenses of critical, postcolonial, decolonial, and Indigenous standpoints, this paper examines some alternative historical narratives of Australian public relations by identifying and describing the historical public relations practices of Indigenous peoples and communities. This provides a foundation for further research and assertions on Indigenous ways of practicing public relations.

**Keywords:**

Indigenous; public relations; communications; history; decolonization; Australia

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### **3.1. Introduction**

The practice of public relations can be defined as “...the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics” (Public Relations Institute of Australia [PRIA], 2019) and has been, in one form or another, in existence since ancient times. There are ongoing debates and controversies surrounding the historical origins of the industry. Contemporary documentation and terminology of public relations is frequently claimed to have originated in the United States of America (US) in the late 1800s (Coombs & Holladay, 2012; L’Etang, 2015). However, another view is emerging from several scholars who describe the link between public relations and communications activities in early Western and/or Asian civilizations (Watson, 2013) and in the unbroken cultures of Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Carlson & Frazer, 2016; Macnamara, 2012).

Critical, postcolonial, and decolonial public relations scholars have asserted alternative understandings of the industry’s origins (Edwards, 2018; Love & Tilley, 2014; Munshi, Kurian & Xifra, 2017; Watson, 2013). This particularly considers the role that activists (and those resisting colonial control) have played as the first public relations practitioners – a position that is becoming increasingly accepted into the mainstream (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). This paper aims to contribute to decolonizing (and thus reconceptualizing) public relations history and contemporary practice by examining some alternative positions regarding the foundation of Australian public relations. In exploring pre-and-post colonial public relations and communications practices in Australia, this paper aims to provide a description of public relations-type strategies and tactics used by hundreds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations and language groups.

### **3.2. Positioning of authors and Indigenous standpoints**

As Aboriginal Australian authors from public relations, education, and psychology disciplines, we usually approach our research with a critical Indigenous lens. Therefore, before focusing on the Indigenous voices that may speak meaningfully to inform public relations scholarship (as opposed to colonial-era narratives), it is critical that we provide a clearer understanding of the cultural positionings that have influenced the academic thrust of this paper (Martin, 2003; Moreton-Robinson, 2013).

As the lead author, my Indigenous woman's standpoint comes from my urban Adelaide upbringing and my extended relationships and kinships with Aboriginal family and friends around Australia. I am descended from South Australia's Kokatha and Wirangu nations and have knowledge and experience from working professionally in public relations and communications. My specific research focus is on activism practices, in both the public relations and fashion disciplines. As the second author, I was born and raised as a member of the D'harawal nation (south-west of Sydney), and have witnessed the silencing and erasure of D'harawal histories, dialects, identities, and even existence, throughout all levels of my Western education (primary to higher degree). I have been trained in both Western and Indigenous research methodologies and have constantly sought to navigate the ongoing tensions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous standpoints in my research and work practices.

We, the authors, commit to our Indigenous standpoints and lived experiences, in the face of mainstream Western academia, to promote decolonizing theory, research, policy, and



practice (Byrd & Rothberg, 2011; Dudgeon & Walker, 2015; Laenui, 2000; Martin, 2008; Muller, 2014; Smith, 2012). Our aim is to benefit both global and Australian Indigenous and First Nations communities by progressively dismantling the dominant trappings of Eurocentric narratives and biases. In order to reflect on and assert Indigenous Australian public relations practices, this paper aims to respond to the following questions:

- *How can we build a process to decolonize Australia's public relations industry utilizing Indigenous standpoints?*
- *What public relations activities are identifiable within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures before colonization?*
- *What role did public relations play in historical Indigenous events and campaigns against colonization itself?*

To answer these questions, this paper will prioritize Indigenous worldviews and examine archival, secondary literature, and grey literature associated with known Indigenous events, protests, communities, and individuals. From our Indigenous standpoints and centered on decolonial positions, we privilege other decolonial, postcolonial, and critical worldviews surrounding the profession of public relations and its practices. We assess these matters in the quest to dismantle the ongoing power structures of colonization and whiteness.

### **3.3. Critical and postcolonial positions of the history of public relations**

The discipline of public relations has traditionally sought to prioritize a Eurocentric worldview of the profession's historical origin while marginalizing the standpoints of diverse minority groups (Edwards, 2018; L'Etang, 2015; Munshi, Kurian & Xifra, 2017;

Watson, 2013). Various critical, postcolonial, and decolonial public relations scholars have critiqued the profession's US-oriented historical narratives—in particular, its assumption that corporations and agencies invented the discipline of public relations in the late 1800s in the US (Adi, 2018; Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Edwards, 2018; L'Etang, 2015; Munshi, Kurian & Xifra, 2017; Watson, 2013; O'Brien, 2018). Instead, nonconformist scholars have argued that the historical beginnings of public relations developed much earlier through activism and protest movements.

Public relations scholars from opposing positions have cited activist campaigns, led by groups or individuals, as examples of historical public relations strategies and practices (Adi, 2018; Alwood, 2015; Bisbe, Molner & Jiménez, 2019; Kern-Foxworth, 1991a, 1991b, 1992; O'Brien, 2018; Vardeman, Kennedy & Little, 2020). Adi (2018, p. 3) considers that public relations “perhaps started (at least in the US) with progressive reform movements such as the Muckrakers (albeit unknowingly)” which operated in the 1890s. Likewise, O'Brien (2018) examined and confirmed the deployment of public relations and activism strategies in the early twentieth century with the UK-based suffragette movement. In the mid-twentieth century, public relations and activism strategies aligned with the US Civil Rights movement have been acknowledged (Hon, 1997; Kern-Foxworth, 1992; Vardeman, Kennedy & Little, 2020). These have focused on the broader movement but also pay specific attention to the expressed roles and activities of Martin Luther King Jr (Kern-Foxworth, 1992) and Rosa Parks (Vardeman, Kennedy & Little, 2020). The Civil Rights movement also inspired other protest campaigns, including the early gay and lesbian rights movement, where the strategic use of public relations and activism played a vital role from 1950 to 1969 (Alwood, 2015). These historical demonstrations of activism practices were connected to public relations

through their strategies of media relations (print or broadcast), strategic branding and framing (of public personae and campaign messages), advocacy (public lectures, sit-ins, non-violence protest), and relationship management (with other activists, groups, and celebrities) (Alwood, 2015; O'Brien, 2018; Vardeman, Kennedy & Little, 2020). When describing historical activism practices, Macnamara and Crawford (2010, p. 5) argue that public relations history needs to be expanded “beyond adoption of the term 'public relations' to include alternative descriptions and constituent practices.” For instance, the role of fashion in public relations in the form of fashion parades and shop window dressing, has been noted as an effective publicity tool (Fitch, 2016a, 2016b).

Interrogations of historical public relations from postcolonial and decolonial positions predominately examine the role of colonization and whiteness on minority and oppressed groups and identify their cultural and resistance practices and strategies (Dutta & Elers, 2019; Munshi & Edwards, 2011; Love & Tilley, 2014; Munshi, Kurian & Xifra, 2017; Sison, 2016). In the context of Aotearoa (New Zealand), Love and Tilley (2014) stress that a historical lens need not be limited to accepted colonial histories, but should also focus on Indigenous perspectives that may allow learning from alternative communication methods, narratives, and strategies. For example, they argue new knowledges from Māori peoples and their oral histories: “...the repertoire of skilful and time-tested communication, negotiation and relationship-building techniques that Indigenous peoples have developed as a result of the forced necessity of engaging with colonizing peoples” (Love & Tilley, 2014, p. 35). Munshi, Kurian and Xifra’s (2017, p. 368) unique research critiquing public relations narratives in the novels of three writers of historical fictional (whose works are set in colonial times) allowed the authors to identify a “fresh window into history and provides an opportunity to reassess as well as

critique mainstream versions of history.” Through analyses of works by Amitav Ghosh, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and José-Luis Pérez-Regueira, Munshi, Kurian and Xifra (2017) identified colonial public relations practices in multiple countries (India, China, Mexico, and Nigeria), and documented the resistance efforts made in response by the groups who had been marginalized. Some instances revealed the deceitful nature of colonial power—that although (self)branded as a civilizing mission (in total command of the normalized rhetoric of justice, morals, law, and patriotism), it should instead be seen as an exercise in the greedy pursuit of economic and political power. In practice that meant promoting division and conflict between local populations, opium trading, the theft of land and natural resources, suppressing political independence and other iniquities.

The histories of public relations and its activism practices from critical, postcolonial, and decolonial standpoints demonstrate the strong role of activism and protest movements within public relations contexts. Further examination is warranted, however, particularly from the vantage of postcolonial and decolonial countries, where the resistance strategies of oppressed groups could add enriching narratives. The examples quoted above demonstrate the importance of understanding and contextualizing the historical narrative of Australian public relations and what may be recognized as evidence of the first public relations practices within Australia. Activism is now emerging as a recognized strategic response in historical public relations practices. However, Indigenous activism against colonization is yet to be acknowledged as a significant area for research within the public relations discipline. In response to that, we as authors actively adopt an Indigenous decolonial worldview of interrogating whiteness within Australian versions of historical public relations to discover and reveal the Indigenous origins of Australian public relations.

### **3.4. Alternative Australian public relations histories**

The scholarly debate about public relations' historical beginnings (Fitch, 2016a, 2016b; Macnamara & Crawford, 2010; Robertson & Crawford, 2018; Sheehan, 2007; Sheehan & Galloway, 2014; Turnbull, 2010) and the inclusion of activism as a feature of public relations (Ali, et al., 2016; Demetrious, 2013; Wolf, 2018) have highlighted the existence of alternative communications within the discipline. Yet, the Australian public relations profession still mostly considers its establishment as during World War II (specifically 1942), when the US General Douglas MacArthur and his public relations team arrived in Australia and introduced the term (Fitch, 2016b; Macnamara & Crawford, 2010; Robertson & Crawford, 2018). Although several scholars argued for alternative timelines and historical milestones (Fitch, 2016a, 2016b; Macnamara & Crawford, 2010; Robertson & Crawford, 2018; Sheehan, 2007), the fundamental role that Indigenous peoples played in the early days of Australian public relations was and is still overlooked.

One of the first discussions about Australian public relations activities took place during the early 1800s (Macnamara & Crawford, 2010). Macnamara and Crawford (2010) argued that public relations-type activities were evident in the nation's founding celebrations that resulted from Australia's colonization in 1788. Before the national large-scale festivity of 'Australian Day' that first took place in 1888, each State and Territory celebrated their own founding day. For example, the "founding settlement" of Sydney/New South Wales organized a small event in 1818 (when 26 January was first assigned as a state public holiday) and again in 1838, with grander celebrations. By 1888, after the century-long genocide suffered by Indigenous peoples had been effectively

erased from the collective memory, Australia celebrated national and “major public communication and promotional activities [that] were undertaken to mark the centenary of European settlement” (Macnamara & Crawford, 2010, p. 6). The public relations activities for the 1888 celebration took the form of public events, meetings, media publicity, speeches, promotional materials, parades, information dissemination, and exhibitions. Yet, even as scholars were asserting Australia Day celebrations as early examples of public relations, they also note that Indigenous protests were the catalyst for issues management strategies from the event organizers (Macnamara & Crawford, 2010). As they describe it: “Aboriginal opposition to 26 January being celebrated as a national day emerged as a major issue that later called for issue management—a recognized function of contemporary public relations” (Macnamara & Crawford, 2010, p. 8). This passing reference was the only mention (of Indigenous protest) within this research and it only confirms the Eurocentric narrative accounts of events and celebrations that must often be traumatic and distressing for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Clarke & Safi, 2016; Aborigines Progressive Association, 1938; Heiss, 2013).

There are some studies of the public relations and activism strategies of World War I, including the Conscription Referendum (Robertson & Crawford, 2018; Sheehan, 2007). Robertson and Crawford (2018) examined the activist strategies of the 1916 Conscription Referendum and the two sides of pro-conscription and anti-conscription campaigners in determining forced overseas service. Within both sides of pro-conscription and anti-conscription, several activist and advocacy organizations and groups strategized activism and public relations tactics incorporating rallies, speeches (including high-level public speakers), publicity via pamphlets and magazines, extensive group networking, and media relations (Robertson & Crawford, 2018). Following the no vote at the 1916

conscription referendum, a second attempt was made in 1917 and this was also unsuccessful (Robertson & Crawford, 2018). This resulted in voluntary recruitment of troops during World War I, including many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Winegard, 2019). Robertson and Crawford (2018) did not discuss Indigenous perspectives in their account of the Australian World War I Conscription Referendum movement, and only highlighted the involvement of mainstream Australians. The participation of Indigenous troops in World War I is controversial, as some Indigenous people did enlist as volunteers (only when numbers were needed) but upon their return to Australia they were treated with continued racism and discrimination and did not receive the same veteran benefits as their fellow white service men and women (Winegard, 2019). Understanding the public relations strategies that led to Indigenous peoples volunteering for World War I, as well as their subsequent treatment, is essential. For example, Winegard (2019, p. 14) indicated that the volunteering of Indigenous peoples in service was for some “a result of coercive and prejudicial governmental actions and policies, for others it was in spite of these.”

From these two examples, we see that Indigenous-oriented public relations strategies and activities have not been explored or recognized as influential to the development of the profession (Macnamara & Crawford, 2010; Robertson & Crawford, 2018). Whenever Indigenous public relations tactics have been acknowledged, it has been done in a predominately tokenistic manner (Macnamara & Crawford, 2010; Robertson & Crawford, 2018). There are also elements of colonial storytelling evident within these two examples, such as the continual diminishing and whitewashing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander narratives and perspectives in favour of Eurocentric stories (Behrendt, 2016). Therefore, if we provide a description of public relations-type

strategies in a way that serves to critique the colonial storytelling that is traditional within Australian public relations history, Indigenous contributions and narratives can start to be asserted and more fully described in public relations scholarship. Edwards (2018, p. 189), justifies this response by stating:

*[g]iven that contemporary forms of racialization and class discrimination have their roots in historical patterns of exclusion, examining the history of communication in, for and by marginalized communities could reconfigure our understanding of public relations today.*

### **3.5. The public relations tactics utilized by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples since time immemorial**

#### *3.5.1. Pre-1788 (communication between 500+ countries for thousands of years)*

Prior to the British invasion and colonization of Australia on 26 January 1788, over 500 Indigenous nations/countries/groups inhabited the land, each with their own cultural ways, beliefs and languages and/or dialects (Muller, 2014). It is often argued that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the longest continuous cultures in the world. Their public relations practices have been utilized since time immemorial, or between 40,000 and 115,000 years, depending on the colonial time measurements that authors may choose to privilege (Muller, 2014).

Australian public relations scholars have noted cave and rock art (Macnamara, 2012; Turnbull, 2010) and smoke signals (Cheal, n.d.) as early forms of communication. Cheal



(n.d.) argued that smoke signals “are one of the oldest forms of communications.” He elaborated that “[t]hey have long been used to signal danger, share news or gather people ... [v]ery much what public relations professionals do today” (Cheal, n.d.). Budawang/Yuin scholar Danièle Hromek (2019) also mentioned the use of smoke signals as a communication strategy. As retold by the Yuin people (of what is now known as the South Coast of New South Wales), Hmorek (2019) described smoke signals used by the neighbouring nations and countries in New South Wales as a warning of the impending arrival of Captain Cook’s ship in 1770.

Gooreng Gooreng Aboriginal man Justin Mohamed (quoted in Carlson & Frazer, 2016, p. 118) emphasized that Aboriginal communication and “social media-type” practices occurred in the Aboriginal practice of Songlines—oral stories that could “connect, share, engage and record news and information” across distant landscapes. Songlines enabled the sharing of stories, at times in different languages, and among different Indigenous countries; they formed an interconnected “map” of the terrain, which would determine and communicate information about the landscape, plants, and animals (Bodkin, 2013; De Santolo, 2019; Kwaymullina, 2017; Martin, 2008). The networks of songlines often intertwined and synthesized many forms of communication, including inter-group diplomacy and cross-nation engagement:

*...importantly, the storytelling was not a one-way process, for the travellers would also share their stories. In doing so, ancient and shared storylines could be traced and valuable lessons embedded within unique stories could be understood (Bodkin-Andrews, et al., 2016, p. 492).*

Message sticks, which preceded written languages and papyrus, were symbolic written communications in the forms of letters and, at times, acted as passports and maps (Farman, 2018). Farman (2018, p. 162) argued that literature carved on message sticks has “been largely ignored by scholars.” One specific example involves celebrated Ngarrindjeri man David Unaipon and his translation of a message stick for the interest of white audiences. Unaipon sent *The Register* newspaper a diagram of a message stick inscribed with symbols. He interpreted what each symbol represented as well as reproducing the overall message—which was to bring different nations together to prepare for war (The Register, 1925). The role of message sticks has continued, and contemporary campaigning mementos provide evidence of this. During the 2011 Freedom Ride, which celebrated the 46th anniversary of the original 1965 Freedom Ride, a travelling message stick was signed by community members in New South Wales towns as it passed through (Murkett, 2012). The original 1965 Freedom Ride was a movement led by Arrernte and Kalkadoon Sydney University student Dr 'Kumantjayi' (Charlie) Perkins AO to highlight the endemic racism still harming Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It was inspired by the antisegregation campaigns in the US (Perkins, 1993).

Traditional versions of the modern Welcome to Country ceremonies are another example of contemporary and continued practice, even though they have often been subject to erroneous claims, by politicians, media, and academics, that the idea was made up recently in 1976. Bodkin-Andrews et al. (2016) stated that “Welcome to Country ceremonies are drawn from the traditional customs and protocols of many (although maybe not all) Indigenous nations throughout Australia”, with formalities used when peoples are visiting from different groups and nations. Traditionally and continuing into

modern times, Welcome to Country ceremonies are performed in various ways, including gift exchanges, rituals of cleansing (through smoke), dance and song, and speeches. They are often performed at the beginning of functions, including workplace meetings and conferences, official events, and university or school functions (Bodkin-Andrews, et al., 2016).

Diplomatic practices, both between and within, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations, and in historical and contemporary times, are evident in the communication methods of message sticks, smoke signals, and ceremonial performances welcoming neighbouring nations/countries. Public relations theory discusses possible similarities and crossovers with the field of diplomacy, to the extent that Macnamara (2012, p. 322) argued that public relations “has the opportunity to borrow public diplomacy and new diplomacy concepts and principles in a transdisciplinary approach” (see also Dolea, 2016; Fitch, 2016b). It is clear then that public relations scholars can learn from both pre-and-post colonial diplomatic strategies utilized by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This is well summed up by Aboriginal scholar Lorraine Muller (2014, p. 26), who wrote that “as with normal human relationships, there was conflict but the resolution of this was confined by strict protocols and laws, thereby ensuring the ongoing integrity of trade routes and Songlines that tracked across the continent” (see also Atkinson, 2002).

These examples, of various forms of traditional Indigenous public relations and communications strategies, are clearly early forms of public relations type practices. Many of these traditional communication practices and protocols have survived, evolved, and are strongly linked to modern practices. They can provide valuable alternative ways of public relations practice against the dominant Eurocentric traditions.

### 3.5.2. *Post-1788 colonization to 1900s (opposition to the invaders)*

The concept of activism can be an outcome of people experiencing and resisting colonization and oppression and evidently was, and continues to be, utilized by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities (Clark et al., 2019; Dudgeon & Bray, 2016). This was often due to Indigenous peoples' efforts to resist colonial practices of assimilation, appropriation, erasure, disregard, and even genocide (Muller, 2014).

It could be argued that the establishment of the Australian public relations profession began with Aboriginal military campaigning during the 1790s Frontier Wars in the Sydney region (Newbury, 1999; Reynolds, 2013). Following violent confrontations with British invaders post-colonization, the resistance fighter Pemulwuy is often cited as having influenced Aboriginal peoples from the surrounding areas, including peoples from the Eora, Dharug, and Dharawal nations, to join his guerrilla campaign (Newbury, 1999). In addition, there is some evidence to suggest that Pemulwuy corresponded with escaped convicts in a bid to undermine the British military campaign (Newbury, 1999). Although the act of war itself is not a public relations activity, the employment of military communication, guerrilla war campaigning, alliance forming, and activism undertaken by the Aboriginal fighters (and their convict allies) could be regarded as such. Diplomatic forms of public relations practices with the European invaders and settlers were also leveraged by Indigenous peoples. In Sydney, from the early days of colonization, Bennelong acted as a public diplomat, brokering alliances and communication among his

Indigenous (Wangal) group, other Sydney Indigenous groups, and the invaders/settlers in the region (AIATSIS, 2019).

In Tasmania, several significant cases, including newspapers, petitions, and protest campaigns, have been documented. The 1836 to 1837 Tasmanian newspaper *Flinders Island Chronicle* was the first Aboriginal publication through the work of the two Tasmanian Aboriginal writers, Walter Arthur and Thomas Brune (Burrows, 2014; Molnar & Meadows, 2001; Sheehan & Galloway, 2014). Walter Arthur, along with seven others, also petitioned Queen Victoria in 1846 to demand Tasmanian Aboriginal rights (Burrows, 2014; Sheehan & Galloway, 2014; Rimon, 2006). This culminated in the return of the Aboriginal prisoners from Flinders Island to the Tasmanian mainland (Burrows, 2014; Rimon, 2006). This 1846 petition is cited as “...the first written document of black protest in Australian history” (Dudgeon & Bray, 2016, p. 2471). According to Gamboz (2012, p. 60), due to the strong use of oral (and non-written) petitions at the time, this 1846 petition is claimed as the “earliest surviving” written protest. In the case of the individual member, Walter Arthur, Sheehan and Galloway (2014, p. 6) claim that “Arthur’s familiarity with activism and lobbying, as with so many PR practitioners over the next 180 years, stemmed from his education and role in early journalism.”

Towards the end of the 1800s, one of the first formally organized Aboriginal political campaigns was conducted by Aboriginal peoples from the Victorian Coranderrk reserve (Attwood & Markus, 2004; Nanni & James, 2013). From the 1870s to 1880s, the group from Coranderrk, under the leadership of Elder William Barak, organized petitions, had spokesmen deliver messages to the media, and initiated marches in the fight against the closure of their reserve by the government (Attwood & Markus, 2004; Nanni & James,

2013). Subsequently, by the 1890s the *Aborigines Protection Act 1886* was implemented and Aboriginal residents under 35 who were deemed "half-castes" (or "half Aboriginal blood") were ordered to leave the reserve (Nanni & James, 2013). By 1924 the reserve was closed, and the remaining residents were dispossessed and moved elsewhere (Nanni & James, 2013). During this same decade, in the Sydney area on 26 January 1888, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples boycotted the Australia Day centenary celebrations to protest against their poor and inhumane treatment (Clarke & Safi, 2016; Heiss, 2013). This may have been the first of what would become major protests against the celebration of Australia Day. This date was and is notorious as a day of traumatic reminders of invasion and colonization for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Heiss, 2013).

Through these early efforts of resistance against invasion and colonization of their country and ways of life, followed by the invaders' subsequent control tactics of genocide, assimilation, and erasure (Muller, 2014), Indigenous peoples acquired knowledge of the power of activism that would continue into the next century.

### 3.5.3. 1910–1940 (*Organized campaigning and protesting*)

The early twentieth century saw a more concentrated effort by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to campaign and protest. This partly resulted from the atrocious treatment of Indigenous veterans during and following World War I (passed down through the stories of veterans or family members) that led to the formation of several organized action groups. Public relations activities were apparent in the campaigning of organizations such as the Australian Aboriginal Progressives Association, the Australian

Aborigines' League, and the Aborigines Progressive Association. These groups were responsible for sophisticated public relations strategies, summarized by Turnbull (2010, p. 164):

*...for much of the 20th century [I]ndigenous Australians fought to end the paternalistic administration of Federal, State and Territory campaigns and ran campaigns around specific social, economic, cultural and constitutional rights, such as the right to vote and the right to be paid fairly.*

From 1924 to 1927, the country's first politically organized, united Aboriginal activist group, the Australian Aborigines Progressive Association was founded by Fred Maynard in Sydney (AIATSIS, n.d.; Maynard, 2003, 2007). This association campaigned for the abolition of the Aborigines Protection Board of New South Wales, autonomy of over Indigenous affairs, Indigenous rights to land ownership, and equal citizenship rights (AIATSIS, n.d.; Maynard, 2003, 2007). Operating from Sydney, the organization practiced public relations activities through the hosting of public meetings, writing of petitions, and seeking of media coverage in newspapers (AIATSIS, n.d.; Maynard, 2003, 2007). Burrows (2014, p. 480) explored media framing and coverage of the activities of the Australian Aborigines Progressives Association, detailing that the organization "responded to opportunities and threats, developed alliances and attempted to control news frames relating to the movement. Their campaign strategies evolved to meet journalistic demands for event-driven news and newsworthy content."

Less than a decade later, the Australian Aborigines' League was formed in Melbourne in 1933 by various Aboriginal members (including William Cooper) and became a formally

constituted body in 1936 (Attwood & Markus, 2004). The League adopted the motto of “A fair deal for the dark race” and campaigned hard for equal rights and for the abolishment of discriminatory laws (Attwood & Markus, 2004). The Australian Aborigines’ League drew up a petition to King George V in 1933, with 1814 signatures, seeking Aboriginal representation in parliament, but the federal government ultimately blocked the petition from being sent (National Archives of Australia, 2019; AIATSIS, n.d.). Other public relations tactics included letters and petitions to governments, targeting of supporters, letters to newspapers, public meetings, relationship management (particularly with white supporters and sympathisers), and collaboration with various organizations, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous (Attwood & Markus, 2004).

In 1937, the Aborigines Progressive Association was established, and, in 1938, William Ferguson and Jack Patten, on behalf of the Association, released “A Statement of the case for the Aborigines Progressive Association” (Aborigines Progressive Association, 1938). In this statement, the Association highlighted the many inequalities and injustices that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples had been forced to endure postcolonization, and it demanded abolishment of the Aborigines Protection Board of New South Wales and a new policy of equal citizenship and equal rights (Aborigines Progressive Association, 1938). The Aborigines Progressive Association used sophisticated tactics, including propaganda (AIATSIS, n.d.), relationship management, and media relations (Burrows, 2014). Activist fashion was also harnessed as a communications tool, with members of the Association wearing formal black dress to symbolize mourning at the 1938 Day of Mourning protest (AIATSIS, n.d.).



Through the collective effort of the Australian Aborigines' League and the Aborigines Progressives Association, the day of 26 January 1938 witnessed the first the Day of Mourning event—a huge civil rights protest to mark the 150-year anniversary of Australian invasion and to highlight the resultant demoralizing treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by the colonists (AIATSIS, n.d.; Foley & Anderson, 2006). This event was joined by Indigenous peoples from across Australia and culminated in a silent march in Sydney's Central Business District (CBD), from Town Hall to Australian Hall, where a meeting was to take place. To create publicity, both prior to and during the event, the two associations conducted radio interviews and distributed a pamphlet/manifesto to Indigenous people (AIATSIS, n.d.). Two members of the press were invited to join the meeting in the Australian Hall: Russell Clark from *Man* magazine and P. R. Stephensen, a writer and publisher (AIATSIS, n.d.). Following the Day of Mourning, members of the Australian Aborigines' League and the Aborigines Progressives Association met with the then Prime Minister, Joseph Lyons, his wife Enid, and the Minister for the Interior, John McEwen, to present a proposed 10-point national policy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Horner & Langton, 1987; Patten, 1938). This policy strongly lobbied for Commonwealth (federal) control of Indigenous affairs (rather than state-based with its raft of different rules), but this demand was denied at the time.

Almost 30 years later, the foundational and continuing work of these pioneering associations (along with several other new Indigenous coalitions) led to the 1967 Referendum, which witnessed the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Australian census for the first time. Significantly, the power to manage Indigenous Affairs was also granted to the Commonwealth (rather than being State based

as before). This change led to some improved services for Indigenous peoples, yet the equality that has been so strongly fought for is still out of reach (Behrendt, 2007). Indigenous peoples in Australia are still impacted by the ongoing effects of colonization; for instance, we still experience the genocidal silencing and erasure of our cultural history and practices (Muller, 2014). Our people's inter-generational experience of trauma is well documented and continues due to white society's brick wall of ignorance and denial—denial of the importance of Country, spiritual connections, cultural practices, languages, kinship systems, identities, stories, and rights to self-determination (Behrendt, 2016; Muller, 2014; Nakata, 2007; Smallwood, 2015).

### **3.6. Discussion and conclusion**

This paper has aimed to contextualize Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public relations practices and strategies in terms of Indigenous history and to contribute to a reconceptualization of Australian public relations. This descriptive narrative of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practices of public relations has sought to answer three research questions:

- *How can we develop a process to decolonize Australia's public relations industry using Indigenous standpoints?*
- *What public relations roles were evident within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and practices before colonization?*
- *What role did public relations play in historical Indigenous events and campaigns against colonization itself?*

In building a process to decolonize Australia's public relations industry from Indigenous standpoints, and inspired by Indigenous postcolonial and decolonial public relations initiatives, this paper contributes to the discipline by critiquing (and thus decolonizing) Western definitions of Australian public relations that have previously been formalized as legitimate within some academic literature. Australian public relations scholars have challenged the suggested World War II origins of Australian public relations by presenting alternative historical facts (Fitch, 2016b; Macnamara & Crawford, 2010; Robertson & Crawford, 2018; Sheehan, 2007). This growing body of work notably explores public relations practices including Australian nation building and Australia Day celebrations (Macnamara & Crawford, 2010), campaigns during World War I (Robertson & Crawford, 2018; Sheehan, 2007), and women's roles in the early to mid-twentieth century (Fitch, 2016b). Within traditional accounts of these historical events, Eurocentric narratives were prominent and Indigenous-related incidents, activities, or themes were rarely recognized. The same is true regarding historical narratives of Australian public relations (Macnamara & Crawford, 2010; Robertson & Crawford, 2018). Therefore, we argue that public relations' inability to recognize and meaningfully engage with the diverse traditional and contemporary practices of Indigenous peoples and communities is only further evidence of the lingering effects of colonization. We assert that the usual assumptions about the foundation of Australian public relations need to be adjusted and corrected.

Several forms of public relations and communications methods in traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies have been recognized and must be acknowledged. These traditional methods include message sticks (a form of letters, with messages engraved on wood), traditional versions of the modern Welcome to Country (storytelling,

sharing, and welcome ceremonies), cultural practices (rock art, smoke signals, songlines), and diplomatic strategies. Message sticks, songlines, Welcome to Country ceremonies, and diplomatic communication methods are now in widespread use. They have been modernized and adapted through the resistance efforts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, who wish to preserve and keep their culture strong (AIATSIS, 2018; Bodkin-Andrews, et al., 2016; Murkett, 2012). Diplomacy was evident in the thousands of years prior to colonization and continued after the arrival of the invaders/settlers, particularly with the cross-communication with Sydney (Wangal) man Bennelong. There are other examples of the connection between diplomacy and public relations (Dolea, 2016; Fitch, 2016b; Macnamara, 2012), with Macnamara (2012, p. 322) arguing that public relations “has the opportunity to borrow public diplomacy and new diplomacy concepts and principles.” Although public relations diplomacy in modern times has been a basis for postcolonial critique (see Dutta, 2016), the diplomatic strategies within and between Indigenous Australians and non-Indigenous Australians have yet to be fully examined to argue the same.

Postcolonial Indigenous public relations strategies involved many examples of resistance, activism, and protest. The period from the 1900s to the 1940s demonstrated organized communications and campaigning (well before World War II), and the 1938 Day of Mourning is acknowledged as the start of Australia’s own Civil Rights movement (AIATSIS, n.d.). Aligning with the US Civil Rights movement, Vardeman, Kennedy and Little (2020, p. 133) emphasize this resistance as “inherently a public relations campaign against racism and inequality.” Similar tactics were used in both the Australian 1938 Day of Mourning and the US Civil Rights movement; both strategized meetings and alliances with other activists and utilized their own press and media outlets (AIATSI., n.d.;

Vardeman, Kennedy & Little, 2020). The practice of wearing black as symbolic communication by the Aborigines Progressive Association at the Day of Mourning campaign aligns with Fitch's (2016a, 2016b) arguments for the recognition of fashion as a publicity tool in public relations contexts. For example, Fitch (2016b, p.16) states that "public relations was conceived broadly as promotional activity, and that while media and press relations were prominent, it also encompassed radio programmes, documentary films and even window displays and fashion parades."

From these three answers, we move forward, as Indigenous authors, in acknowledging and paying our respects to the many Indigenous peoples who have fought for their Country, their communities, their rights, and their futures. In further unpacking Indigenous positionings within a historical public relations framework, this paper specifically argues:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander strategies and tactics of public relations have existed since time immemorial and long before the arrival of white settlers/invaders.
- We argue that the discipline of Australian public relations, as we know it, commenced in the Aboriginal military and protest campaigns, both during and after the Australian Frontier Wars.
- Sophisticated and organized public relations campaigning emerged from the 1920s with the establishment of the Australian Aborigines Progressives Association and later organizations.
- Further research and documentation of case studies from the 1940s until modern times is greatly needed to continue the work of decolonizing the historical

narratives of Australian public relations and to celebrating Indigenous Australian public relations pioneers and advocates.

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in public relations may be seen as an emerging specialization of public relations and far more research is needed to truly assert our aims and methods, on our own terms.

This paper in contributing to the profession of public relations' historical narratives offers a descriptive view of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practices of public relations. Prior to this paper, there was minimal research on historical Indigenous public relations strategies. Therefore, further research is needed to continue decolonizing Australian public relations and to assert Indigenous historical and contemporary practices within the profession. This presents an exciting opportunity to explore the Indigenous public relations sphere further and to contextualize Indigenous historical practices through empirical conceptual frameworks.

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**4. Asserting an Indigenous Australian theoretical framework in public relations**

**Preamble:**

A few years ago, I attended a two-hour optional media-training workshop for all university staff working within Indigenous contexts, ultimately to learn more about media storytelling and journalistic engagement and liaison with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander spaces. Facilitating the event were two women communications managers – a non-Indigenous former journalist, and an Indigenous communications professional, who together informed the staff on ways to increase their work profile in the media and to share their team stories.

During the workshop, one of the Indigenous participant's mentioned her joy in having an Indigenous person, an Indigenous woman, working at the university in a role that promotes and shares Indigenous stories from an Indigenous perspective. She discussed the previous lack of an Indigenous communications/public relations professionals at the university and how important it is to have Indigenous communications professionals to help share positive stories, both within universities and externally.

This was not an isolated comment; this type of sentiment is reflected in academia and research with several Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars (and from industry representatives), highlighting the lack (or absence) of Indigenous public relations and communications professionals and commitment to Indigenous cultural practices and protocols in Indigenous Australian public relations.

Researching highlighting and engaging with Indigenous Australian public relations is only just emerging, but this research is already exploring how certain areas of Indigenous Australian public relations can be performed and its resulting benefits. There are an

increasing number of protocols and values guiding Indigenous Australian public relations and communications consultancies, and their ways of Indigenous business could do much to guide the larger realm of academia.

This chapter supports the decolonising approach of this dissertation by exploring the practice of Indigenous Australian public relations and how it is unique from Western and mainstream public relations. This chapter details the strong cultural influence and values that are embedded within the practice, and the need for strength-based stories and giving back to community. This chapter is momentous for me as it is the first published account of Indigenous Australian public relations practices of Indigenous women, and offers a foundational set of protocols for further framework development.

**Abstract:**

The Public Relations Institute of Australia defines public relations as the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics. In an Indigenous Australian context, public relations should move beyond this simplistic and western-centric definition by including a diversity of cultural dimensions, including the centering of stories and issues that reflect or impact Indigenous Australians, Indigenous knowledges and principles, and motivations for social change. Although minor definitions of Indigenous Australian public relations exist, no theoretical framework has been developed for the Australian profession. This paper responds to this lack in the scholarship by developing an Indigenous Australian public relations framework from the voices of five public relations and communications Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. The end result summarizes Indigenous practices in the Australian public relations profession and calls for further literature in the field to continue asserting Indigenous ways of being and doing.

**Keywords:**

Indigenous; public relations; Australia; Indigenous PR; PR theory

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#### **4.1. Introduction**

In the past decade there have been a range of definitions offered for Indigenous Australian public relations in theory and practice. Sakinofsky (2013) describes it as “to, by and for Aboriginal communities and organisations” and Petersen (2016, p. 1), in drawing from the earlier work of Clark (2011, 2012), outlines it as “communicating to and/or on behalf of Aboriginal people, Aboriginal organisations and Aboriginal communities”. Although these existing definitions (Clark 2011, 2012; Petersen, 2016; Sakinofsky, 2013) closely resemble the definition from the Public Relations Institute of Australia (“the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics” - 2019), and may provide a surface level of understanding of how Indigenous peoples may ‘fit’ into public relations, this is not enough. It is essential to recognize that the processes for achieving adequate theoretical and empirical representations of Indigenous standpoints within and across public relations are far more complicated. There are complexities when comparing Western public relations practices to Indigenous Australian public relations; for example, the strong cultural emphasis on relationships, the relationship between activism and public relations, and connections to Indigenous narratives in the media and general public. Whilst there are surface-level descriptions of Indigenous Australian public relations, and applied frameworks and principles in practice (for example, see Cox Inall Ridgeway’s five governing principles, 2014), there is no theoretical framework developed specifically for the Australian public relations profession. By asking the question “What are your experiences and roles working in Indigenous Australian public relations?”, this paper responds to this lack in the public relations scholarship by asserting an Indigenous Australian public relations theoretical framework. Importantly, rather than mimicking the limitations inherent within

prior public relations literature, this framework is drawn from the voices and perspectives of five public relations and communications Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

#### **4.2. Indigenous ways of public relations in Australian academia**

In recent years, several scholars have called for further research on Indigenous Australian public relations and identified the lack of Indigenous perspectives (Clark, 2011, 2012; Macnamara, 2012; Sakinofsky, 2013; Sison, 2016; Petersen, 2016). Australian based public relation scholar Marianne Sison (2016, p. 36) argues that “very few Australian PR scholars engage with [I]ndigenous issues in our research and teaching.” Jim Macnamara (2012, p. 452) also advises that “... public relations can find productive new pathways for theory building and practice in ... [I]ndigenous studies”. Pre-existing research and empirical studies on Indigenous Australian public relations are limited, but does include the works of Clark (2011, 2012) and Petersen (2016), who both explored organizational standpoints from Aboriginal Community Controlled Organizations.

Clark (2011, 2012) discovered the ideal perceptions of public relations/communications qualifications versus the experience levels of Aboriginal cultural competency knowledge. Interviewing a total of eight CEOs, board members and communications/public relations officers in three Aboriginal Community Controlled Organizations, Clark (2011, 2012) found that the majority of the public relations/communications officers in all of the organizations were non-Indigenous, and not all were university educated within public relations and communications. Clark (2011, 2012) uncovered public relations/communications strategies including relationship management (establishing and

maintaining relationships and connections), community consultation and engagement, integration of local Indigenous cultural protocols in the public relations strategies, and efforts of Indigenous media exposure. Successfully promoting positive stories was a common challenge for the communications/public relations officers in the organizations. The most used form of communication tactics at the time of the study were corporate newsletters.

Petersen's (2016) study also noted negative portrayals of Indigenous peoples in the media. Interviewing seven Indigenous and non-Indigenous communications/public relations type officers in six Aboriginal Community Controlled Organizations, Petersen's (2016) research similarly explored the communications strategies, tactics, and perspectives working within Aboriginal Community Controlled Organizations. In investigating the practice within the organizations, Petersen (2016) discovered a strong link between Indigenous Australian public relations and social change, reactive/ad hoc strategic plans (flexible communications planning, thinking on the spot), a fluid and organic shift of roles within their work (undertaking both marketing, media), and Indigenous protocols and style of public relations. Notably, Petersen (2016, pp. 54-72) described the Indigenous style of public relations as "culturally sensitive communications" and "more than a PR-like strategy. It is a mode of knowing and doing that informs many of the tactics". From Petersen's (2016) research, it can be concluded that Indigenous ways are not simply a set of public relations strategies, but rather epistemological and ontological foundations for engaging with public relations tactics that respect (and empower) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.



Overall, the empirical studies of Clark (2011, 2012) and Petersen (2016) indicate Indigenous Australian public relations as including relationship management, community consultation and engagement, integration of Indigenous cultural elements/Indigenous ways in the public relations, media relations for positive media exposure, social change as a theoretical public relations framework/direction, and fluid functions in their work. However, their research only includes the voices of Indigenous employees of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organizations in capital cities/urban environments, and thus may be argued as limited in its applicability to a broader development towards understanding a potential Indigenous public relations framework.

### **4.3. Research Approach**

#### *4.3.1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's standpoints*

A significant characteristic of Indigenous research is the contribution to self-determination, community responsibility, decolonisation and autonomy (Foley, 2003; Martin, 2003, 2008; Moreton-Robinson, 2013; Moreton-Robinson & Walter, 2009; Nakata, 2002, 2007; Rigney, 1997, 1999; Wilson, 2008). As Indigenous women co-authors, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's standpoints and principles were the guiding voice to the methodology within this paper. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's standpoints emphasize that the perspectives, standpoints, and knowledges of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women be increasingly recognized as a point of resistance against the various levels of oppression that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women continually face (Behrendt, 1993; Fredericks, 2004, 2010; Huggins, 1987, 1994; Moreton-Robinson, 1998, 2000, 2003, 2013; Moreton-Robinson &

Walter, 2009). In embodying an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's standpoint, Indigenous ways of knowing (epistemology), ways of being and belonging (ontology), and ways of doing (axiology) are integral to the research framework (Martin, 2003, 2008; Moreton-Robinson & Walter, 2009; Rigney, 1997, 1999).

#### 4.3.2. *Positioning of the research participants*

Five Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women from public relations and communications participated in this paper, and collectively have worked as consultants, researchers, and managers in Indigenous public relations and communications spaces. Many of the women participants in this paper are frequently in the public face, whether it be media interviews, writing opinion pieces, savvy social media users, or regular conference presenters. All participants have been issued pseudonyms.

Susan (pseudonym) has university qualifications in journalism and started out in radio and Indigenous affairs reporting. She is based in a large city and moved into public relations as another way to continue storytelling, particularly around creating and maintaining positive narratives for Indigenous peoples.

Debra (pseudonym) studied communications at university and has moved between journalism and communications role throughout her career. She is now in a dedicated Indigenous communications role and is based in a large city. She chose communications as her career because of its power to create social change, particularly through storytelling.

Stacey (pseudonym) is based in a large city and studied media and communications at university. She briefly worked in print media but chose to focus on communications, public relations and marketing roles. She has only worked in Indigenous spaces, and specializes in Indigenous specific communications, particularly with government clients.

Lily (pseudonym) graduated from a degree in media production practices and initially didn't intend to work in communications. She is based in a large city and has worked in Indigenous organizations and on Indigenous campaigns undertaking digital media, media relations, branding and storytelling strategies.

Nicole (pseudonym) lives in a middle size city and studied public relations at university and has worked in numerous community roles, both within public relations and project management roles. She originally chose public relations as a career to promote the importance of education to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth.

#### 4.3.3. *Method*

This paper privileges the vast and varied voices and lived experiences of the five Indigenous women in public relations and communications through the utilization of a yarning methodology. Yarning as a methodology is a culturally appropriate and relevant Indigenous research storytelling tool (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Geia, Hayes & Usher, 2013) used to promote and advocate familiarity, collaboration, co-researching, and confidence in storytelling. Under the lead author, collaboration with the research participants was essential in ensuring comfort with the process, and involved all of the women telling their stories their way, reviewing their own transcripts and/or journal

papers for context and accuracy, and determining whether to participate as co-researchers. Under the yarning methodology, “semi-structured” interviews were conducted to gather data and share knowledges and explored the question: “What are your experiences and roles working in Indigenous Australian public relations?”, however there were also noted conversational cues to spark ideas and follow up questions were formed during sessions.

Gifts were exchanged at the beginning or end of each yarning session, to represent and symbolize social yarning, collaboration, gratitude and Indigenous women’s similarity and culture. Specifically, gift cards and a pair of *Haus of Dizzy* Aboriginal flag earrings were presented. All yarning sessions were undertaken one-on-one with the lead author, audio-recorded on an iPhone 7 or Mac laptop and followed similar, but flexible, yarning plans/set of themes to discuss. The lead author’s yarning session followed the same procedure and was recorded by her male, Aboriginal PhD supervisor. All yarning sessions were transcribed through a transcription program (Otter, 2019) and authenticated by manually listening to the audio. Resulting from the initial audit of each transcript, early themes were noted, followed by the major data analysis in the NVIVO program for thematic analysis. The thematic analysis of key themes followed a six-phase guide (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017), where the lead author first became familiar with the data, generated initial codes, searched for emerging themes, reviewed themes, defined themes, and conducted the write-up.

#### **4.4. Findings: Indigenous themes within public relations theory and practice**

The results from the women’s perceptions on the practice of Indigenous Australian public relations were identified and categorized into the main themes of: Versatility; Indigenous

Philosophy; Indigenous Justice; Indigenous storytelling; Indigenous diplomacy; Interrelatedness; and Narrative empowerment.

4.4.1. *Versatility: Undertaking multiple roles and functions within Indigenous Australian public relations*

When defining Indigenous Australian public relations, Lily shared the different roles she experiences and relates to this type of work:

*Whenever I've worked in a black space, you are the marketing, communications and PR person rolled into one. That is just the common experience, and I hear that from Indigenous comms people all the time. There's generally no separation; it's just all squeezed together, and we're spread too thin. I found that funny coming to [current place of work], because everything is so separated. You've got a marketing team, you've got an internal communications team, an external communications team, a media team. But that's my job all rolled into one, I have to do all of those things, it's such a common experience in the black space. The expectation is that you have to encompass everything.*

Lily's insight into the mixture of public relations/communications/marketing terms used with Indigenous Australian public relations is reflected within the terminology used by all women. For example, in a count of the most used terms when referring to Indigenous Australian public relations, it was found that "communications" was used the most, followed closely by "public relations". Current research reveals that in many areas of

Indigenous Australian public relations there are different terminologies and perceptions used to describe the profession and/or its strategies (Clark, 2011, 2012; Petersen, 2016). In Clark's research, it was noted that one of the participants explained Indigenous Australian public relations as "[involving] multiple staff undertaking the public relations in all levels of the organisation" (Clark, 2012, p. 22). While, Petersen (2016, p. 55) identified that participants "described their PR-like activities by predominantly using the terms "communications", "marketing" or "media relations"". Outside of Indigenous public relations, Fitch (2016) and Cassidy and Fitch (2013) discuss the versatility of roles in the fashion public relations industry and the disregard of public relations versatility from the standpoint of the dominant paradigm of public relations (the Excellence theory). The Excellence theory conveys how organizations can conduct excellence and quality public relations in all levels of an organization (Grunig & Grunig, 2008; Vercic & Zerfass, 2016), and specifically calls for public relations as a stand-alone profession, and not integrated with other disciplines such as marketing. The difficulty of the Excellence theory is its specific application to organizational contexts and rigid depiction of public relations. In an Indigenous Australian public relations context, versatility of roles can be viewed as a result of less staff in an organization and/or cultural values transferable to several positions.

#### 4.4.2. *Indigenous Philosophy: Understanding the lived experiences of Indigeneity and cultural knowledges*

In terms of the lived experience of being Indigenous, Lily, detailed being an Indigenous person working in Indigenous Australian public relations:

*When you're a comms person in an Indigenous organisation, or working in the black space, and you're black yourself, it's more than a job, it's personal. Your perspective, lived experience and historical context goes into the comms, it's not going to be the same as if it was a white person. You often are personally affected by the issues you are addressing and speaking about, you have experienced it with your own families and communities. Separating emotion and objectivity can be really difficult.*

Colonization impacts all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and this includes the approach of work through the lens of Indigeneity. In identifying the Indigenous ways of being and doing in their work, the majority of women elaborated on Indigenous approaches, values and protocols. Debra discussed the Indigenous protocols and values that her organization incorporates:

*In our work at [name removed], we would never develop a campaign without community or without the right people in the room. I guess a more traditional approach is to develop something and then go and test it. So, we actually commit to embedding Aboriginal perspectives into every step of that project, not just through our own Indigenous path but through the right people. ... Community is always at the centre. Indigenous voices will be embedded in every single step of this project.*

Susan, similarly, mentioned following protocols in her storytelling work:

*I'm retelling or facilitating people's stories in a way that they see themselves, because I understand them culturally. And two, because I*

*always follow the right protocols in getting those stories and stuck to them. Talking to the right people from the right Country and the right storyteller owners for those particular stories, and getting it from the horse's mouth, basically.*

Indigenous perspectives in public relations and communications could be considered as paving the way in socio-cultural and human centric theories. Debra explained how non-Indigenous public relations and communications professionals are co-opting Indigenous style methodologies:

*I think now we're seeing in the broader PR industry that they say things like, "Oh, we've got to focus on human-centred design and co-design" and we're like, "Yeah. We've been doing this for a while, 60,000 years or so." So, it's kind of funny when we go to big conferences or we hear other guest speakers and they're talking about it like it's a new concept and we're sitting there going, "How else would you do it? Of course, you'd do it that way."*

Stacey noted how a human-centered approach is used within her work:

*I always take a human centred approach. I talk to people first, to better understand what messages they are connecting with.*

Within public relations theory, socio-cultural standpoints aim to find and encourage alternative views, particularly against the dominant organizational paradigms (see Excellence theory above), and to contribute to society (Edwards, 2018; Edwards & Hodges, 2011; Ihlen, van Ruler & Fredriksson, 2009; Ledingham, 2003; L'Etang, 2008).



Indigenous Australian public relations evidently provides inspiration for alternative insight in public relations and how the profession can contribute positively to society.

4.4.3. *Indigenous Justice: Utilizing public relations as a vehicle for social change and activism*

Petersen (2016, p. 94) recognized in her research that “[a] key finding was seeing participants’ PR-like work as a vehicle for driving social change due to their aspirations to give voice to the needs of ATSI communities”. This was reiterated by a number of the co-authors/participants, especially in their motivations of studying/entering public relations and perceptions of Indigenous Australian public relations.

Stacey described creating change as one of the reasons to establish her own communications consultancy:

*I wanted to share positive stories. I saw great things happening in my community and knew that other Australians weren't hearing about them.*

Nicole chose her career of public relations because of its perceived ability to create change:

*I've always wanted to do something that gives back. Obviously as an Aboriginal person. But I saw that public relations has the power for that” ... “I wanted to work in government, to create change. So that was my viewpoint. I knew what public relations could do, but I knew that I was different because I was Aboriginal.*

Debra elaborated on how Indigenous Australian public relations can facilitate change and positive outcomes, describing it as “comms for a purpose:

*... people don't realise how big a role communications and PR play in building movements and sustaining energy and getting people on board and addressing inequality, because it's just like, 'Guys, we can do so much more. This is bigger than all of us.'*

Debra continued, linking her public relations and communications work with activism:

*I guess through the work that I do, I like to think that I'm empowering change. I wouldn't say the work we do is hard because we work with all parties, so it's not like we would say we are fighting against the system, but we are working with the system to try to improve outcomes for everyone. I think that could be seen as a new form of activism as well.*

Public relations scholars Edwards and Hodges (2011, p. 3) highlight numerous international and national scholars (such as Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Holtzhausen, 2000; McKie & Munshi, 2007; Heath, 2006) who have “argued for the importance of public relations as a discipline that fundamentally changes the way in which society functions and have explored its potential to take more of an active role in bringing about change”. In particular, the 2018 book, *Protest Public Relations: Communicating Dissent and Activism*, provides a wealth of information and varying insight on the role of activism within public relations from numerous scholars (Adi, 2018). In Australian public relations, discourse from non-Indigenous perspectives on the role of activism within

public relations are varied (Ali, Boddy, O'Leary & Ewart, 2016; Demetrious, 2013; Message, 2018; Robertson & Crawford, 2018; Wolf, 2018), and provide insight and validation into the link between activism and Indigenous Australian public relations.

#### *4.4.4. Indigenous Storytelling: Becoming and being a storyteller*

Storytelling from an Indigenous standpoint is a way to pass on stories, lessons, and values to the next generation, and is a shared process that is important not only for individuals and their families, but also wider communities (Bodkin-Andrews, et al., 2016). Nicole and Debra described Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as “naturals at communicating and storytelling, and public relations” and “the original storytellers”, respectively. In western public relations, Elmer (2011, p. 47) declares that “[p]ublic relations is storytelling” and Kent (2015) states “[s]torytelling is a staple of public relations, from crisis, to branding, to identity, to reputation”. Susan described herself as a storyteller: “I call myself a story teller, because I feel like that’s more appropriate for what I do. I don’t care what the medium is, I’ll just tell a story”.

Susan and Debra both explained how they undertake storytelling, either for Indigenous or non-Indigenous audiences. Susan described a process for targeting non-Indigenous audiences:

*... what you've got to do is you can't just hit them over the head with this, because they don't listen. You've got to creep up to them and then you hit them over the head. I really liked that approach. I like to think fishing line when I'm drawing things in. Reeling people in softly, softly, softly and hit them over the head once you've got them there listening*

*to your every word. That's, I suppose, the way to do it. ... Otherwise barriers just get put up.*

Debra shared how storytelling in her work can be used to alleviate issues within Indigenous communities:

*... rather than coming at it as, "Here's a massive problem and here's how we're going to fix it", we actually look at where pockets of excellence are and how do we amplify excellence, so let's go find stories of resilience and good practice."*

Similarly, Stacey emphasized storytelling in her work and business establishment:

*My business has always been about sharing the positive stories coming out of our community and promoting the importance of Indigenous values across different sectors. I do a lot of work with Aboriginal businesses on their brand narratives. Many Aboriginal business owners go into business to create change, to promote culture, to create economic freedom, it's important to share these stories with their customers.*

#### *4.4.5. Indigenous diplomacy: Communicating between Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds*

Several of the women discussed being brokers, translators, and diplomats in their roles. Debra explained what being a diplomat entails in her role:

*I think where I feel like I can contribute the most is working in a more diplomatic role, which is bringing all parties together, trying to broker solutions that work for everyone and sort of influence things from the inside.*

Stacey emphasized being a translator between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous world, particularly in terms of communicating messages:

*I find that a lot of professional Aboriginal people end up in a translator role. Especially if they are working in a non-Indigenous environment on Aboriginal programs. They need to take the language of their workplace and any jargon that's used, and translate this for the way that Aboriginal people speak to each other, and then they often have to translate this back to their non-Indigenous colleagues ... part of my role is to remove this additional workload by creating communication strategies that speak to Aboriginal people.*

Lily outlined communicating messages and organizational narratives with publics/stakeholders:

*You have to tell the story of the work in a way that makes it digestible for people to understand why it's important. Due to the instability in funding for most Indigenous organisations, your narrative is often linked with selling the organisation as well as educating or promoting your work. You're communicating messages to help create trust and validity of what the organisation's doing. It's often not just about*

*delivering a message, but also raising the profile and helping to secure funding.*

Public relations theory discusses and explores similarities with diplomacy (Macnamara, 2012). For instance, Macnamara claims that public relations “has the opportunity to borrow public diplomacy and new diplomacy concepts and principles in a transdisciplinary approach that will yield a substantially enriched paradigm for PR that is more effective, more societally-orientated, more ethical, and ultimately more publicly accepted” (2012, p. 322).

#### 4.4.6. *Interrelatedness: Establishing and maintaining relationships and dialogue*

Debra, emphasized two-way communication within her work, expanding on it in an Indigenous sense and linking it with brokering and diplomacy:

*I think one of the things that we try to embed more so from an Indigenous point of view when we talk about co-design or two-way communication isn't just having the PR people being the broker but actually looking for opportunities to bring everyone together, so have the police in the room with this family and actually facilitate robust conversation and design stuff together.*

Stacey linked the natural connections that most Indigenous peoples have with one another, and how that relates to appropriately communicating messages with the right people:

*Messages are often lost in translation. Marketing for Aboriginal programs and events often go through non-Indigenous communications teams. The people writing the messages may have never met an Aboriginal person before, and so it's extremely difficult for them to know whether words and messages are connecting with their audience. In some cases, words can trigger the opposite response.*

Nicole shared her approach in establishing community and family connections and relationships:

*You want to interview someone for your newspaper, or for the media. You have family connections already. You go there, you already have the protocols kind of down pat. ... it depends on what task you're doing. So yeah, events, you would be the one who would approach them, and generally you'd expect that you'd have a relationship with the Aunty or Uncle who's just say doing Welcome to Country. So, I'm thinking of [name removed], when I used to work there. So, you give them a call, you know, and that's it. But if you didn't know them, maybe you'd have someone introduce you.*

Debra discussed engagement methods and establishing and maintaining relationships in her work:

*... we don't even have the same method of engaging with people because that's their decision whether they give us permission to come and how they would like to be engaged with. ... we'll often contact peer leaders in communities or people we know and say, "What's the*

*appropriate channel? ”, whether that’s contacting a Land Council, an Elder, a family and then giving people choice about how we talk to them, whether that’s through focus groups, conversations, yarning circles, one-on-one.*

Within an Indigenous Australian public relations context there is a crossover between the Western theories in public relations, particularly relationship management theory (which “balances the interests of organizations and publics through the management of organization–public relationships” – Ledingham, 2009, p. 181), and the two-way symmetrical theory (which emphasizes high ethical research and communication between an organization and its publics/stakeholders to obtain mutual understanding and interests - Macnamara, 2012). Similarly, for instance, Clark (2011, 2012) found that the Indigenous values of listening and engaging with community and forming and maintaining relationships closely align with the two-way symmetrical model. Although these examples confirm a certain applicability to Indigenous Australian public relations, it may be argued that two-way and relationship management are fundamentally superficial to Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing (Moreton-Robinson & Walter, 2009). Two-way symmetry and relationship management can certainly be evident within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organizations and communities, however, the appropriateness and success from non-Indigenous peoples, groups, and organizations to Indigenous publics have yet to be fully and specifically determined.

#### *4.4.7. Narrative empowerment: Advancing positive stories in the media and public*



A strong and frequent theme involved combatting the negative narratives around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and promoting positive stories encompassing Indigenous self-determination. Susan, in reflecting on her work as a former journalist, described only wanting to write positive stories about Indigenous peoples and shared her approach to storytelling and what she prioritizes:

*For me, these days, even when I was a journalist, I use to call myself an advocacy journalist, because I didn't want to do stories that bought into deficit narratives. I don't think that was even a term at that time, but it was a personal vent. That was my personal philosophy, and for those other reasons, I found it too sensitive for myself and my personality.*

Stacey explained her desire to share positive stories and contribute to increasing a positive Indigenous narrative:

*These days I work mainly on strategy. Promoting a respect for Aboriginal values at a leadership level means that space opens up across the company or department and we can embed positive narratives throughout.*

Lily shared how she mainly has positive experiences with the media, because she works with media who are either Indigenous focused or progressive:

*I've largely had positive experiences because I've only generally dealt with media that's probably seen as more 'liberal' or 'progressive'. I often deal with Indigenous media, like, NITV or Koori Mail, and that is a positive experience because they're so keen on the story. And they're*

*keen on reporting on positive stories, not just deficit stories as the mainstream media often does. The reality is the narrative the mainstream media is familiar with and wanting to portray (for shock value, which equals ratings) – is negative reporting on Indigenous people. They want to create drama and friction.*

Susan shared a media relations tactic of utilizing the connections non-Indigenous peoples have with non-Indigenous media:

*The other thing that I know now, is that it's really hard to sell your own story, it sounds like you're boasting all the time. So, you hire a company to sell your story for you. That's the way it's done.*

Clark (2011, 2012) and Petersen (2016) strongly discussed the role of the media and reporting within Indigenous Australian public relations. They particularly stressed the pre-existing negative narratives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the media and the need to recognize Indigenous self-determination relating to more positive and empowered stories. Petersen noted that one participant emphasized community events as a way to counteract negative portrayals and promote 'positive reconciliation' in the media and public (2016, p. 64). To progress positive narratives and stories within the media, the roles of Indigenous and non-Indigenous journalists' need to be transparent and the utilization of texts and handbooks on ethical media reporting with Indigenous peoples are essential (Leach, James, McManus & Thompson, 2012; Media Diversity Australia, 2018; Waller, 2010). This is summarised in an account of decolonising journalism, whereby Sweet, Dudgeon, McCallum, and Ricketson, state that decolonizing the profession "would result in increased awareness of institutionalised racism and concerted

efforts to ensure greater representation of Indigenous peoples — whether in newsrooms and media management, or as sources in stories, including and beyond those directly related to Indigenous affairs” (2014, p. 626).

#### **4.5. Discussion: Asserting an Indigenous Australian public relations theoretical framework**

Indigenous perspectives and standpoints in Australian public relations academia are limited and the two studies outlined in the literature review (Clark, 2011, 2012; Petersen, 2016) provided only minor insights into the nature of Indigenous Australian public relations. These studies indicated that Indigenous public relations discipline includes relationship management, community consultation and engagement, integration of Indigenous cultural elements/Indigenous ways (in the public relations across media relations, social change and/or activism), and fluid functions and tasks in their work. The media relations commonality from both studies identified the potential for positive relationships between public relations and the media, particularly in the promotion of positive stories and redressing negative narratives of Indigenous Australia (Clark, 2011, 2012; Petersen, 2016).

We argue though that this paper moves beyond the prior works of Clark (2011, 2012) and Petersen (2016) by providing more concrete foundations for developing an Indigenous Australian public relations theoretical framework. To begin with, we define Indigenous Australian public relations as:

*The deliberate act of establishing and maintaining relationships between stakeholders, incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait*

*Islander cultural protocols and values and/or communicating for social change and self-determination with and/or on behalf of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.*

By moving beyond the simplistic Western-epistemic definitions of public relations (Public Relations Institute of Australia, 2019), this new definition demonstrates the importance of centering Indigenous cultural practices, relationships, and self-determination/agency within Indigenous public relations.

This paper has expanded upon existing research by sharing the perspectives, narratives and standpoints from five Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in public relations and communications. The paper centered on their lived experiences within the public relations discipline and posed the question “What are your experiences and roles working in Indigenous Australian public relations?” From this, the paper identified seven key themes from the data, themes that can be argued to theoretically guide future Indigenous Australian public relations research and practice and contribute back to Indigenous communities by promoting Indigenous self-determination. The following Indigenous Australian public relations theoretical framework is outlined with its respective call to actions for both non-Indigenous public relations professionals and researchers:



**Figure 1.** Indigenous Australian public relations theoretical framework

*Versatility: Undertaking multiple roles and functions within Indigenous Australian public relations*

Public relations is not the only term used in this field; communications is used interchangeably, and multiple roles such as marketing are utilized within public relations. The public relations academy needs to continue to consider the relevancy and/or implications of more diverse and versatile roles out in practice, and what this means for the profession. This is especially the case for cultural organisations, and organisations that don't align with dominant Western paradigms.

*Indigenous Philosophy: Understanding the lived experiences of Indigeneity and cultural nuances*

Discuss with each Indigenous group on the best method and set of ethics to work within their organisation or community. Start the initial process by exploring ethical research documents such as the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) *Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies* (2020). Also consult closely with local Indigenous representatives and organization to become aware of localized protocols and cultural practices.

*Indigenous Justice: Utilising public relations as a vehicle for social change and activism*

Consider the actions of your public relations approaches as benefiting Indigenous peoples and communities. The public relations academy needs to continue considering the relevancy and/or implications of utilizing public relations for social change and activism, and how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities can provide rich knowledges in this area of public relations.

*Indigenous storytelling: Being a storyteller*

Take on the approach of storytelling in your public relations practice. The public relations academy needs to continue considering the relevancy of more in-depth storytelling within public relations, and how the public relations academy can build on storytelling theory from Indigenous knowledges.

*Indigenous diplomacy: Communicating between two worlds*

Consider the limitations of public relations theories and methods when communicating between Indigenous and western audiences. The public relations academy needs to continue to explore the relevancy and/or implications of diplomacy in public relations, particularly in cross-cultural communications.

*Interrelatedness: Establishing and maintaining relationships and dialogue*

Ensure that communication is two-way and consistent with the protocols of the Indigenous community and group you are working with. When working with Indigenous peoples, communities and organizations, first establish two-way communication, followed by the Indigenous protocols provided to you.

*Narrative empowerment: Advancing positive stories in the media and public*

Consider in your work how public relations can help in framing positive narratives for Indigenous peoples and communities, both in the media and the general public. Take on a social justice approach, where you are working towards limiting the negative narratives and stories of Indigenous peoples and communities. See handbooks on Indigenous ethics

and protocols within journalism/media for more insight into this approach (Leach, James, McManus & Thompson, 2012; Media Diversity Australia, 2018; Waller, 2010).

#### **4.6. Conclusion and recommendations**

This paper contributes towards the development of a more substantial understanding of Indigenous Australian public relations by centering the voices of five Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in public relations and communications. Resulting from the standpoints of Indigenous women, this paper has developed an Indigenous Australian public relations definition and theoretical framework for Indigenous and non-Indigenous public relations practitioners and academics to utilize and share within the profession. However, while research in the field of Indigenous Australian public relations is increasing, it is critical to recognize that further work is needed. For instance, there is a gap in scholarship on the role public relations can play in framing positive narratives (with the media and through the public relations activities of events, publications, community engagement, and speeches) and also the relevancy of the Indigenous public sphere and its relation to public relations. Research on activist and protest practices in public relations exists (Adi, 2018), yet there is a lack of knowledge on the power of public relations for Indigenous individuals and activists (the public relations activities Indigenous individuals and activists undertake).

Lack of scholarship also exists on the perspectives on Indigenous feminism and Indigenous women's issues in Australian public relations - women's standpoints in Australian public relations are emerging, but almost solely from non-Indigenous narratives and research (see the works of Kate Fitch and Marianne Sison). The

intersection between gender and Indigeneity is a critical issue within the wider Indigenous studies setting (Behrendt, 1993; Moreton-Robinson, 2003), and thus should also be carefully considered within public relations. Finally, a prevalent element from the literature review research involved an urban based approach, which only minimally represents the contextual complexities of Indigenous Australian public relations. Therefore, research on Indigenous Australian public relations in rural and remote areas of Australia is also needed. There is richness in Indigenous Australian public relations, and this paper calls for further research and literature from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to continue privileging and/or asserting Indigenous ways of being and doing in public relations.

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**5. “I want to create change; I want to create impact”: Indigenous Australian PR women’s narratives and framings of personal activism**

**Preamble:**

I have had many career passions. Along with wanting to be either an Archaeologist or Historian, I also wanted to be a Paediatrician or Environmental Scientist. It wasn't until my later teen years that I settled on journalism to help with ending the media and public negative narratives and deficit discourses targeting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, cultures, and practices.

In my journey to becoming a journalist, I applied to journalism at the University of South Australia but failed to get the required marks for entrance. I felt despondent but aimed to get into journalism by other means. I applied for a bridging program, which provided students with foundational knowledges and skills to succeed at university. Towards the end of the year long program, I found an advertisement in the South Australian Sunday paper about a new degree – the Bachelor of Public Relations. In that moment, I knew that I wanted to study public relations rather than journalism; I had had the insight that public relations could additionally contribute to positive news creation and strength-based narratives, but with the creativity and strategy of developing campaigns and events. Public relations I decided could also allow me to work for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation, or on a campaign, and directly help from that angle.

Ultimately, through my different jobs and positions I was able and continued to contribute to social change for Indigenous peoples. Some of my favourite experiences were developing stories on educational successes or people's life stories and wisdoms. The following chapter provides insight into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's personal stances of activism and how it overlaps with their profession dedication to a public relations for social change. The chapter continues with the description and

definition of Indigenous Australian public relations, but expands on the critical public relations notion of activism and how activism applies within the personal lives of communication professionals.

For me, this chapter was momentous to write. As an Aboriginal woman from public relations, I have noticed the significance of activism and community work in our discipline, and it was significant for me to provide context to it in the academic space. I hope that this chapter achieves a reconceptualization of activism within public relations, and how activism can be integral to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

**Abstract:**

The role of activism has significance within the specialization of Indigenous Australian public relations as a strategy for creating change and giving back to Indigenous peoples and communities. Yet, there is a dearth of information on the activist practices of Indigenous women employed in public relations, including how, when and why they are used. Therefore, this paper aims to help fill this gap by exploring the activism practices that Indigenous public relations women have used in their personal lives. By considering personal activism from the perspectives of Indigenous women working in public relations we can further conceptualize activism within the profession. Through the critical lens of Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory, and utilizing an Indigenous yarning method, five Indigenous women discuss their definitions of activism and the varying ways that they perform activism within their personal lives. This paper builds upon notions of activism within public relations and demonstrates the power of public relations to effect social change for Indigenous peoples and others.

**Keywords:**

Indigenous; public relations; activism; women; Australia

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## **5.1. Introduction**

The concept of activism can be defined as “the process of campaigning in public or working for an organization in order to bring about political or social change” (Collins Dictionary, 2020). Within public relations, activism can be considered in several ways; from the alternative approaches of activism as an integral component of the profession (and one which has the power to influence social change) to the traditional notions of activism (and the strategies of activists) as an organizational function of issues management (Coombs & Holladay, 2007, 2012; Demetrious, 2013; Dutta & Thaker, 2019; Heath & Waymer, 2009; L’Etang, 2016; Pieczka, 2016; Weaver, 2018). As an integral component and strategy of critical and postmodern standpoints, activist public relations illustrates power, change, and persuasion and confronts the dynamics of Eurocentric and capitalist public relations structures (Adi, 2018; Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Holtzhausen, 2012; Weaver, 2018).

Research on activism within the Australian public relations contexts highlights an absence of Indigenous perspectives within mainstream literature (Ali et al., 2016; Demetrious, 2013; Robertson & Crawford, 2018; Wolf, 2018). Likewise, of the research that engages with Indigenous Australian public relations and activism (Clark, 2012; Clark et al., 2019; Fitch, 2020a; Johnston et al., 2018; Petersen, 2016; Sakinofski et al., 2019), Indigenous women’s empirical narratives and contributions are scarcely visible within scholarship. Especially absent are the varying perspectives and positions of Indigenous women’s activism practices within organizations and the leverage of public relations by Indigenous women activists. Although there is an emergence of research on women’s and feminist approaches in activist public relations (Dutta & Thaker, 2019; Edwards, 2018;

Edwards et al., 2020; O'Brien, 2018; Vardeman et al., 2020) and on Indigenous Australian women within broader activism studies (Carlson & Frazer, 2016; Dudgeon & Bray, 2016), they are either not Indigenous focused or described as public relations strategies.

This paper will, therefore, explore the personal lives and narratives of Indigenous women working within Australian public relations and aims to provide further understandings of how activism within public relations contexts is shaped by Indigenous women's worldviews and ideological positionings (Weaver, 2018). In attempting to engage with and link the theoretical stances of critical, socio-cultural, postmodern, postcolonial, and decolonial public relations to the practice of Indigenous Australian public relations, this paper will expand on activism concepts within the public relations sphere and explore how the profession can be reconceptualized through further alternative narratives and positions.

## **5.2. Literature review**

### *5.2.1. Alternative thoughts in public relations: critical, postmodern, postcolonial and decolonial activism*

Critical, postmodern, postcolonial, and decolonial public relations positions encourage the examination of power within the profession and engage with notions of public relations benefit to society (Edwards, 2014; Edwards & Hodges, 2011; Heath et al., 2009; Holtzhausen, 2012; McKie & Munshi, 2007). As such, activism within public relations emerged in the 1980s from scholars of alternative thought who critiqued the silencing of

historical and contemporary activism narratives and challenged the corporate view of public relations (Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Weaver, 2018).

Critical and postmodern concerns with the unbalance of power see to a reconceptualization of public relations from the current corporatist and organisational landscapes to a profession that considers activism as a holistic and prominent function of public relations (Robertson & Crawford, 2018; Coombs & Holladay, 2007, 2012; Heath & Waymer, 2009; Holtzhausen, 2012; L'Etang, 2015; Pieczka, 2016; Weaver, 2014). Critical public relations scholars argue activism has been an early conductor within the public relations discipline and that agencies and corporations appropriated public relations when they deemed it applicable to their practices (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). They Postmodern scholars, including Derina Holtzhausen (2012), further debate that all public relations practitioners are activists themselves, both internally and externally to their organizations (Adi & Lilleker, 2017; Sen, 2014; Toledano, 2016). Within postmodern terms of thought, Holtzhausen and Voto (2002, p. 63) claim that the “postmodern practitioner also can assist the organization itself to become activist by resisting dominant and harmful power in society in general”.

Postcolonial and decolonial positions of interrogation focus attention on the benefits of public relations to minoritized groups and global indigenous communities, along with the leverage of public relations in resistance efforts against organizations or historical colonial powers (Dutta, 2012; Dutta & Elers, 2019; Dutta & Thaker, 2019; Kim & Dutta, 2009; Munshi et al., 2017; Sejrup, 2014; Sison, 2016). One example of activism in the postcolonial context highlights the Indian alliance *Niyamgiri Surakshya Samiti* [NSS], which, in resisting a mining operation and engaging communities, organized various



activist strategies (Dutta & Elers, 2019). These resistance strategies included the organization of community members, evaluation of community participation, direct opposition to the mining company's community engagement efforts, and tactical use of protests, marches and performances (Dutta & Elers, 2019).

The research from critical, postmodern, postcolonial, and decolonial public relations demonstrates emerging insights into activism concepts within the profession and from varying nations. Given the strong privileging of colonization within public relations, alternative positions center the interrogation of whiteness and colonial practices within the profession (Dutta, 2016; Munshi, 2005; Sison, 2016). Yet, there is still an absence of research into Indigenous Australian activism perspectives (and Indigenous Australian decolonial lenses) within public relations contexts (Clark, 2012; Clark et al., 2019; Fitch, 2020a; Petersen, 2016; Sakinofski et al., 2019). Considering the rich and vital First Nations standpoints within public relations theory and practice, including the strong research from our Māori New Zealand neighbors (Dutta & Elers, 2019; Love & Tilley, 2014; Munshi et al., 2011), further study of Indigenous Australian practices is essential in building on and conceptualizing activism frameworks.

### 5.2.2. *Activism practices within Indigenous Australian public relations*

Activism has an integral role within the profession of Indigenous Australian public relations and encompasses organizations, informal groups, and individuals who are campaigning and working toward change (Clark et al., 2019). Indigenous Australian public relations is very much about the self-determination to reinforce healthy cultures, communities, families, and peoples (Clark et al., 2019). Strategies of activism described

within Indigenous Australian public relations literature demonstrate a fundamental purpose to support social change and equity and to combat negative reporting of Indigenous peoples (Clark, 2012; Clark et al., 2019; Fitch, 2020a; Johnston et al., 2018; Petersen, 2016; Sakinofski et al., 2019).

The mainstream media has an ongoing history of discounting Indigenous stories or promoting deficit discourses/negative narratives of Indigenous peoples, while Indigenous-owned and led media attempt to choose and frame stories in a culturally appropriate and empowered way (Bacon, 2005; Proudfoot & Habibis, 2015; Thomas et al., 2019). Sakinofski et al. (2019) examined a case study of Indigenous people's utilization of public relations and activism in the late 1990s against mining endeavors and their difficulty in securing positive news stories within mainstream news outlets. To acquire media coverage of their bid to stop mining on their land, the Aboriginal Adnyamathanha nation in South Australia collaborated with the *Greens Party*, the *Australian Conservation Foundation*, the *Anti-Nuclear movement*, and *Flinders Ranges Aboriginal Heritage Consultative Committee* to form the *Alliance Against Uranium* as a means for collective sharing of strategies, skills, and resources (Sakinofski et al., 2019). As this movement was formed prior to the advent of social media, the Alliance advocated their anti-mining positions via media releases, blogs, spokespeople, media coverage, a public forum, an on-site protest (known as the "Beverley Bash"), and two public events (Sakinofski et al., 2019).

The public relations strategies utilized on social media by Indigenous peoples and activists demonstrate insight into skills of communicating messages and promoting causes (Carlson et al., 2017; Carlson & Frazer, 2016; Sweet et al., 2013; Hutchings &

Rodger, 2018; Petray, 2013). Within Indigenous Australian public relations scholarship there is little detailed information about social media activism practices; however, Petersen's (2016) research provides some insight into these practices within Indigenous organizations. From the perspectives of the public relations officers working in seven Aboriginal community-controlled organizations, Petersen (2016) recognized that the social media practices revolved around e-marketing, networking, event promotion, and the Facebook platform. Examples of social media activism in the broader Indigenous public sphere include hashtag movements and extensive campaigning. For example, the Twitter hashtag #Indigenousdads came about as a result of the pushback to a racist news cartoon by Bill Leak (which depicted Indigenous dads as unfit and incapable of raising children). This led to a barrage of positive imagery shared online that showcased Indigenous dads with their families (Carlson et al., 2017). Further, in response to the Western Australian government's forced closure of up to 150 Aboriginal communities, the movement #SOSBLAKAUSTRALIA generated strong global awareness via social media (Carlson & Frazer, 2016; Cook, 2015). This movement operated across digital and traditional media platforms and harnessed worldwide marches through its international arm of *Global Call to Action* (Carlson & Frazer, 2016; Cook, 2015).

From these examples, Indigenous peoples and Indigenous organizations can leverage media campaigns and social media movements to highlight self-determination and positive and empowering stories. Indigenous strength and empowerment is a critical discourse that must be encouraged; for instance, Petersen (2016, p. 64) identified community events as a useful forum to counteract negative portrayals and promote "positive reconciliation." These texts provide some insight into Indigenous Australian public relations activism practices, yet far more research and scholarship is needed to

achieve a well-rounded examination of how public relations activism is used and experienced. This is especially true of the role of Indigenous women in public relations positions or those utilizing public relations strategies. Given the lack of Indigenous Australian women's narratives of public relations work, we must consider all women's roles and contributions of activism to the profession and how gender influences the strategies of activism within public relations.

### 5.2.3. *Women's and feminist activism within public relations*

The emergence of women's perspectives within public relations has tended to focus heavily on the burgeoning overrepresentation of women in a profession that privileges men in senior roles and higher salaries, along with an examination and exploration of the issues and practices that impact women working within (and/or utilizing) public relations (Demetrius, 2014; Dutta & Thaker, 2019; Edwards, 2018; Edwards et al., 2020; Fitch, 2020b; O'Brien, 2018; Pain, 2020; Vardeman et al., 2020; Weaver, 2014). Some public relations scholars, in moving away from concepts of organizational public relations (such as the dominant paradigm/Excellence theory), and the consideration of activism as an issues management function only, call for further examination of gendered approaches to activist public relations (Edwards, 2018; Edwards et al., 2020; Vardeman et al., 2020).

The practices of activism within Western women's and feminist public relations contexts demonstrate homogenous campaigns, historical figures and social media practices (Edwards et al., 2020; O'Brien, 2018; Vardeman et al., 2020; Weaver, 2014). The New Zealand "Mothers Against Genetic Engineering" campaign targeted mothers as the main purchasers of food bought for the household/children and as a channel to create change.

Their activities included a six-course fundraising banquet, a campaign to force supermarkets to label food with genetic engineering ingredients (“purse power”), and a controversial genetic engineering billboard to create shock value (Weaver, 2014). Social media practices from six women employed at *Rape Crisis England & Wales* indicated social media as a double-edged sword for women employed in the organization (Edwards et al., 2020). They warned of the negative ramifications of adopting a potentially controversial voice when using the organization’s social media accounts and noted resolution through creation of individual social media accounts (separate to their organization where they could speak more politically) (Edwards et al., 2020). Although the “Mother’s Against Genetic Engineering” campaign utilized unique public relations and communications efforts to highlight genetic engineering, it lacked awareness of intersectionality, as it predominately targeted white, middle class mothers. Likewise, within the *Rape Crisis England & Wales* research, women of color were not identified and the themes resulting from this double-edged sword of social media were homogenous.

The activist public relations experiences involving women of color have privileged the acknowledgment of historical figures and contemporary localized case studies (Dutta & Thaker, 2019; Pain, 2020; Vardeman et al., 2020). The narratives and contributions toward the Civil Rights movement predominately emphasize the public relations roles of the men, and discount or superficially acknowledge the women behind the scenes (Vardeman et al., 2020). Vardeman et al. (2020) argue that Rosa Parks had a strong role within the Civil Rights movement yet is far more known for her involvement in the 1950s Montgomery Bus Boycott. Dutta and Thaker’s (2019) research on the resistance efforts of Indian women farmers against introduced Western models of agriculture/neoliberal

agriculture in the 1990s described the women's various communication structures. In collaboration with the *Deccan Development Society* (DDS), the women farmers targeted and advocated to policy makers, universities, the media, and community members and promoted movement toward a "sovereignty of seeds" through annual seed events, decentering colonial knowledge production, decolonizing western individualized farming practices, and recentering community support (Dutta & Thaker, 2019). The silencing of Black women's contributions and experiences within the Civil Rights movement demonstrate layered meanings of social class, patriarchal dominance, and oppressional effects. Equally, in the study from Dutta and Thaker (2019), the research is produced from men's standpoints and is lacking Indian women's direct voices.

These women's and feminist roles and contributions to public relations activism demonstrate instances of how gender can impact on the recognition of roles, standpoints of research, and freedom of speech. The Western illustrations strongly reinforce the need for further intersectional examinations in public relations and activism and the recognition of women's contributions that may be silenced. The women of color examples demonstrate the concern of hidden women, which is especially relevant in Indigenous Australian contexts (Dudgeon & Bray, 2016). There is a gap within the Indigenous Australian public relations literature on Indigenous women's narratives and standpoints and, given that Indigenous women experience intersectional oppressions (Moreton-Robinson, 2013), Indigenous women's theoretical frameworks need to be addressed to further understand the complexities and contexts that may impact women working within, and utilizing, public relations.

### 5.3. Research approach

#### 5.3.1. Positioning: Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory

Through the lenses of ontology (ways of being), epistemology (ways of knowing), and axiology (ways of doing), we contextualize our worldviews and knowledges to inform our positioning and methodology (Morton-Robinson, 2013). As we, the co-authors, are Indigenous women, our positionings as Indigenous women and our representations within a modern patriarchal and Eurocentric nation, are intersectional. This is further explained by Quandamooka woman Aileen Morton-Robinson (2013, p. 339):

*our experiences will differ because as Indigenous women our social location within hierarchical relations of ruling within our communities and Australian society also factors into our standpoint as researchers within the academy as does our different disciplinary training.*

Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory is embedded throughout this paper, from the development of the literature review, to the research methods of data collection, and importantly, through the privileging of narratives of the Indigenous women participants (Morton-Robinson, 2013). The chosen research approach reflects the lead author's values as an Indigenous woman and the privileging of ethical Indigenous research protocols through use of an Indigenous Yarning method and resulting thematic analysis. To privilege the narratives of the Indigenous women participants, and to ensure context is not distorted, long quotations are included to enable the women's voices to remain intact and their stories to be fully told. The influence of Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory

within this research was integral in critiquing colonial and patriarchal constructions of public relations and centering the positions and voices of Indigenous women.

### 5.3.2. *Participants*

Five Indigenous women participated in this research, and are identified under the pseudonyms of Susan, Debra, Stacey, Lily, and Nicole. The women were sourced through both existing contacts of the researcher/lead author and cold-emailing or messaging on LinkedIn. Consent forms were provided to all of the Indigenous women participants outlining the collaborative and ethical role of the research. This research paper is based on a PhD dataset of the narratives of Indigenous Australian women working within public relations. There are four papers resultant from the dataset that together explore the complexities of the practice of Australian public relations for Indigenous women. The Indigenous participants discuss the value of public relations as a career and share their positive and negative experiences within the profession. This particular paper presents and evaluates the women's intersectional narratives of what activism, both within and outside of working contexts, means to them as Indigenous women.

### 5.3.3. *Method*

An integral aim of an Indigenous research methodological approach must be to privilege the voices and lived experiences of Indigenous participants throughout the entire research (Rigney, 1997). Indigenous research methodologies strongly advocate for collaboration, in this case allowing the women to tell their stories their own way, to review their own transcripts and/or journal papers, and also to determine whether to participate as co-



researchers. Yarning, as an Indigenous research method, was selected to gather voices in a culturally appropriate and respectful manner and to promote and advocate familiarity, collaboration, and the idea of co-researching (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010).

The research method of Indigenous yarning took the form of a semi-structured interview approach with broad themes to guide the knowledge exchange. The question “How do you view, and take part in, Indigenous activism today?”, posed with cues to spark ideas, generated conversation. Presents representing a gift card and a pair of *Haus of Dizzy* ([www.hausofdizzy.com](http://www.hausofdizzy.com)) Aboriginal flag earrings, were exchanged at the beginning or end of each yarning session to represent and symbolize collaboration, gratitude and Indigenous women’s solidarity. The yarning sessions were audio-recorded and carried out one-on-one with the lead author and were transcribed and authenticated through an initial audit of transcripts. From this, early themes were noted, followed by a major thematic data analysis with use of NVIVO software. Evaluation of data followed the six-phase guide of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which promotes becoming familiar with the data (1); generating initial codes (2); searching for emerging themes (3); reviewing themes (4); defining themes (5); and conducting the write-up (6).

#### **5.4. Results and discussion**

The women in this study live in mid-to large-sized Australian cities and are university graduates with degrees in communications, media, or journalism. The women chose public relations as a career for its ability to create change and advocate self-determination for Indigenous peoples and communities. The majority of the women identify as Indigenous feminists, which as an ideology resists the various levels of oppression

(racism, sexism, classism) that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experience (Behrendt, 1993; Fredericks, 2004; Huggins, 1987; Moreton-Robinson, 2000). All of the women explained what activism means to them and detailed how they express activism in their personal lives. The following three themes emerged from the findings: i. Indigeneity as activism; ii. Connections of Indigeneity, professional activism and personal activism; and iii. Communicating Indigeneity and personal activism through fashion.

#### 5.4.1. *Indigeneity as activism*

The five women related to activism from their lived experiences, whether as an Indigenous person or woman, their values of giving back to community, and their perception of activism roles.

For instance, from an admiration of street protests as a child, Nicole linked this stereotypical image of activism with her current choice of work:

*I guess initially I thought of activism like the standard protesters out on the street. The 60s/70s protesters, which I've idolized since I was a kid. Then it started with public relations. So, in a way, it was activism in my mind, but a modern... I wouldn't say a modern form, but another form.*

Stacey created her own business to give back and create change:

*I'm interested in business as a force for positive change. And so, you know, some people wouldn't see that as activism at all ... I'm definitely somebody that wants to create impact, whether people view that or*

*whether I kind of use the term activism I guess, is different, but I want to create change, I want to create impact.*

Susan also strongly related to the concept of activism as giving back to community:

*That's what activism is for me. Using the skills that you have to best use within your community. I've always done that, whether it be dancing, or whether it be writing or singing, you're still an activist for doing your stories ... In actual fact, I call myself a storyteller, because I feel like that's more appropriate for what I do. I don't care what the medium is, I'll just tell a story.*

Susan elaborated by considering the connection between activism and Indigeneity:

*Activist. That's funny – well not funny, because I thought how do you take part in Indigenous activism? I don't really, I'm not an activist. But, I think, being Indigenous makes you an activist.*

Debra, although not defining activism, outlined her career motivation:

*I don't want to do communications for profit. I don't want to do selling Coca-Cola or makeup or lollies or anything like that. I want to be doing comms for a purpose.*

Lily detailed the natural activist role for Indigenous peoples, especially within her type of work:

*Obviously at work, you're constantly, you know, whether you like it or not, you are in that activism space, because I think Indigenous people*

*are constantly in a state of activism. So, it's just a pretty natural thing for a lot of blackfullas [Indigenous]. But, particularly with comms people, it [activism] just makes sense for that to cross over. I mean, you see with, the black [Indigenous] journos and the people who are linked in with the media, they're just automatically in an activist role, whether they like it or not.*

The women's definitions of activism demonstrate and reiterate that public relations is a channel for them to create change and give back to Indigenous communities (Clark et al., 2019; Fitch, 2020a; Johnston et al., 2018; Peterson, 2016). Giving back to community is an existing Indigenous ethical notion of reciprocity and often asserted within Indigenist research and guidelines (see AIATSIS, 2020; Rigney, 1997). Public relations scholar Weaver (2018, p. 24) highlighted that “[w]hen we examine and theorize activism, we need to be clear about how we are defining it, as well as about how we are defining public relations”, and the Indigenous women in this paper provide insight into how Indigeneity influences their theorizing of activism.

The notions of living in a constant state of Indigeneity and Indigeneity rendering you an automatic activist were relevant ideas professed by both Lily and Susan. Within Australian public relations scholarship, this theme is not explicitly considered; however, it has been expressed by Indigenous peoples on activism and resistance (Dudgeon & Bray, 2016; Pearson, 2017). Aboriginal Gamilaroi man Luke Pearson (2017), the creator of the highly successful and influential Indigenous social media platform *IndigenousX*, considered why Indigeneity could be viewed as an extension of activism:

*To me an Aboriginal activist is not just anyone with an opinion, and it isn't even anyone willing to get arrested or march down a street. Activism is a set of skills, a set of strategies. It is about responding to the failings and limitations of our society with purpose and conviction, and offering alternatives.*

In another view, Aboriginal Bardi woman Pat Dudgeon and non-Indigenous woman Abigail Bray (2016, p. 2472) both articulate that “[...] given the multiple layers of oppression that Aboriginal women experience, the very act of living is a form of resistance in itself.” This is a unique perspective that wasn’t explicitly mentioned from the women and they didn’t detail the connection of Indigeneity and womanhood. This concept was vaguely covered by the same women in a separate paper on their experiences working in public relations (Clark et al., 2021). The women touched on working within Western contexts and white men in public relations and the gender issues that result from this (Clark et al., 2021).

In considering Pearson’s point about a set of skills and a set of strategies as activism, an Indigenous public relations practitioner who leverages their public relations skillset for social change is indeed an activist. The added layer of gender also complicates understandings of who an activist is, especially considering the quote of Dudgeon and Bray (2016) that describes Indigenous women as “living acts of resistance.” Ultimately, the Indigenous women in this study consider their work as activism and by extension see themselves as activists. These findings, therefore, provide insight into the practices of activism within professional and personal contexts and suggest the idea of further

research into the concept of the public relations practitioner as an activist (Adi & Lilleker, 2017; Holtzhausen, 2012; Sen, 2014; Toledano, 2016).

#### 5.4.2. *Connections of Indigeneity, professional activism and personal activism*

All of the five women have skills and experiences in public relations that are useful in their personal lives, including writing articles, networking with media contacts, and applying social media expertise. Two of the women provided specific insight into the crossover of activism practices within their personal lives, whether that included traditional forms such as face-to-face protest or media activities.

Lily described the forms of activism that she is personally involved in:

*You're always involved in activism in some way, you know, going to protests or going to community events and involved in that stuff all the time ... I do like using the platform of Twitter to try and put out perspectives or information and any sort of interesting view that maybe hasn't been thought about.*

Lily, expanded on her personal media tactics and the importance of media knowledges for Indigenous women:

*[...] writing articles for NITV [National Indigenous Television] and The Guardian [Indigenous allied media] and stuff like that I think that's important, particularly for an Indigenous woman to be having that platform as well I think is a good thing.*

Lily's relation to the importance of Indigenous women having a media platform was not expanded upon further, but within public relations scholarship there is strong and emerging discussion on the importance of women's voices and roles (Demetrius, 2014; Dutta & Thaker, 2019; Edwards, 2018; Edwards et al., 2020; Fitch, 2020b, 2020c; Pain, 2020; Vardeman et al., 2020; Weaver, 2014).

In her personal life, Debra promotes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture on social media platforms and originally came into this work after noticing a demand for these Indigenous stories. She explained:

*[...] that's sort of how I started, because I was writing for NITV and Koori Mail and I covered [Indigenous stories], so I would write a lot about it for other blogs including American blogs and one in Asia.*

Both Lily and Debra acknowledged different forms of activism and the importance of social and print media—suggesting a seamless continuation of their work into their personal lives. While Nicole, Susan, and Stacey did not expand on their extracurricular activist work outside of their day jobs, it is important to note that they undertake various public speaking roles, writing pieces, and taking on board positions in advocating for and promoting Indigenous peoples and cultures. Implicitly, these activities may be seen to include activist elements. For example, Nicole is emerging in her career and is accepting guest speaker spots. Susan has a wide range of experiences and skills and speaks at conference speaking, writes articles for the media, and does consulting work. Stacey is a regular guest speaker and a known presence within the field; she is frequently asked for advice and contacts and is a member of several boards.

The women's personal work reiterates the theme of living activism, as the women are continuous activists in the public space. Given that Indigeneity is connected to activism it is clear that the women in this study do continue their professional work into their personal lives. Women's roles in public relations and activism additionally raises concerns of wellbeing and emotional labor (Bridgen, 2011; Yeomans, 2019) and how the work of professional and personal activism can take a toll on mental health (Bridgen, 2011; Clark et al., 2021; Edwards et al., 2020; Pain, 2020). For instance, Lily described her concerns when reflecting on how her activism role can affect her personal life:

*I think - I'm very sort of careful about how much or what I do. Mostly because I could just go down a rabbit hole with it and really occupy so much of your time. You're already doing that at your day job and, so you - I kind of have to be in the head space to want to do it outside of work. But, it just happens naturally all the time.*

From these findings we must further explore emotional labor and wellbeing in terms of Indigeneity, professional activism and personal activism. This also relates to activities and channels that are beneficial for Indigenous women's mental health and wellbeing. Some of the women related the connection of fashion and the conscious effort of communicating a unique persona, gender, and Indigeneity through clothing and dress.

#### 5.4.3. *Communicating Indigeneity and personal activism through fashion*

Fashion and clothing can often be viewed as trivial or superficial, but like social media platforms and events, fashion has the power to communicate a message through the body in its adornments and wearable forms (Barnard, 2003; Fitch 2020b; Motion, 2020;



Widders Hunt, 2020). This is evident through the personal activism and messages communicated by fashion practices explained in the narratives of Lily and Debra. For instance, Lily stated her love of jewelry and its role in communication:

*I love wearing jewelry and that's just such a perfect way of, you know, making a statement ... in the last few years because of Haus of Dizzy, I think that's been a really good way of wearing cute earrings but with the Aboriginal flag on them. Because, you couldn't get anything like that before.*

Lily continued, mentioning her choice to wear an Aboriginal flag t-shirt and how this is an expression of activism:

*And, I'll often, if I'm going to events, I've got an Aboriginal flag T-shirt that I love wearing. I think sometimes you do try and dress, like, use dress to — as a form of activism.*

Debra discussed wearing a political slogan t-shirt as a child and her early involvement with social movements:

*I actually have a t-shirt with a bear on it that says, 'I want to grow up, not blow up. Stop nuclear power.' So, from a very young age, I was exposed and participated a lot.*

Continuing into adulthood, Debra acknowledged the significant role of fashion for Indigenous activism and storytelling:

*.... fashion is another creative avenue that is a place for activism, a place for storytelling, and I think fashion is a way that we wear stories in history.*

Both Lily and Debra recognize that fashion and jewelry can be a tool to express activism. This aligns with the voices of other Indigenous peoples on the function of Indigenous fashion as a powerful means of communication and protest (Hayman, 2015; Miller et al., 2002; Widders Hunt, 2020). For instance, Aboriginal Kalkadoon and Wakka Wakka woman Amanda Hayman (2015, p. 45) states that “Fashion is one area through which cultural identity can be expressed, and it can indeed be a powerful statement”. Further, as part of the 2000-2007 Australian Powerhouse museum exhibition *Bayagul: contemporary Indigenous communication*, which showcased Indigenous communication through fashion and design, media practices, tourism, and the performing arts, Miller et al. (2002, p. 21) stated:

*[t]he phrase “a fashion statement” is the strongest indication of the communication power of fashion and design. Fashion can make social and political statements, be an economic indicator or simply state ‘I am here’—a phrase that resonates with Indigenous people.*

Fashion can also be a strategic practice in resisting patriarchal views and gendered narratives through Indigenous women’s bodies (see Aboriginal Wiradjuri woman Kristy Dickinson’s brand *Haus of Dizzy*). Public relations research on the language of fashion and the body is emerging and usually points to Eurocentric patriarchal notions of body image and appearance (Demetrius, 2014; Fitch, 2020b, 2020c; Kriyantono & Rakhmawati, 2020; Motion, 2020; O’Byrne, 2010). Little exists in scholarship on the

activism effects of fashion within public relations contexts - although Weaver's (2014) research on genetic engineering highlighted the use of a controversial billboard (a western woman mimicking a cow to imply the genetic engineering of humans) and its fashion and style context could have been expanded on in greater detail. Ultimately, as a strategic function, fashion can communicate an organizational message or brand (Kriyantono & Rakhmawati, 2020), or as evidenced by Lily and Debra, a cultural personal message that non-verbally communicates the stance and position of the wearer.

## **5.5. Conclusion**

The privileging and centering of Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory as a contextual position assists in grounding the critique of colonial and patriarchal constructions of public relations (Morton-Robinson, 2013). Through the lenses of ontology (ways of being), epistemology (ways of knowing) and axiology (ways of doing), the women's positions and worldviews of being an Indigenous woman were reflected within the stories they shared, their lived experiences working within Indigenous Australian public relations, and their activist skillsets practiced within their personal lives.

As Indigenous Australian women's voices have been lacking in public relations, this research is a forerunner in the privileging of Indigenous women's standpoints in public relations research. Through the voices of Indigenous women working in public relations, this paper defines three themes: *Indigeneity as activism*; *Connections of Indigeneity, professional activism and personal activism*; and *Communicating Indigeneity and personal activism through fashion*. These three themes are explicated below.

*Indigeneity as activism:* Public relations scholar Weaver (2018, p. 24) explains that “How we define public relations and activism, and the relationships between the two, is determined by our own world views, theoretical and political positions and beliefs, and allegiances”. The need to give back to community and the constant lived experience of Indigeneity provide both explicit and implicit activist roles for the Indigenous women. Together with the added layer of being a woman, and the intersectional oppressions that Indigenous women experience, it could be said that for the women “[t]he very act of living is a form of resistance in itself” (Dudgeon & Bray, 2016, p. 2472).

*Connections of Indigeneity, professional activism and personal activism:* Indigeneity as activism and the cultural values of communal and reciprocal responsibilities were related to notions of a public relations practitioner as an activist (Holtzhausen, 2012). The women all have public relations skills and experiences that they utilize in their personal lives, especially when performing activism in Indigenous contexts. These interchanging connections of professional and personal activism, however, do raise concerns of emotional labor, wellbeing, and the mental strain of maintaining a presence in a public forum or coping with abuse on social media (Bridgen, 2011; Clark et al., 2021; Edwards et al., 2020; Pain, 2020; Yeomans, 2019).

*Communicating Indigeneity and personal activism through fashion:* Fashion was identified as an extension of Indigeneity, being an external expression of their culture. Aligning with existing literature on Indigenous fashion communication practices, fashion and jewelry were highlighted as useful communication tools for activism. The findings reveal that within both Indigenous and public relations contexts, fashion can serve a function in resisting patriarchal structures and control. However, within Australian

scholarship, fashion as expressed in public relations still predominately speaks with the voices of Eurocentric women.

This paper has contributed to several research themes relevant to public relations by connecting Indigenous women's activist narratives to broader critical, postmodern, postcolonial, decolonial, and Indigenous Australian contexts. It presents current research on the activism practices that women Indigenous public relations professionals perform outside of their employment and suggests the need for further empirical research on the concept of the public relations practitioner as an activist. For Indigenous peoples, this paper advocates and encourages the leverage of public relations as a powerful vehicle for social change for individuals and activists. This paper has attempted to cover complex concepts, and we, the authors, argue for further culturally appropriate research on the public relations experiences of Indigenous activists – particularly the mental distress of Indigenous women who express activism across both professional and personal contexts.

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6. **“I liked that it could create social change and do good”:  
Indigenous Australian women’s motivations and perceptions of  
public relations as a career**



**Preamble:**

A narrative heard often is the lack of Indigenous peoples in public relations, a profession that could significantly improve the struggles for self-determination across many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

I pondered this conundrum way back in the introduction of my 2011 Honours thesis, and reiterated this as a significant issue given the strong role that public relations and communications can and does play in strengthening wider Australian communities. Fast forward to the current few years, and I reflected on this same problem when chatting to my Indigenous women research participants. This narrative of the significance and relevance of communications for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is growing stronger within organisations and communities. This is particularly the case for my current job working in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, and across general news articles on stronger awareness campaigns advocating for Indigenous social issues.

This chapter, therefore, provides an insight into how we can further develop the profession of public relations in terms of Indigenous representation. It follows on from the previous chapters in this thesis by delving into the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's career choices, rather than how they performed public relations and activism. This chapter specifically highlights the stories and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women entering and working within public relations and communications.

This chapter is relevant in understanding more about how to promote public relations as an essential discipline for Indigenous peoples, and the understanding of the motivations

and desires to work in a field that is so often misunderstood within the public consciousness. This chapter is significant for me as the Indigenous representation within the profession is slowly becoming larger, but further work needs to be done to increase our numbers. I hope that practical change can come out of the recommendations of this chapter and that knowledge of the power of public relations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities can be widespread.

**Abstract:**

The recognition of public relations as a viable Indigenous career path is currently lacking in education and employment reports but is starting to emerge in public relations scholarship. Within the broader study of Australian public relations, Indigenous women's specific positions and voices are notably absent, and this paper aims to contribute to an Indigenous women's perspective within the profession. This research, stemming from a larger study with five Indigenous women employed in the Australian public relations and communications space, examines public relations as a career through an Indigenous women's standpoint position and Indigenous yarning method. The research findings provide a voice for these Indigenous women, contextualizing their motivations for entering and working in public relations and suggesting the need for further Indigenous representation. In view of these findings, we suggest ways to promote public relations as a career to Indigenous peoples, especially women, and ways to embed Indigenous protocols within Australian public relations theory and practice.

**Keywords:**

Indigenous; Australia; women; public relations; career; education

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## **6.1. Introduction**

In the context of the Indigenous sphere, addressing public relations as an underrepresented industry and recognizing the profession as a conduit for social change is essential. According to the 2016 Australian census, health care and social support are the primary industries of choice (at 15%) for the employed Indigenous Australians aged from 15 to 64 years, followed by public administration and safety (12%), education and training (10%), construction (10%), and retail (9%) (ABS, 2017). Representations at the Australian university and tertiary level show similar enrolment figures for studies in health, education, and society and culture (Behrendt et al., 2012; Universities Australia, 2020). In contrast, Indigenous students are underrepresented in the specializations of management, accounting, commerce, engineering, veterinary science, and natural and physical sciences (Behrendt et al., 2012; Universities Australia, 2020). Indigenous Wiradjuri academic Sandy O'Sullivan (2019) suggests that these specializations may be underrepresented due to the perception that they do not support Indigenous communities or remedy perceived disadvantage.

Recent Australian research indicates that public relations can be a useful tool for social change and advocacy (Ali, Boddy, O'Leary & Ewart, 2016; Demetrious, 2013; Wolf, 2018), and, especially for Indigenous peoples, the public relations arena could offer powerful tools for combating negative stories and replacing these with more positive narratives (Clark et al., 2019; Fitch, 2020a; Johnston, Forde & Robertson, 2018; Petersen, 2016; Sakinofsky et al., 2019). While the career possibilities in public relations do not focus on current Indigenous education and employment reports, emerging research on Indigenous perspectives, strategies and stories do reveal increasing attention in the

relevant scholarship (Clark, 2011, 2012; Clark et al., 2019; Fitch, 2020a; Johnston, Forde & Robertson, 2018; Petersen, 2016; Sakinofsky et al., 2019). However, Indigenous women's experiences and voices are conspicuously absent from the literature of Australian public relations, and this research aims to correct this deficit. Examined through the lens of Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory (Moreton-Robinson, 2013) and using an Indigenous yarning method (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010), this paper provides context for considering the motivations and perceptions of Indigenous Australian women towards the possibility of a public relations career.

## **6.2. Literature review**

### *6.2.1. Intersectional women of color within Western/American public relations*

Intersectional public relations scholarship highlights the underrepresentation of ethnic and minority public relations practitioners and calls for greater diversity within the industry (Brown, Waymer & Zhou, 2019; Edwards, 2018; Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2017). One of the earliest works on minority issues within public relations focused on the growing presence of African American practitioners within the profession (Layton, 1980). Almost a decade later, Kern-Foxworth published numerous articles of the status and roles of both public relations practitioners of color (1989a), representations of people of color in early public relations academic textbooks (1990), and the perspectives of women of color within the profession (1989b). These foundational texts have contributed to the emergence and evolution of research on women of color in American public relations (Pompper, 2004, 2007; Tindall, 2009; Vardeman-Winter, 2011; Vardeman-Winter et al., 2013; Vardeman-Winter et al., 2014).

Pompper (2004) studied 28 African American women practitioners in public relations, examining how they related to and perceived the dominant paradigm of public relations/Excellence theory (Dozier, et al., 1995; Grunig, 1992). Pompper's (2004) research found that the women all had undergraduate degrees; however, the majority had not majored in public relations. This majority (68%) had degrees in media and communications and 25% had graduated in the humanities. Many of those formerly in media roles had naturally adjusted to and merged into public relations, due to dissatisfaction with their previous careers and/or desire to advocate on social issues. Pompper (2004, p. 282) reports:

*Several other discussants said they pursued public relations careers so that they could promote issues important to the African American community. A Chicago not-for-profit practitioner said: I have known since I was in eighth grade that I want to be in PR....I really went into PR to hold the media accountable.*

Pompper (2004, p. 284) outlined how some of the women identified stereotyping and "pigeonholing" as barriers in their public relations careers, stating "[o]n the other hand, some participants characterized the educator role as a second generation of the stereotypical 'token' function and were split as to whether they embrace it." Pigeonholing and tokenism for people of color in public relations can place them in a box of only working with stakeholders and/or strategies linked to the concerns of ethnic groups (Edwards, 2018). Pompper (2004, p. 284) alluded to one participant who described their role as being "the immediate expert on all issues Black". Workplace racism discussed in this study took the form of institutionalized discrimination, discounting of voices, and even unequal salaries. One of the participants described how others were reluctant to



listen to her voice in workplace meetings (Pompper, 2004). In attempting to address these concerns, the women changed their jobs, overcompensated within their work, or strategized by creating their own consultancy.

In research from the standpoints of 25 Hispanic/Latina women, Pomper (2007) utilized feminist standpoint theory to explore their working experiences within public relations. Nineteen of the women were university graduates and four had Masters degrees in various unspecified disciplines. The women had experienced gender/ethnicity discrimination from white colleagues and discrimination and/or sexism within their Hispanic cultural group. Cultural stress and pressure from societal expectations were also noted, such as difficulty with work–life balance. Within the workplace various issues were identified: racism, voicelessness, low pay, dressing in dark or neutral colors, to lessen their visibility and related harassment, and monitoring their every behavior in case it be misconstrued as sexualized. Pompper (2007) also found evidence for pigeonholing within the responses and noted that some of the women did not want to work exclusively with Hispanic audiences. Pompper (2007, p. 305) identified that “some Latinas embrace Anglos’ perceptions of them as ‘ethnic insiders’ and proudly promote their marketability as bilingual, HPR-savvy [Hispanic public relations-savvy] practitioners.” Although there is an existing Hispanic Public Relations Association, respondents expressed the need for a stronger voice to increase their status and representation (Pompper, 2007). The desire to own a consultancy was also a common theme: “Many said they hope to open their own agency, be their own boss, and pick and choose clients” while others “warned of ownership pressures” (Pompper, 2007, p. 301).

A majority female study from Tindall (2009) studied the perspectives from 12 African American public relations practitioners (11 females, 1 male). All the participants were college-educated, usually in fields of journalism or communications, and had taken various pathways into public relations. Some of the participants entered from journalism, some liked the creative and advocacy side, and others were attracted by the prospect of a salary and career advancement. In exploring the notion of workplace pigeonholing, Tindall revealed that “[f]ew practitioners were hired to communicate specifically with African American publics or minority audiences. The majority were hired to conduct ‘mainstream’ public relations efforts on behalf of their organization” (2009, p. 444). One of the women participants stated that “her career was not based on being a Black public relations professional” (Tindall, 2009, p. 444). Subtle examples of discrimination and racism were noted, including insensitive comments or behaviors from colleagues and stereotypical, pejorative opinions about African American people (Tindall, 2009). Five years after Pompper’s (2004) similar study, Tindall (2009, p. 444) acknowledged the dearth of public relations professionals of African American descent, noting that “several practitioners struggled to meet people of color who worked in public relations.”

Although research demonstrates the scarcity of both African American and Hispanic public relations practitioners (Pompper, 2004, 2007; Tindall, 2009), there are some public relations associations for professionals of color. For example, the Hispanic Public Relations Association (established in 1984) is dedicated to Hispanic needs and interests and professional advancement, while the National Black Public Relations Society (established in 1998) advocates for African American practitioners by providing support, mentoring, training, and networking opportunities. Although these examples demonstrate that research on women of color in public relations is emerging, several scholars argue

that most research on ethnicity and women of color occurs in Western countries and call for research from the locations of developing nations in the Global South (e.g., Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico) (Bachmann & Proust, 2020; Edwards, 2018). For example, Bachmann and Proust (2020) recently studied Global South feminist communication and called for more Indigenous voices in that region. Although Bachmann and Proust's (2020) focus is on Indigenous women in developing countries, Golombisky (2015) has highlighted the need to embrace all Indigenous feminist standpoints within the field of public relations.

#### *6.2.2. Intersectional and Indigenous women's voices within Australian public relations*

Calls for diversity from the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA, 2016) encourage increased representation in the profession from males (men under 25 years represent 18% of practitioners), LGBT practitioners, practitioners with disabilities, and Indigenous people. It is estimated that women account for around 70 percent of public relations professionals (Fitch & Third, 2010; Keating, 2016), yet only fill 20 percent of senior managerial roles (Fitch & Third, 2010; Wolf, 2016). This hybrid of overrepresentation and underrepresentation of women, particularly in relegated roles, has spurred a plethora of women's issues research on equal pay, sexism, and discrimination (Demetrius, 2014; Fitch, 2016a, 2016b, 2020b; Fitch & Third, 2010; Fitch, James & Motion, 2016; Johnston, 2010; Keating, 2016; Rea, 2002). However, while mainstream women's issues are emerging in research - as well as calls for greater diversity relating to men, sexualities, disabilities, and ethnicities - studies of the intersectional experiences of women of color have been minimal (Johnston, 2016; Keating, 2013; Sison, 2016). It is

particularly evident that the voices of Indigenous Australian women are unheard (Clark et al., 2019; Petersen, 2016).

In the context of Australian public relations, the intersectional considerations of women of color have explored positions of women's postcolonial and migrant experiences. For example, Keating (2013) studied public relations strategies within unions and migrant women as stakeholders, and Sison (2016) explored perceptions of the profession from a minority, postcolonial feminist voice. In her study of Australian public relations practice, Sison (2016) recounted anecdotal narratives (auto-ethnographical method) of gender, identity, and diversity within the industry. As a female Filipino migrant, Sison (2014, p. 192) dissected her experiences from an intersectional postcolonial feminist position, stating: "In considering how public relations might enable social justice and social change, a postcolonial feminist lens has been helpful in unpacking complex issues of gender, power and culture." Sison's (2014, 2016) work in articulating a postcolonial feminist standpoint in public relations and identifying its links to social justice and social change, is significant for highlighting the need to focus on Indigenous women's voices in public relations. Her call for increased Indigenous representation in the field of Australian public relations has similarly been echoed by Clark et al. (2019), Sakinofsky et al. (2019), and Wolf (2016).

Indigenous perspectives within Australian public relations reveal a recent emergence of research and practices within Aboriginal community-controlled organizations (Clark, 2011, 2012; Petersen, 2016), considerations of protocols (Clark et al., 2019), and media framing and activism (Fitch, 2020a; Johnston, Forde & Robertson, 2018; Sakinofsky et al., 2019). There is still a shortage of Indigenous women's specific perspectives; however,

some of their voices echo within certain broader studies (Clark et al., 2019; Petersen, 2016). Petersen's (2016) investigation briefly captured the voices of four Indigenous women employed in Australian public relations through a study with seven participants (one white male, two white women, four Indigenous women). Petersen (2016) noted that two out of the four Indigenous women had qualifications in either journalism/media or marketing and determined that two of them took on these roles to give back or to create change within the Indigenous community. The values of giving back to community are reflected in other research on Indigenous women's career motivations (see White, 2010) and Indigenous public relations texts (Clark et al., 2019). Additionally, this work highlighted that within Aboriginal Community Controlled Organizations there are often working conditions of long hours, low pay, and extra work (Petersen, 2016).

From these examples, it is clear that more intersectional studies, especially from Indigenous standpoints, is vital in the field of public relations to deepen societal understanding of the complexities and patterns of entrenched colonial power. Attention to diverse experiences and voices within Australian public relations is increasing; however, the continuing scarcity of Indigenous public relations professionals has been noted by several Australian scholars (Clark et al., 2019; Fitch, 2020a; Petersen, 2016; Sakinofsky, et al., 2019; Sison, 2016; Wolf, 2016). Further, despite Petersen's (2016) study, which described Indigenous women entering the profession to give back to community and create change, this research was neither Indigenous women-focused nor led by an Indigenous (or Indigenous woman) researcher. To truly represent the standpoints and voices of Indigenous women, there is a clear need for an Indigenous woman researcher to examine and center the stories of other Indigenous women working within public relations.

### **6.3. Methodology and method**

#### *6.3.1. Indigenous women's standpoints*

Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory advocates that the perspectives, experiences, and knowledges of Indigenous women be recognized and understood (Moreton-Robinson, 2013). Indigenous women experience double-layered oppressions compared to white men, white women, and Indigenous men, and find a similarity in resistance to these various levels of subjugation (Behrendt, 1993; Fredericks, 2004; Huggins, 1987; Moreton-Robinson, 2000, 2013). From this stance, and in alliance with Indigenous women participants and co-authors, it is important to develop a research approach that will privilege Indigenous women's voices and allow an unbiased approach to data analysis and write up. Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory combines the lenses of ontology (ways of being), epistemology (ways of knowing) and axiology (ways of doing) (Moreton-Robinson, 2013). Using this as a research framework, this paper will privilege and center narratives of the lived experiences of Indigenous women in Indigenous Australian public relations.

#### *6.3.2. Participants*

Five Indigenous women participated in this study and were recruited through existing networks or social media internet sites such as LinkedIn. Due to the underrepresentation of Indigenous women in public relations, there was a difficulty in recruiting a large number of participants. Following Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory, principles of

collaboration, respect, and transparency were paramount in the research process (Moreton-Robinson, 2013). This involved centering the option to identify under pseudonyms, tell stories their way, review/approve their own transcripts and/or journal papers, and deciding whether to participate in the study as co-researchers. For each Indigenous woman research participant, consent forms were provided that outlined these values and the research ethics specified by the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) Human Research Ethics Committee (2018).

### 6.3.3. *Yarning interviews*

To center the voices and lived experiences of the five Indigenous women, an Indigenous yarning method of narrative inquiry and interviewing was employed. Indigenous yarning advocates familiarity, collaboration, co-researching, and having a flexible interview/yarning plan (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010). At the outset gifts were provided to the participants to symbolize gratitude, cultural values, and Indigenous women's bonds. *Haus of Dizzy* ([www.hausofdizzy.com](http://www.hausofdizzy.com)) Aboriginal flag earrings were presented with shopping gift cards. The yarning method invited discussion of the women's experiences and roles working in Indigenous Australian public relations and how they view and take part in Indigenous activism. The interview sessions were undertaken one-on-one with the lead author and followed a similar but flexible yarning plan. Interviews were audio-recorded on an Apple iPhone 7 or Apple Mac laptop.

### 6.3.4. *Thematic data analysis*

The analysis of data followed the six-phase guide of thematic inquiry (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the lead author becoming familiar with the data (1); generating initial codes (2); searching for emerging themes (3); reviewing themes (4); defining themes (5); and conducting write-up (6). Yarning sessions were recorded and transcribed with transcription software and authenticated by means of careful listening to each audio recording. Subsequently, the initial audit of transcripts noted early emerging themes. Major data analysis occurred once transcripts had been approved by the women and uploaded into the NVIVO program. During write-up of the findings, quotes were extracted to emphasize the experiences relative to each participant and to preserve the content of their voices and narratives. All of the Indigenous women provided approval for publication once the paper was finalized and had the choice to adjust their quotations or to add context to their stories. This paper is part of a collection of four publications from a PhD dataset on the practice of Indigenous Australian public relations from the standpoint of Indigenous women.

#### **6.4. Findings**

The five Indigenous women in this study live in mid-to-large-sized Australian cities and have university degrees at undergraduate or postgraduate levels in public relations, journalism, media, and communications. From either an initial career idea or from a need to create change, all of the participants discussed how they made their way into the field of public relations or communications. The notion of pigeonholing within the women's career experiences was deemed irrelevant, as these participants had chosen to work in the specific area of Indigenous Australian public relations.



#### 6.4.1. Career entry

Of the five participants, Nicole, Debra, and Stacey knew early on that they wanted to work in public relations and communications, while Susan and Lily both fell into the profession more accidentally. Debra discussed moving location to achieve her career goal:

*I actually studied communications at [university name removed] and went to Canberra straight after with the dream of becoming a press secretary.*

Similarly, Stacey transitioned into government work directly after her university studies:

*I studied media/comms and got a government cadetship to work in the comms team at [name removed]. So, I was really, really young, that transitioned directly from a cadetship into a full-time position. So, when I finished uni, I went into full time government comms.*

Susan initially graduated from a non-communications degree at university, but transitioned into public relations through a postgraduate qualification in journalism and experience as a volunteer radio presenter:

*I started out just working in radio, like a lot of Indigenous people ... I was a first year uni student doing a Bachelor ... and they were looking for people and I wanted to connect with other Aboriginal people at the uni. There weren't many in those days, there was probably, maybe 20 across the whole. I thought it was a good way of connecting and just playing some music ... then I realised that radio work actually turned*

*into something that I really, really wanted to do more than anything else. So, I went into journalism, a grad dip, because I already had a degree.*

Lily was initially indecisive about her discipline of study at university; however, she moved into communications and public relations after graduating from a foundational double degree.

*I think I kind of just randomly fell into communications because I didn't really know what else I wanted to do. I knew I had to go to university. I had no idea what I wanted to study, and ... I didn't really enjoy at the time doing film. So, that was — I ended up doing a double degree of arts and communications majoring in media production. So, obviously communications just then becomes your kind of base degree.*

Within research into Indigenous Australian university studies, public relations, as practiced within the creative industries, is underrepresented (O'Sullivan, 2019). Further, Indigenous higher education students predominately enroll in health, education, and society and culture (Behrendt et al., 2012; Universities Australia, 2020). Petersen's (2016) study identified that two out of the four Indigenous women participants in Australian public relations roles have tertiary qualifications in either journalism/media or marketing. When compared to the career entry for African American women, university degrees in media, journalism, and communications were more predominant (Pompper, 2004; Tindall, 2009). These results and studies indicate that those who do enter public relations predominately do so from degrees in the creative industries, marketing or business. Therefore, the results suggest that few professionals transition into public

relations from disciplines other than humanities, creative industries, and business. Within a mixed-gendered context, Wolf's (2016) Australian research with minority participants explored their different aspirations and means of entry into public relations. She highlighted that for minority groups, entry into public relations was accidental for the majority of participants and was not originally viewed as a suitable career choice (Wolf, 2016).

#### 6.4.2. *Rationale for working in public relations and communications*

For the Indigenous women participants, entering public relations and communications in order to create change and benefit their Indigenous communities was a theme they all shared. Prior research into Indigenous perspectives has identified desired social change as a motivator in the career field of public relations (Clark et al., 2019; Petersen, 2016). For Susan, her profession provides her the opportunity to be part of a cultural movement:

*To grow and to be able to make changes and change the future ... I just want to be a part of a cultural movement, as I see it, I suppose.*

Debra described how being part of an activist family shaped her standpoint:

*My dad was a land rights activist and my parents were very active through that movement. So, I grew up in a very activist household and I went to a lot of rallies as a young child.*

With an activist background from her childhood, Debra described her entry into public relations and communications study:

*When I got to university, I was studying political comms ... and I joined the student union, and I was the Aboriginal officer there for a while. I was interested in how on-the-ground activism could translate into this political world and that's sort of what drew me into this comms-y sort of world ... I got into this field because I've always been really interested in politics and social movements and I'm very, very fascinated by political communications and how social change is always facilitated by strong narrative and storytelling.*

Similarly, Stacey stressed how her passion for activism influenced her choice of career:

*For me, and the impact that I want to make, is really around us having spaces where we get to be our whole selves, and we get to do work that we're passionate about.*

Nicole saw the power of public relations to create change:

*The reason I chose public relations as a profession was because I liked that it could create social change and do good.*

Pompper (2004) and Tindall (2009), in highlighting African American women, both identified social change and advocacy as motivators and rationales for entry into a public relations career. Public relations has been acknowledged as a profession that can bring about social change, and new research is continuing to highlight this previously marginalized area of public relations (Adi, 2018; Demetrious, 2013; Holtzhausen, 2012; Weaver, 2018). Giving back to community is a value that many Indigenous peoples center and O'Sullivan (2019) has noted that some Australian universities have adopted a strategy

to encourage and support Indigenous students into areas that seek to redress Indigenous disadvantage (education, health, community development). Lack of attention to this idea within public relations research, and failure to see that public relations can be a vehicle for Indigenous social change, are narratives that need correcting.

#### 6.4.3. *Career pigeonholing or career self-determination?*

The concept of pigeonholing carries negative tokenistic connotations: it can be a term for people of color being deliberately placed to work with other people of color. Pigeonholing was not explicitly discussed with the Indigenous women participants; however, the women did discuss experiences of only working in Indigenous spaces or preferring to work in Indigenous affairs. Collectively, the women have worked as consultants, researchers, and managers in Indigenous public relations and communications and many are frequently visible in the Indigenous public sphere as media guests/interviewees, opinion piece writers, verified social media users/administrators, or conference presenters. Stacey emphasized her predilection for “working in Aboriginal spaces” by choosing to work in a non-communications role in the Indigenous space (rather than in the mainstream public relations industry) to fulfil her particular work and community values:

*I kind of had the option to keep working in government, to go mainstream PR, or to work in project management roles in my community. And I just wanted to work in community, so I gave up comms, for oh my gosh, it might have been almost 10 years because there just were no jobs.*

Stacey eventually created her own business, given this void of Indigenous public relations opportunities:

*I didn't start a business because I wanted to be in business. I just started a business because I wanted to work in comms. And the job didn't exist.*

Similarly, Susan stressed her preference for working in Indigenous spaces, saying: “I’m an advocate and it doesn’t matter what I’m doing, and I only work in Indigenous affairs”. While, Lily has only ever worked in Indigenous roles: “I’ve not worked outside of the black space, really”.

Previous public relations research has highlighted instances of pigeonholing. Edwards (2018, p. 183) states, “[t]he practice of pigeonholing and stereotyping can worsen the situation: for example, when practitioners are asked to work on campaigns specifically focused on ethnic groups, or in specialist areas such as the non-profit or public sector because of their race, ethnicity or class”. Pompper’s (2004) study of African American women identified pigeonholing and stereotyped roles, with the women divided in their opinions about whether to embrace this practice. Pompper’s (2007) separate research with Hispanic American women also obtained similar results for issues of pigeonholing or stereotyping of roles. However, Tindall’s (2009) work with African American women (and one male) did not identify pigeonholing as an issue. In that study, the majority of participants were hired to fill mainstream public relations positions, with just one woman rejecting her role as a Black-only public relations professional.

The effects of pigeonholing for people of color in public relations can work in their favor. For instance, Edwards (2018, p. 185) states:

*They also consciously strategise about their position and career development and may use their identity as an asset, changing the way organisations communicate to different groups. They may take advantage of opportunities presented on the basis of their knowledge of the 'other', and use the experience they have gained to set up their own public relations companies.*

Within mainstream women's public relations scholarship, instances of pigeonholing suggest some positive results, where women have become entrepreneurs and created their own consultancies (Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2017).

The women in this study all chose to work within Indigenous Australian affairs and Indigenous roles, reflecting their cultural values of giving back to community and creating positive change. For the Indigenous women participants, the positionality of being an Indigenous public relations professional is welcomed and represents a personal choice (as opposed to a response to institutional or societal pressure). On the surface, this may be seen as contradicting public relations literature, as the majority of findings suggest the racial undertones of pigeonholing or the lack of opportunity to work within mainstream roles (Pompper, 2004, 2007; Tindall, 2009). However, given the unique ramifications of Australian colonization, the motivation for giving back to Indigenous communities can translate the negative connotations of career pigeonholing into a positive vision of career self-determination. It must be emphasized that the practice of pigeonholing is not synonymous with being an Indigenous informant or being the token Indigenous person for all matters Indigenous (Bargallie, 2020; Thunig & Jones, 2020). Pompper's work (2004, 2007) acknowledged various motivations for creating an independent consultancy that included racial issues selectively—and it is the latter

motivation that aligns with the views expressed by the Indigenous women participants in this research. For example, Stacey established her own business to create the type of work that she was passionate about and to create change.

#### 6.4.4. *The lack of Indigenous representations within public relations*

The majority of the women mentioned the lack of Indigenous practitioners within the profession and the ramifications of non-Indigenous practitioners working with Indigenous public relations protocols. Stacey, upon learning about the other women in this study, was initially surprised by the number:

*I can't believe that you've even found multiple women in this space, that's exciting to me ... when I was in uni, there was [name removed] and she was a year ahead of me in media/comms. And that was it. There was no one else around.*

Nicole also acknowledged the lack of Indigenous representation, lamenting on Indigenous males in particular, by stating “You don’t have many male Aboriginal PR people.” Lily, in referring to the low numbers of Indigenous public relations professionals, shared her goal of establishing an Indigenous public relations network.

*I've always wanted to try and create a network of Indigenous comms media people. Because you kind of hear about, I honestly probably know a couple ... I just don't really know that many.*

Within Australian public relations scholarship, several scholars advocate for an increase in Indigenous representation (Clark, 2011, 2012; Fitch, 2020a; Petersen, 2016;



Sakinofsky et al., 2019; Sison, 2016; Wolf, 2016). Yet as discussed, educational statistics suggest that public relations appears to be an academic specialization that is underrepresented within the Indigenous student cohort (Behrendt et al., 2012; O’Sullivan, 2019; Universities Australia, 2020). Further, unlike creative industry practice (O’Sullivan, 2019), public relations is evidently underrepresented with Indigenous employees and practitioners. Suggestions to increase numbers and representation within the profession recommend promotion and support pathways toward a career in public relations (Clark, 2011, 2012; Sakinofsky et al., 2019), and clearly need to continue.

From these realities, a serious implication of an absence of Indigenous men and women within public relations is that not only are Indigenous voices being lost, but the cultural complexities across gender-based communication practices and protocols within Indigenous public relations are being ignored and potentially violated (AIATSIS, 2020; Australian Council for Arts, 2019). Debra highlighted this need for more gendered approaches in public relations:

*There have been times when we’ve had to talk to people about really sensitive issues and they’ve been more comfortable in their home. So, we do it in their home. Also, whether they want to speak to a man or a woman. So, all of those sorts of considerations are just part of what we think about before we even step into community.*

Debra elaborated on this theme, sharing her experiences of navigating and exploring Indigenous gender roles within the workplace and in communications campaigns:

*It’s actually really interesting at the moment because we’re working on a campaign about family violence and working with young Aboriginal*

*people and talking about gender roles and those sorts of things. And a lot of them are saying, 'part of what we have to confront is also Western concepts of femininity and masculinity and having to get our heads around what that means, when for tens of thousands of years we had different gender roles, but both very equal in the way that they were viewed by communities.*

Evidently, gendered considerations are essential within Indigenous Australian public relations contexts to develop culturally respectful communication strategies and also to privilege Indigenous women's positions and standpoints. In decolonizing the Eurocentric patriarchy to assert the intersectionality of Indigenous men, gendered research is needed to further contextualize the demographics of Indigenous male public relations practitioners and its implications for theory and practice. From this finding, it is also critical then that the Australian public relations profession respectfully engage and acknowledge potential issues of Indigenous gendered considerations and strategies when attempting to redress systemic "whiteness" within the industry. For example, within the Indigenous social media sphere, gendered practices are evident (and thus need to be considered) within Facebook men and women's "business" pages, gender-specific messages/stories in joint Indigenous group pages, and gendered social media hashtags (#Indigenousdads).

Further, Lily's comment on creating a network is an important discussion point, as there are existing public relations associations catering to international and diverse practitioners, such as the National Black Public Relations Society (2017) and the Hispanic Public Relations Association (2018). It is evident that within Australia there is a gap in

knowledge of who is working in public relations, what roles constitute as working in public relations, and avenues to network with other Indigenous public relations professionals. With this lack of Indigenous representation in public relations, Nicole questioned the ramifications for practice:

*There's still a lack of Indigenous PR/comms people around. So, you either have people coming in [to the PR space] who are Indigenous and culturally connected to community, and not really knowing the PR side; or you're having non-Indigenous who know the PR side, but not culturally connected.*

An overrepresentation of white/non-Indigenous women working in Indigenous public relations and communications positions was identified by Clark (2011, 2012), which may have implications to the standpoints that non-Indigenous practitioners adopt within their work. For instance, Brown, Waymer, and Zhou (2019, p. 4) assert that “practitioners’ social-cultural identities likely affect how they perform as public relations practitioners and the messages they create for vast groups of people.” Thus, this implication may affect the lack of cultural protocols and connections that non-Indigenous public relations practitioners may apply when working on Indigenous strategies or with Indigenous peoples. This notion of cultural identities within Indigenous public relations roles was highlighted by Lily, who considered the importance of a cultural insider approach of Indigenous public relations practitioners:

*... they're the ones that are going to be able to tell the story the best ... that's [Indigeneity] part of your identity and your being, you're going to project that information so much more differently.*

Lastly, Debra emphasized not only the lack of Indigenous public relations professionals but also mainstream public relations' lack of understanding toward Indigenous people's experiences and knowledges within public relations:

*I don't think that the advertising and PR industry in Australia has fully untapped the potential of working with Indigenous professionals and creating genuine employment pathways for Indigenous professionals ... The number of Aboriginal PR practitioners is so low that Roy Morgan calls it statistically insufficient, it's not even registered anywhere.*

Debra's comment has a two-fold meaning: first it emphasizes the public relations industry's lack of employment and external working relationships with Indigenous peoples, and second it acknowledges the overall lack of Indigenous public relations professionals. According to Debra's insight, there is a strong need to increase Indigenous public relations practitioner numbers through not only university study channels but also by providing recruitment pathways within public relations organizations.

## **6.5. Discussion**

This paper, in providing an overview of Indigenous women's career entry, motivations, and need for Indigenous representations within Australian public relations, has identified the values of working for social change and giving back to community as strong indications for entering the profession. University study was a common theme and the women interviewed had graduated at either the undergraduate or postgraduate level with degrees in media, journalism, communications, and public relations. Although existing

indicators from Indigenous research suggest that public relations is not a popular university study (nor employment choice) for Indigenous peoples (Behrendt et al., 2012; O’Sullivan, 2019; Universities Australia, 2020), the majority of the women realized early on that public relations was the career for them. Existing public relations literature confirms journalism, media, and marketing as common tertiary qualifications for Indigenous Australian women (Petersen, 2016), while in the US, journalism, media, and communications were common qualifications for African American women working in public relations (Pompper, 2004; Tindall, 2009).

The value of giving back to community and creating change was a huge motivator for the women in this study, and Petersen’s (2016) work similarly reflects this theme. These values are not intrinsic within public relations., they similarly appear in some literature specific to Indigenous women (see White, 2010 on Indigenous women’s career motivations) and Indigenous students’ university discipline motivations (see O’Sullivan, 2019). Some research ethical guidelines (AIATSIS, 2020; Australian Council for Arts, 2019) also reiterate these principles. It was clear that most of the women in this research prefer to stay within the Indigenous space and may either move into non-public relations Indigenous roles or choose to open their own consultancy in order to focus on their preferred area of work. The women discussed the scarcity of Indigenous practitioners, which accords with the experiences of African American and Hispanic American women practitioners (Pompper, 2004, 2007; Tindall, 2009). One significant difference is the existence in the US of professional public relations support organizations for African Americans (National Black Public Relations Society) and Hispanic Americans (Hispanic Public Relations Association). Another difference of a scarcity of Indigenous practitioners is the potential ramifications of culturally inappropriate communication

practices from non-Indigenous public relations professionals working in Indigenous contexts.

The position of gendered considerations was also discussed, especially within public relations campaigns and strategies and the requirements of gendered differences and perspectives when developing public relations work and policies. One of the women (Debra) discussed the practical issues to consider when working on campaigns that involve colonized concepts of masculinity and femininity with Indigenous peoples. The role of gender within Indigenous communities is one that is recognized across many key Indigenous protocols and ethical documents and is an instrument toward further knowledge in this intersectional research (AIATSIS, 2020; Australian Council for Arts, 2019). The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) (2020) calls for respecting gender-related diversities (e.g., men's and women's business) when researching within and across Indigenous communities, and the Australian Council for Arts (2019) additionally cautions the respecting of customary laws and cultural protocols surrounding gender when interpreting and reproducing Indigenous representations within the arts.

Therefore, following these findings on Indigenous women's career entry, motivations, and lack of representation, we recommend several ways in which to increase the numbers of Indigenous practitioners and Indigenous representations within Australian public relations.

#### *6.5.1. Establishing an Indigenous Australian public relations association*

There is presently no association or membership for Indigenous Australian public relations professionals—a gap which Lily noticed. As there is limited understanding of issues relating to the recruitment of Indigenous public relations practitioners, certain considerations are important as first steps: for example, how many and which gender to target, explication of public relations roles, and existing networking structures. Therefore, in creating an Indigenous public relations association, similar industry associations (National Black Public Relations Society and the Hispanic Public Relations Association) and Indigenous Australian memberships (Indigenous Accountants Australia and Australian Indigenous Psychologists Association) would be beneficial for inspiration and replication. For instance, an Indigenous Australian association could start modestly in a basic promotional stage (like the Indigenous Accountants Australia association, 2020) before reaching a more comprehensive level, similar to the Australian Indigenous Psychologists Association (n.d.).

#### 6.5.2. *Promoting the profession of Australian public relations as an area of Indigenous employment*

Rectifying the issue of low Indigenous public relations numbers may be achieved through more promotion of public relations as a career to Indigenous students and those already in similar professions, including journalism, community engagement, and the arts. For Indigenous peoples not interested in attending university, Clark (2011, 2012) and Sakinofsky et al. (2019) recommend promoting alternative pathways toward a career in public relations (e.g., mobile public relations community-based workshops or training in regional and remote areas - Clark, 2011, 2012). These steps could increase the number of Indigenous public relations practitioners in order to generate greater representation of

Indigenous issues, services, and self-determined narratives. Increasing Indigenous representation within public relations would encourage research to assist with lobbying against mining companies (Sakinofsky et al., 2019) or to rectify negative media framing and deficit discourses about Indigenous peoples (Bacon, 2005; Proudfoot & Habibis, 2015; Thomas, Jakubowicz & Norman, 2019).

### *6.5.3. Increasing Indigenous protocols within mainstream Australian public relations*

Several Australian scholars have advocated for increased Indigenous voices to contribute to more diverse narratives and a reconceptualization of public relations (Clark et al., 2019; Fitch, 2020a; Petersen, 2016; Sakinofsky et al., 2019; Sison, 2016). Both Clark (2011, 2012) and Sakinofsky et al. (2019) have previously called for cultural awareness training for non-Indigenous practitioners working within Indigenous spaces and communities. Clark et al. (2019) provided direction for cultural ethics and protocols for practitioners to consider and implement when working across Indigenous organizations, communities, and strategies. These include engaging with local (or if national, from each State) Indigenous communities on appropriate and respectful approaches and exploring ethical research documents (AIATSIS, 2020; Australian Council for Arts, 2019). Within tertiary institutions, numerous scholars have advocated for Indigenous protocols and narratives to be more apparent in public relations research and university curricula (Clark, 2011, 2012; Fitch, 2020a; Sakinofsky et al., 2019; Sison, 2016). Specifically, Fitch (2020a, p. 37) detailed the necessity to “Indigenize” university pedagogy by arguing for the “need to educate students about race and social justice, and about specific cultural protocols (i.e., not simply in terms of cultural diversity or the multicultural other), but actually



thinking specifically about Indigenous disadvantage and how public relations can intervene in that space”.

## **6.6. Conclusion**

This paper has provided a voice to Indigenous women’s motivations and perspectives when considering a public relations career. It argues that an increased Indigenous presence across public relations is desirable to address cultural protocols that non-Indigenous practitioners may be unaware of. Therefore, this paper recommends an increase in the numbers of Indigenous public relations professionals, the establishment of an Indigenous Australian public relations association, and education about Indigenous protocols within Australian public relations. Further research is needed to explore career experiences of Indigenous women. This could provide insight into other issues that affect Indigenous women: for example, salaries (and discrepancies), work–life balance, career progression, and retention rates for Indigenous women public relations practitioners.

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7. **“We’re not treated equally as Indigenous people or as women”:  
the perspectives and experiences of Indigenous women in  
Australian public relations**

**Preamble:**

I am a strong Aboriginal feminist, and this philosophy has increased exponentially since undertaking this Doctorate. I am now in my 30s and I have learnt so much through my work experiences and interpersonal relationships. When I was younger, and far more naïve, I admired the white employees working alongside of me in my identified Indigenous roles. I had that paternalistic mindset where I thought that it was so sweet and kind that they wanted to help. I started gravitating to these worldly, liberal white employees as friends and found many common interests. Little did I know what was to come in my work roles; backstabbing, patronising, and belittling, all because of the intersection between my job and community responsibilities and contributions. From these experiences, I started becoming cynical of both these white employees and the Indigenous employees who I felt were blind to this (either by naivety or power play). To me, this blindness was especially evident in the Indigenous men. For the first time, I gravitated to Indigenous women due to workplace politics and our commonality in both racial and gendered life experiences.

Around ten years ago, one of my Aboriginal mentors encouraged me to read Aileen Moreton-Robinson's seminal (2000) book "Talkin' up to the white woman" after I had told her of my issues with my white female colleagues. I had never heard of the book and thought it was fantastic. A few years later, my supervisor Professor Gawaian Bodkin-Andrews broadened me further to the works of Moreton-Robinson, specifically her (2013) Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory. From these introductions to Indigenous feminist standpoints and perspectives, and the continued experiences of whiteness and gender bias across varied jobs and peoples, I was set down the path of sisterhood with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

This following chapter discusses whiteness, gender, and wellbeing from the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. This chapter follows on from the collection of narratives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in terms of their experiences and practices within their public relations work. This chapter was extremely difficult to write, and there were many edits. There was a lot to say, and there was difficulty in articulating and structuring it, but I finally got there in the end through various supports. I anticipate and hope that readers will understand and appreciate the multilayers that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experience and the very courage and resistance that we share as a collective group.

**Abstract:**

This paper argues that the public relations sphere needs to have better understanding and more representation and acknowledgment of Indigenous women's contemporary experiences and contributions. Indigenous Australian women experience multiple oppressions, such as Eurocentric and patriarchal control and, within the broader areas of Indigenous, women's, and feminist public relations scholarship, their voices are largely absent. To address these issues, this paper, based on Indigenous women's standpoint theory and an Indigenous yarning method, presents the narratives of five Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women employed in public relations. These narratives reflect experiences of marginalization by the Australian mainstream culture of whiteness and patriarchy; they also suggest the incidence of work-induced mental distress for the women participants. This study of female Indigeneity within public relations aims to promote understanding of intersectional identities, the long-term effects of whiteness and racism, and may suggest how public relations can play a role in decolonizing efforts.

**Keywords:**

Indigenous; women; public relations; Australia; whiteness; feminism

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## 7.1. Introduction

The ongoing effects of colonization, and the multilayered oppressions of whiteness and gender, mean that Indigenous women suffer a higher rate of mental illness and distress (Walker et al., 2020) and 10-year less life expectancy compared to non-Indigenous women (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2017). At only 2%–3% of the Australian population, Indigenous women also suffer from disproportionate rates of incarceration (Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), 2018) and violence and homicide (e.g. of all reported women’s murders in Australia, 16% of victims are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women—Collard & Higgins, 2019). In response to these statistics, Indigenous women are increasingly seeking to highlight the experiences and resistance efforts of other Indigenous women against Eurocentric and patriarchal systems (Fredericks et al., 2019; Moreton-Robinson, 2000; Ryan, 2019; White, 2010). Yet, within the discipline of public relations, there is a notable absence of studies centering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women’s standpoints and reflecting on Indigenous women’s lived experiences.

Indigenous Australian women are rarely cited or acknowledged for their roles and contributions in public relations’ intersectional contexts and this disciplinary silence may have implications for theory and practice (Clark, 2012; Clark et al., 2019; Fitch, 2016, 2020a; Fitch et al., 2016; Fitch & Third, 2010; Johnston, 2010; Keating, 2013, 2016a, 2016b; Petersen, 2016; Rea, 2002; Sakinofsky et al., 2019; Sison, 2016). In response, this paper aims to present and analyze some intersectional narratives of Indigenous women employed in public relations, showing how their feminist and Indigenous standpoints may contribute to the development of the profession. Indigenous women’s standpoint theory



(Moreton-Robinson, 2013) and an Indigenous yarning method (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010) will be harnessed to challenge and disrupt the Eurocentric and patriarchal practices of mainstream Australian public relations.

## **7.2. Decolonizing whiteness within Indigenous Australian public relations contexts**

The social construct of whiteness is based on the concept of Caucasian peoples having power, privilege, and priority, to the extent that it has long been the “invisible default” (Petray & Collin, 2017). This has been reported within Indigenous Australian public relations scholarship (Clark, 2012; Clark et al., 2019; Fitch, 2020a; Johnston et al., 2018; Petersen, 2016; Sakinofski et al., 2019). Research from critical and postcolonial public relations positions aims to interrogate whiteness and privilege decolonizing frameworks in order to dismantle existing white colonial power structures (Dutta, 2016; Dutta & Elers, 2019; Edwards, 2014, 2018; Munshi et al., 2011; Munshi & Edwards, 2011; Sison, 2014, 2016; Vardeman-Winter, 2011). Within the specialization of Indigenous Australian public relations, research is highlighting evidence of whiteness and is now attempting to remove this continuing legacy of colonial control (Clark, 2012; Clark et al., 2019; Fitch, 2020a; Johnston et al., 2018; Petersen, 2016; Sakinofsky et al., 2019).

The media and public relations industries have assumed ongoing roles in promoting deficit discourses of Indigenous peoples since the inception of Australian colonization in 1788 (Clark, 2012; Clark et al., 2019; Clark & Bodkin-Andrews, 2021; Fitch, 2020a; Johnston et al., 2018; Petersen, 2016; Sakinofsky et al., 2019; Thomas et al., 2019). Public relations research from Indigenous Australian positions has highlighted the challenge for

many Aboriginal organizations to secure positive media representations. Studies of Aboriginal community-controlled organizations (Clark, 2012; Petersen, 2016), Indigenous Affairs (Clark et al., 2019), and Aboriginal cultural associations (Sakinofsky et al., 2019) all confirm this and advocate addressing these difficulties in the context of Indigenous Australian public relations. One aim of Indigenous Australian public relations is to advocate for social change and self-determination and thereby challenge deficit discourses. Examples of this “decolonizing” approach are now emerging, notably in the promotion of critical empowerment of media relations and challenging deficit discourses as integral factors of a seven-protocol Indigenous Australian public relations theoretical framework (Clark et al., 2019). Yet, while these collective efforts highlight the continuation of whiteness, there is still an ongoing silencing, marginalizing, and demoralizing of Indigenous people’s roles and contributions to Australian public relations (Clark et al., 2019; Fitch, 2020a).

The lack of recognition of Indigenous contributions and strategies perpetuates whiteness within theory and practice. Several scholars have cited numerous instances of this lack of recognition of public relations engagement and protocols with Indigenous peoples and communities in practice (Clark & Bodkin-Andrews, 2021; Fitch, 2020a). This is particularly highlighted through lack of Indigenous engagement and communication within the two organizations Qantas airlines and the Adelaide36ers basketball team (Clark & Bodkin-Andrews, 2021). In these separate instances, both Qantas and the Adelaide36ers involved the same person, Aboriginal (Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara) artist Elizabeth Close, and their attempts at hiring artistic services free of charge (Clark & Bodkin-Andrews, 2021). This lack of respect for both artist livelihood and Aboriginal cultural exchange resulted in varying negative outcomes from both of their public

relations teams (Clark & Bodkin-Andrews, 2021). In referring back to the Indigenous Australian public relations theoretical framework, there are several protocols that outline culturally appropriate and respectful engagement practices, notably the themes of *Indigenous philosophy*, *Indigenous justice*, and *interrelatedness* (Clark et al., 2019). While public relations scholarship on Indigenous perspectives is emerging, within practice there still remains a continuation of deficit engagement practices from Eurocentric public relations positions (Clark and Bodkin-Andrews, 2021; Fitch, 2020a).

This brief demonstration and critique of Eurocentric privileging and systemic practices from Indigenous Australian public relations scholarship provides further ground-work in the movement toward a self-determination and decolonization of the Australian public relations discipline (Clark, 2012; Clark et al., 2019; Fitch, 2020a; Johnston et al., 2018; Petersen, 2016; Sakinofsky et al., 2019). This is a significant step, as the acknowledgment of colonization and colonial practices is a movement toward decolonization in itself (Muller, 2014). Within the public relations discipline, the process to decolonize public relations is described by Dutta and Elers (2019, p. 4) as “interrogat[ing] the West-centric assumptions circulated in the scholarship, interrupt[ing] the universals built upon Eurocentric assumptions, and attend[ing] to the textures of power that silence voices from colonized and postcolonial contexts.” Along with these processes to decolonize whiteness, the privileging of women’s positions and voices can also assist with questioning and critiquing white and patriarchal knowledge productions and colonial practices. The profession of Australian public relations has historically been viewed as a creation by “important white men” and Eurocentric patriarchal control continues to underpin management in the profession (Fitch, 2016; Fitch & Third, 2010; Wolf, 2016).

### **7.3. Gender and sexism within Australian public relations**

The growth of women's voices and critiques of the patriarchy emerged toward the end of the 1980s when a burgeoning representation of women entered the public relations profession. This emerging work scrutinized the salary discrepancies between men and women, lack of management and senior roles for women, and work allocated in roles that appeared to be stereotypical women's tasks (Cline et al., 1986; Grunig, 1988; Kern-Foxworth, 1989; Rakow, 1989; Toth, 1988; Toth & Cline, 1989). In Australia, public relations remains a female-majority but Eurocentric, male-managed profession, highlighting both an overrepresentation and an underrepresentation of women within the industry (Fitch, 2016; Fitch et al., 2016; Fitch & Third, 2010; Johnston, 2010; Keating, 2013, 2016a, 2016b; Rea, 2002; Sison, 2016; Wolf, 2016). This privileging of a white male-managed profession has resulted in a gender imbalance. This means fewer managerial and strategic roles and multiple instances of sexism and sexist representations of and for women (Demetrious, 2014; Fitch, 2020b, 2020c; Keating, 2016a, 2016b).

The imbalance of gender within Australian public relations is a concern for the industry, and although an increase in male members is advocated, a further overrepresentation of men in senior level positions may continue to impact the experiences of women. This is revealed within the Diversity and Inclusion Policy of the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) (2016)—Australia's peak public relations body—which has recommended a 40% increase in the representation of males aged under 25 by the year 2025. Nevertheless, women were not explicitly categorized within the policy and no targets were set for addressing the continued discrimination that women can experience

within the profession. This is reflected within wider employment practice, in the overrepresentation of Australian women working within technical and/or part-time roles, compared to men who dominate full-time positions (Keating, 2016a, 2016b). Regarding working conditions, men are often described as “gender blind” to the intersecting factors that impact women; for instance, work–life balance and associated stressors, parenthood, professional, and societal pressures, and the often casual nature of their work (Aldoory et al., 2008; Keating, 2016a, 2016b). In this scenario, advocating the overrepresentation of men in high-level strategic positions may be seen as permitting the continuation of sexist industry standards and practices and the sexualized representations of women.

The continuation of Eurocentric patriarchal structures within Australian public relations is ongoing and instances of sexualized representations of women practitioners are evident within historical and contemporary cases (Demetrious, 2014; Fitch, 2020b, 2020c). The legacy of sexism is evident in historical examinations of internal public relations industry publications/magazines from 1965 to 1972, which demonstrates gendered representations of women in subservient domestic roles such as wife figures, bodies/ body parts, support workers, or consumers (Fitch, 2020c). These publications did not showcase women as figures of agency, but merely as props or stereotypically sexualized females (Fitch, 2020c). More recently, research on a case of two Australian public relations professionals (a female and a gay male) examined their filings of sexual harassment cases against their employers and workplaces and the role of media/bloggers in their representations of the two plaintiffs (Demetrious, 2014). This case demonstrated unequal power roles and pressure to conform to sexualized gender-role dressing for both women and (gay) men (Demetrious, 2014). Ultimately, this clothes-body complex is still significant within

Australian public relations and the media, and women are continually viewed with sexual connotations (Demetrious, 2014; Fitch, 2020b).

The research on women's standpoints within Australian public relations is highlighting and interrogating Eurocentric patriarchal privileges and the ongoing practices of sexism and sexualized representations of women, yet far more work needs to be undertaken (Demetrious, 2014; Fitch, 2016, 2020c; Fitch & Third, 2010; Keating, 2013, 2016a, 2016b; Rea, 2002; Sison, 2016; Wolf, 2016). Although these understandings of sexism and sexualized representations may relate to the positions of women of color and Indigenous women they still center on the standpoints of the majority white female professionals. This effectively silences the voices of women of color and Indigenous women and thus perspectives of racism and sexism need to be explored within public relations to fully understand their lived experiences, historical and contemporary oppressions, and determinations of resilience (Sison, 2016). Intersectional lenses and feminist inquiries (i.e. third world, global south, postcolonial feminism) offers platforms for interconnecting race, gender, class, sexuality and/or disability, and affirms the need to dismantle dated power structures that still affect the lives of marginalized groups such as Indigenous women (Bachmann & Proust, 2020; Golombisky, 2015; Vardeman-Winter and Tindall, 2010).

#### **7.4. The multilayered oppressions of racism and sexism for Indigenous women**

The constructs of sexism, racism, and false notions of white supremacy relegate Indigenous women to the lowest level of Eurocentric society. Despite this, there is a

strong movement toward proclaiming a decolonization and self-determination of Indigenous women voices and narratives (Behrendt, 1993; Huggins, 1987; Moreton-Robinson, 2000; Ryan, 2019; Sullivan, 2018). Historically, Indigenous women were deprived of their rights within all aspects of their lives, subjected to racism and sexism and forced into occupations like domestic service or prostitution (Best & Fredericks, 2013; Sullivan, 2018; White, 2010). Resulting from these past and contemporary oppressions from the white male (and female) gaze, many strong and resilient Indigenous women have provided a fount of critical inquiry and scholarship (Behrendt, 1993; Fredericks, 2004, 2010; Fredericks et al., 2019; Huggins, 1987, 1994; Langton, 1989; Moreton-Robinson, 2000, 2013; Ryan, 2019; Sullivan, 2018; Watson, 2007; White, 2010).

Today, the continuation of historical racism is manifested in the various organizations and professions that Indigenous women enter. Indigenous women are continually undervalued within professional contexts, underrepresented in senior roles, experience racism within the workforce, and struggle to manage personal responsibilities (Fredericks & White, 2018; Moreton-Robinson, 2007; O'Sullivan, 2019; Thunig & Jones, 2020; White, 2010). Aboriginal Gooreng Gooreng woman White's (2010) research detailed 11 university-educated Indigenous women's encounters with racism within their careers. Notably, the women described experiencing covert racism and negative attitudes from their non-Indigenous co-workers (for instance, the negative belief that Indigenous peoples get special treatment and advantages over other Australians) (White, 2010). Likewise, attitudes toward Indigenous women noted within the research of Aboriginal Gamilaroi woman Amy Thunig and non-Indigenous scholar Jones highlighted the racist role and experience of, what they termed, an Indigenous "performer" within academia and

university workplaces. In this research involving seventeen Indigenous women the Indigenous “performer” is defined as an Indigenous person who is expected to serve their work-places on all matters Indigenous while also undertaking their own paid role (Thunig & Jones, 2020). This research claims that when Indigenous women refuse this role as “performer” they are often positioned and labeled as an “angry black woman” (Thunig & Jones, 2020: 17). This labeling is resonant with the historical sexual positioning and deficit narrative constructions of Indigenous women by white peoples.

The historical and contemporary sexualized treatment of Indigenous women (and girls) by white men (and white women) has arguably transitioned from overt to covert behaviors (Ryan, 2019; Sullivan, 2018). Historically, this was evident in the practice of white men kidnapping Indigenous girls and women, forcing them into prostitution or sexual slavery, then labeling them as promiscuous (Sullivan, 2018). Aboriginal Wiradjuri scholar Sullivan (2018) underscores that the colonial narratives and positionings of white men deemed that all Indigenous women were available to them as prostitutes. Today, Indigenous women and girls continue to experience high levels of sexual harassment and violence, with the perpetrators being both non-Indigenous and Indigenous men (Cripps et al., 2019). These disproportionate instances of sexual violence from both non-Indigenous and Indigenous men has been reasoned as “the direct effect of gendered, colonial violence against Indigenous women” (van Rjiswijk, 2020, p. 34). The colonial slur labeling Indigenous women as promiscuous continues, as has been argued by Aboriginal Biripai woman Ryan (2019), via media framing and reporting. For example, Ryan (2019) high- lighted the case of Ms Daley, who in 2017 was brutally raped and murdered, but was instead framed by *The Sydney Morning Herald* (2017) newspaper as dying following a wild and dangerous sex orgy.



Within historical and contemporary colonizing practices, the sexism and racism of white men and white women have entrenched hierarchical boundaries and forced sexualized narratives onto Indigenous women. Through Indigenous women's continued resistance to oppressive forces, they are increasingly able to fight for, and self-determine their own narratives. However, resisting these patterns of historical and contemporary oppressions may take a large toll on their mental health. The research literature highlights that further work must be done in understanding the lived experiences of Indigenous women across the disciplines, and this is certainly an important role for public relations. Rather than commit to research that ultimately reinforces the sexism and racism embedded within the white male gaze, it is essential that such research instead engages with Indigenous women's standpoints (Moreton-Robinson, 2013) to better understand their lived experiences within an intersectional approach to public relations (Vardeman-Winter & Tindall, 2010). Many Indigenous women have argued that Indigenous feminism is a way of decolonization, and Indigenous women's standpoint theory provides a framework for Indigenous women to assert their roles in research, legitimize their stances, and embody movement toward decolonization (Moreton-Robinson, 2013).

## **7.5. Research approach**

### *7.5.1. Indigenous women's standpoint theory*

The co-authors of this paper are Indigenous women and the lead author is committed to an Indigenous woman's standpoint theoretical position. Indigenous women's standpoint theory is "a socially situated subject of knowledge" (Moreton-Robinson, 2013, p. 332),

that privileges reflection, consideration, and/or critique through ways of knowing (epistemology), ways of doing (axiology), and ways of being and belonging (ontology). The foundation and development of Indigenous women's standpoint theory was inspired by the approaches (and the gaps) in existing feminist and Indigenous standpoint theories (Moreton-Robinson, 2013).

As Indigenous women, our positionings and representations within a modern patriarchal and Eurocentric nation is unique and intersectional. Indigenous women's standpoint theory will therefore be integral in critiquing Eurocentric patriarchal constructions of public relations and centering the positions and voices of Indigenous women within the profession. As the basis for this research, Indigenous women's standpoint theory inspires the strength to resist colonization and the patriarchy, guides the methodology/method, and centers and privileges the Indigenous women participants' voices.

#### 7.5.2. *Participants*

Five Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women working in public relations and communications (identified under pseudonyms) participated in this study. The women originate from areas all over Australia, and thus each identifies with different Indigenous groups or nations. The women live in mid-to-large-sized Australian cities, and work or have worked in consultancies, universities, and Indigenous organizations. Some undertake public relations practices in their personal lives (media interviews, writing articles/opinion pieces, influential social media users).

The five women were sourced via existing networks and knowledge of the Indigenous Australian public relations practice, and were contacted by phone, email, and LinkedIn. The small sample size of this research was largely due to the underrepresentation of Indigenous women in the profession and the challenge in obtaining participants. Consent forms were provided to all participants, which outlined the collaborative role of the research, the use and recording of their stories and knowledges, and the steps for maintaining approval/ethics throughout the research journey.

### 7.5.3. *Data collection*

The method of yarning is an Indigenous and culturally appropriate storytelling approach in gathering data, advocating collaboration, and co-researching (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010). Yarning as a method is similar to unstructured interviewing and relies on collaboration and respect between researcher and participants, and agreement on all aspects of research and write-up. The yarning plans were flexible to suit a conversational, storytelling approach, with follow-up discussion allowing further expansion on key themes. Under this plan, discussions centered around themes of Indigenous Australian public relations and Indigenous women's experiences. At each yarning session, a gift card and pair of Indigenous made earrings (brand: *Haus of Dizzy* <https://hausofdizzy.com/>) were presented to the participants to represent the values of yarning (collaboration, unity, reciprocity) and to symbolize gratitude. Sessions were recorded one-on-one with the lead author and transcribed through a transcription program.

### 7.5.4. *Data analysis*

Data examination was performed with thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and record themes within the transcript sets (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis of the data was conducted in the NVIVO program, under a six-phase process of (1) becoming familiar with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for emerging themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining themes, and (6) conducting the write-up (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The transcripts were first authenticated through careful listening, comparison of text to the audio, and notation of resultant initial/early themes. The approved transcripts (by participants) were uploaded into the NVIVO program and a comprehensive breakdown of initial themes into subthemes was implemented. The five women who contributed to this paper have previously provided their voices and perspectives to another paper from our authorship: “Asserting an Indigenous theoretical framework in Australian public relations” (Clark et al., 2019). This published paper has separate themes and provides a theoretical view of Indigenous Australian public relations. Our forthcoming papers will utilize the remainder of the dataset to analyze additional themes.

## **7.6. Findings**

The five Indigenous women in this research commonly studied public relations and communications at university and are self-proclaimed feminists who entered public relations and communications to create positive change and to benefit their Indigenous communities. The following findings provide recognition to the perspectives and experiences of Indigenous women working within public relations, elaborating on the two themes of *Eurocentric and patriarchal experiences*; and *mental stress and distress* within the profession.

### 7.6.1. *Eurocentric and patriarchal experiences within Australian public relations*

The women openly discussed their experiences of whiteness, racism and/or the patriarchy in public relations and communications—whether that included struggling with the media, differences in collaboration styles with stakeholders, or an overrepresentation of white men within the public relations system. For example, Susan discussed the media’s continuing oppression and racism toward Indigenous peoples in discounting Indigenous stories:

*One of the difficulties working in marketing and communications for Indigenous perspectives is trying to cut through to mainstream media. . .they didn’t want to know about a positive story, because we don’t fit their pigeonhole categories of what an Indigenous person looks like.*

This stance from Susan is reflected within other public relations literature that has noted the role of the media in its negative reporting of Indigenous Australian peoples and communities (Clark, 2012; Clark et al., 2019; Fitch, 2020a; Johnston et al., 2018; Petersen, 2016; Sakinofsky et al., 2019). Whiteness is also evident within the public and government sectors. When working within Eurocentric government systems, Debra commented on bureaucratic constraints, timelines and budgets, and the pressures to balance Indigenous protocols and values with wider public relations strategies:

*It’s sometimes hard being at the table, because the government has its own demands, timeframes and budgets, so we’re not always able to do exactly what we would like to do or what we think is best practice. But we do the best we can to stay true to our principles in whatever it is that we’re asked to deliver.*

Debra also provided insights into the discrepancies and roles of non-Indigenous consultants from other agencies in pitching their business services:

*I watch advertising guys pitch, or other PR professionals pitch, and it's like, "we've got the answer for you" and we're always walking into pitch rooms going, "we don't know how to solve this. But here's the way that we're going to make sure that you get the answers you need. This is the process we're going to take to get the right comms solution for you." So, it's just totally different. I've been in pitches with other agencies where people have sort of looked at us cross-eyed and just gone, "no, you've got to sell, sell, sell."*

Debra's words express the systemic privileging of non-Indigenous standpoints and practices within public relations that, in the end, offer little prospect of meaningful engagement with Indigenous communities and peoples. The top-down pressures from government agencies with their own visions, timeframes and budgets provides minimal space for respecting Indigenous protocols and practices. Non-Indigenous public relations practitioners' and advertising agents' policies have little foundation in practices considered more culturally appropriate to Indigenous Australians. These examples of public, government, and advertising/public relations processes are confirmed in other research that has found superficial cultural engagement and dialog with Indigenous peoples (Clark & Bodkin-Andrews, 2021; Dutta & Elers, 2019; Fitch, 2020a).

White male privilege in Australian public relations literature is a topical and continual theme, and predominately discussed by non-Indigenous women scholars (Demetrious, 2014; Fitch, 2016; Fitch & Third, 2010; Keating, 2016a, 2016b; Rea, 2002; Sison, 2016;

Wolf, 2016). As a woman in a space that is overrepresented with white, privileged males, Stacey described her workplace experience:

*I think it's interesting being a woman in business, because I'm constantly at tables of, all white men, who are older than me, and wealthier than me, and have had different opportunities. . . you know, we don't talk about class in Australia. . . And, you can't help but be a feminist in those spaces.*

Stacey's insight provides further knowledge on intersectional considerations within public relations; namely, it highlights the dominance of white privileged men, and the ensuing need to identify as a feminist to rally against this very white, patriarchal, class-based presence. It is critical to note that this oppressive presence is far from rare, as Susan also discussed the invisibility and lack of voice that is forced upon her as an Indigenous woman:

*You feel like you're an invisible person when it's in the boardroom. You can say things to people, and it doesn't land, and then someone else says exactly what you've said – a middle- aged white man – and it's suddenly such a revelation.*

This ties back into Debra's experiences with other advertising agencies and public relations professionals. Examples from Susan and Debra both demonstrate and provide insight into the assumed privilege of the white patriarchy. Although Susan's experiences position her as the "other" (e.g. the cloak of invisibility that she wears), she uses her position as an Indigenous woman as motivation to succeed against the forces of the white patriarchy within public relations:

*We're not treated equally as Indigenous people or as women. Somebody said a term to me the other day and I loved it. I have been thinking about it a lot lately.*

*“Oh, to be a mediocre middle- aged white man, you could go so far. But, to be an Indigenous person or to be a woman, you have to be exceptional to go far”. That really motivates me to do things and to do them well. Like rebutting the stereotypes as well. They are the things that motivate me.*

Susan’s recognition of having “to be exceptional to go far” and repeated experiences of suppression within decision-making bodies have been reflected in other Australian public relations women’s and feminist discussions (e.g. Fitch, 2016; Keating, 2016a, 2016b; Rea, 2002; Sison, 2016). In Australian public relations, the reality for women is relegation to non-senior positions or the potential suppression and ignorance of their voice when they do reach senior levels (Fitch, 2016; Fitch & Third, 2010; Keating, 2016a, 2016b). Therefore, women must continue identifying and dismantling these inequalities and unequal power dynamics within the patriarchal norms of society and organizations.

Susan’s quote is additionally thought-provoking in her use of terms of “Indigenous person” or “woman” without specific reference to “Indigenous woman” and the particular struggles that Indigenous women encounter in the workplace (Fredericks & White, 2018; Moreton-Robinson, 2007; O’Sullivan, 2019; Thunig & Jones, 2020; White, 2010). Both women and Indigenous people experience oppressions, yet Indigenous women embody both intersecting factors (culture and gender) that are liable to be magnified under white patriarchal oppressions (Behrendt, 1993; Moreton-Robinson, 2000). Consequently, Indigenous feminism is increasingly recognized as a point of defiance and decolonization against the multilayered oppressions of racism, sexism, and classism (Behrendt, 1993; Fredericks, 2004; Huggins, 1994; Langton, 1989; Moreton-Robinson, 2000, 2013; Sullivan, 2018).



Conceivably, Susan's lack of the term "Indigenous woman" may be due to the shared stance or confliction from some Indigenous women who want to privilege their culture over mainstream feminism (Behrendt, 1993; Huggins, 1987; McQuire, 2015; White, 2010). For instance, influential Aboriginal Bidjara and Birri Gubba Juru scholar Huggins (1987, para. 16) said that "Black liberation for men and women seems a more important goal to many Black women than women's liberation." More recently, White (2010, p. 13) acknowledged that white women's role historically "has made it difficult for Indigenous women today to have a sisterhood with white women, who are seen as contributing to their historical oppression." Ultimately, in experiencing both Indigenous and women worldviews and positions, Indigenous women are likelier to encounter greater oppressions and are undervalued, underrepresented and discriminated against in their careers (Fredericks & White, 2018; Moreton-Robinson, 2007; O'Sullivan, 2019; Thunig & Jones, 2020; White, 2010).

#### 7.6.2. *Indigenous women's mental stress and distress within Australian public relations*

Two of the women relayed a mixture of stresses and experiences that impact on their mental distress within their career, including burnout and imposter syndrome, censorship and exploitation of bodies, and implications of dress code within the workplace. Stacey reflected on her experience of being an Indigenous woman and Indigenous feminist in public relations workplace contexts:

*I really believe that we carry intergenerational trauma in our bodies, and our bodies are hypersensitive to people's intentions. And I think*

*that that can be a very powerful thing that we hold as Aboriginal people being able to read a room...and I think you have to be a feminist in those spaces ...you can't help but be a feminist in those spaces. You know, you're the only woman there, and you feel the fact that you're an Aboriginal woman in so many ways, in your body you feel it.*

Stacey's description of our bodies as sites of intergenerational and historical trauma has been echoed by many powerful Indigenous women scholars, who have critiqued colonization and its white male gaze (Huggins, 1994; Moreton-Robinson, 2000, 2013; Ryan, 2019; Sullivan, 2018). Specifically, Aboriginal Koenpul, Quandamooka scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2013, p. 339) stated that "Indigenous bodies have been the focus of western surveillance, punishment, containment, discipline and theorising", and thus Indigenous women must be continually vigilant against the patriarchal forces that objectify and abuse their bodies and minds. This unfortunate, but necessary, observance is expanded upon by Stacey, who highlighted the impact of the white male gaze on Indigenous women in the workforce:

*I think that we have to consider that we are sexualized as women, working in male spaces, as Aboriginal women, and there's been such a history of abuse and a particular lens put to viewing Aboriginal women's sexuality ... I think that affects all of us in different ways, and how we walk and hold ourselves and dress. I want to be at home in my own sexuality as an Aboriginal woman, but I also am conscious of my safety in Australia.*

In relation to Stacey's views, Moreton-Robinson (2000, p. 170) elaborated that Indigenous women's historical "positioning in white society as sexual deviants means that they are represented as being sexually available and easily accessed." Historically, white women constructed stereotypes and positioned narratives of Indigenous women as being promiscuous and lacking in self-respect due to miscegenation (read: coercion) with white men (Moreton-Robinson, 2000; Sullivan, 2018). Moreton-Robinson (2000, p. 168) argued that these constructed narratives "meant that middle-class white women positioned her as competition". This residual effect, therefore, continues to impact on Indigenous women's sexual safety and consciousness of bodies, which has filtered down into clothing and dress choices. Stacey expanded upon this notion through an example of the public relations industry standard of fashion and the ramifications of Indigenous women's mental distress in conforming to it:

*Marketing teams everywhere I've worked are predominantly women and really stylish, kind of well put together, and well thought out looking women. So, I think there's a bit of an industry standard around PR and comms with that. And, I think as Aboriginal women we have different considerations that there's lots of us [who] suffer imposter syndrome when we're in certain places, and feel like we have to be more intentional with our dressing, or more put together so that we kind of don't feel out of place.*

Within public relations research, British and Australian scholars have highlighted the stereotypical embodiment of the public relations practitioner as a white middle-class woman (Edwards, 2018; Fitch, 2020b). Demetrious (2014) and Fitch (2020b) also highlight the identified forms of professional and occupational dress of Australian public

relations practitioners. Evidently, in comparison to Stacey's comment on Indigenous women having different considerations, Indigenous women do indeed bear an imposition of a different dress and fashion standard within public relations and the imposter syndrome that comes into play with conforming to Western notions of fashion. This sexualization and abuse from the white male gaze, and the enforced racialized and sexualized pressures leading to imposter syndrome, can negatively impact upon Indigenous women within the public relations profession.

Imposter syndrome within Indigenous contexts is well documented anecdotally (Liddle, 2015) and in scholarship (Schwartz, 2018). Imposter syndrome is classified as feeling inadequate and/or less intelligent than others, mostly in the context of study and work (Schwartz, 2018). Aboriginal Arrernte woman Celeste Liddle (2015, para. 6), in referring to imposter syndrome for Indigenous women, stated that:

*[...] black women are socially not as entitled to take up space as white women. Our experiences are special, are marginal and therefore, no matter how much we may have achieved, reside on the periphery. This is part self-perpetuating and part socially-reinforced.*

Working across both Indigenous contexts and mainstream public relations, Lily and Stacey revealed their experiences of workplace burnout. Workplace burnout is not only the result of long hours and weekend work, but also comes from cultural pressures that are upsetting and triggering: community obligations, the effects of colonization manifested within the workplace, racism from white colleagues and stakeholders, and not being able to fully "clock off" the job when you live and breathe Indigeneity. Lily spoke about the health toll on Indigenous peoples who work within Indigenous affairs:

*A lot of [Indigenous] people get burnt out and kind of have to step away eventually. It's not a long-term option to stay in the one place for a really long time.*

Stacey also emphasized the mental toll of working within Indigenous affairs:

*I'm a real advocate for self-care. I think that, no matter what job you have in Aboriginal Affairs, it takes a huge toll on your emotional and physical well-being.*

Lily further explained why working within Indigenous contexts can be so draining on your health and mental distress:

*It's because you are so personally invested in it - and, a lot of the time you're not working in, ultra-positive stuff. It's always issues based, or, you know, trying to fix a problem or something like that ... It's, 24/7, it's not a hat that you can just take off. You're constantly embedded into it.*

Racism and Indigenous work stress/burnout for other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in varying professions are evident (Bargallie, 2020; Petray & Collin, 2017; Thunig & Jones, 2020; White, 2010) and demonstrate almost identical themes, aligning with the pressures and experiences that Indigenous women are all subject to. The perpetuation of public relations theory and practice committing to Eurocentric patriarchal foundations marginalizes all women and can create negative emotional responses and stress. The emerging research on the emotional labor (emotional response and work stress), work labor, and work burnout within public relations suggests the potential impact

on women's mental health (Keating, 2016a, 2016b; Yeomans, 2019). For example, Yeomans (2019) conveyed insights into the emotional demand and labor of women practitioners working within public relations, often under gendered conditions. Yet, although these are important texts, they lack the added burden of "race" and its intersectional relationship with Indigenous women.

## **7.7. Discussion: whiteness, gender, and Indigenous women**

This paper has provided insight into some of the issues that Indigenous women in public relations experience, especially revealing their encounters in resisting Eurocentric, hierarchical ways of managing public relations, with the resultant effects of hypersexualization and work burnout. The following section summarizes the findings and provides suggestions and solutions for decolonizing whiteness and the patriarchy and addressing Indigenous women's mental stress and distress that often leads to burnout.

### *7.7.1. Decolonizing whiteness and the patriarchy*

Decolonizing Australian public relations involves building a framework to examine systemic whiteness, gender imbalances, and patriarchal control in all areas of the profession. This could reveal how specific experiences of the Indigenous women reflect whiteness. For instance, the Indigenous women participants described their difficulties of obtaining news placements for Indigenous stories or encounters of culturally inappropriate engagement with non-Indigenous clients. Numerous scholars have described examples of racism and whiteness in Australian public relations practices (Clark & Bodkin-Andrews, 2021; Clark et al., 2019; Fitch, 2020a; Johnston et al., 2018;

Petersen, 2016; Sakinofsky et al., 2019) and similarly confirm the perpetuation of systemic whiteness and the need to decolonize the industry. This paper urges all Australian public relations practitioners to review the existing literature on Indigenous reporting and presenting (Janke & Guivarra, 2006; Media Diversity Australia, 2018) and Indigenous Australian (Clark et al., 2019) and Māori-led New Zealand engagement within public relations (Dutta & Elers, 2019; Love & Tilley, 2014; Motion et al., 2012).

This literature reveals that Indigenous women's lived experiences in public relations have been continually framed as a fight against colonization and white patriarchal systems of class, whiteness, and gender. For example, the women shared their difficult experiences dealing with white men in boardroom meetings, and the class-based, gendered, and cultural issues that emerged from such encounters. Recent scholarship continues to demonstrate that male privilege and the white patriarchy is highly evident within non-Indigenous women's contexts (Demetriou, 2014; Fitch, 2016; Fitch & Third, 2010; Keating, 2013, 2016a, 2016b; Rea, 2002; Sison, 2016; Wolf, 2016). Within the findings, Indigenous feminism has been noted by scholars as an ideology that aims to confront white patriarchal issues. Therefore, in order to decolonize and dismantle the power of whiteness and the patriarchy within public relations, the perspectives of Indigenous women need to be heard, and their right to self-determine their own narratives needs to be asserted. This includes further research and privileging of multiple intersectional factors of class, disabilities, and Indigenous Australian, Queer and Gender Diverse peoples (O'Sullivan, 2015; Sullivan & Day, 2019). From this, public relations intersectional considerations can assist in providing context and research to the varying intersecting factors of Indigenous women in the discipline (see Tindall and Waters, 2013 and Vardeman-Winter & Tindall, 2010).

### 7.7.2. *Addressing Indigenous women's mental distress*

The personal health toll due to systemic whiteness and gender discrimination within Australian public relations is clearly evident from some of the narratives told by the women in this study. These examples highlight shared positionings related to the white male gaze, sexualization, and burnout in work, and correlate to the layered, oppressive hierarchies, sexism, and racism that Indigenous women continue to experience (Behrendt, 1993; Huggins, 1987). One of the women (Stacey) discussed her experience of imposter syndrome when conforming to white (and patriarchal) standards of dress. This illustrated the conflicting and taxing nature of public relations for Indigenous women, who too often are forced to meet some sexualized-white-female prototype, while simultaneously being rejected of this prototype itself (Fitch, 2020b; Edwards, 2018; Moreton-Robinson, 2000). The work of Demetrious (2014) and Fitch (2020b, 2020c) similarly highlights sexualization embodied by industry standards of gendered dress within Australian public relations. However, this limited body of scholarship fails to make an intersectional analysis of Indigeneity with gender and does not consider the impact of historical narratives that have been imposed upon Indigenous women by white men and white women. Further research is needed on the connections between the Australian public relations standard of dress, Indigeneity, gendered representations, and layered contexts of colonization.

Present findings reveal that two of the women experienced mental stress and distress over work burnout—a common theme within broader public relations studies (see Keating 2016a, 2016b; Yeomans, 2019) and Indigenous contexts (see Bargallie, 2020; Petray &



Collin, 2017). For these two women, work burnout involved more than working long and hectic hours; it encompassed racism, the effects of residual colonization and the 24/7 pressures of fulfilling Indigenous communal responsibilities. Further analysis of the toll of public relations on Indigenous women is needed: for example, on issues such as media racism and social media trolling. Specifically, this paper argues for more research on Indigenous women's mental distress caused by constantly working with social media as part of their jobs in the public relations arena. Highlighting and diagnosing Indigenous women's negative experiences within the profession could lead to changes within public relations theory and practice. These could include implementing structures to relieve the cultural and mental distress of Indigenous women practitioners and signal a movement toward the decolonization of whiteness, racism, and sexism within Australian public relations.

## **7.8. Conclusion**

A focus on Indigenous Australian public relations research has been slowly increasing within academia; however, the voices of Indigenous women heard in this paper suggest that recognition of Indigeneity still needs to be fought for within public relations and included in feminist discourse. This paper has contributed contextual understanding of the complexities surrounding Indigeneity and gender and the need to challenge the white patriarchal system. Only when we dismantle its power will we reach a proper understanding of the reality and omnipresence of whiteness and racism within Australian public relations. Although this paper provides a forum for Indigenous women's voices on whiteness, sexism, feminism, intersectionality and Indigeneity within Australian public relations, more empirical (yet culturally safe) research is required. Critical theoretical

discussions surrounding race, gender, and other diverse intersectional contexts must also occur.

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## **8. Discussion and conclusion**

### **8.1. Introduction**

As I finalize this thesis in 2020—amid the COVID-19 pandemic and the continued Black Lives Matter protests—I reflect on the importance of public relations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organizations. As reiterated throughout this thesis, public relations plays a significant role in transformational social change, and if we consider these two defining features of 2020 within public relations contexts, it is clear that this discipline can further understanding of and engagement with Indigenous issues.

The Black Lives Matter movement resonates in Australia. It advocates for unity and support from many minority groups, in the US and beyond, who suffer or have suffered racism at the hands of the police and legal systems (Bond, 2020; Marsh, 2020). Black Lives Matter protests were held all around Australia, and speakers were introduced from Australian Indigenous, African, African American, Bangladeshi, Papua New Guinean, and Peruvian backgrounds (Bond, 2020; Marsh, 2020). The focus within the Australian movement calls attention to the continued overrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in both rates of incarceration and deaths in custody (Bond, 2020; Bond et al., 2020; Geia et al., 2020). These related issues have been at the forefront of Australian Indigenous consciousness since the release of the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* report in 1991 (Bond, 2020; Bond et al., 2020; NATSILS, 2020). In 2020, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services has crowdfunded over \$123,000 and soon there will be a dedicated full-time Australian Indigenous crusader to

“create a campaign to end Black deaths in custody” (NATSILS, 2020, para 2; Moore, 2020). The global Black Lives Matter movement provides a joint platform for solidarity, and further advocacy may provide increased and funded campaigning roles to help cease Australian Black deaths in custody.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the lives of all Australians and has highlighted the importance of timely and appropriate campaigns to warn the public of the deadly consequences of this virus. Communication to Indigenous peoples and communities regarding the COVID-19 pandemic had to demonstrate certain features: it needed to be disseminated in numerous Indigenous languages and its rhetoric and design needed to be culturally appropriate (33 Creative, 2020; Aboriginal Health Television, n.d.; Akuhata-Huntington et al., 2020; Briggs, 2020; First Nations Media Australia, n.d.; Finlay & Wenitong, 2020; Moodie et al., 2020; Power et al., 2020). Visual communication and storytelling of COVID-19 through the medium of dot paintings were created by members from the Uluru/Mutitjulu area of the Northern Territory (Haskin, 2020). Campaigns needed to be run in different languages, as well as in Indigenous-English, to communicate effectively with stories and in languages that all Indigenous communities could understand (CAAMA, 2020; Haskin, 2020; ICTV, 2020). This is an essential practice, as there are about 120 separate spoken Indigenous languages (reduced from 250–500 since colonization). Although, less than 10 percent of Indigenous peoples speak an Indigenous language at home (see National Indigenous Languages Report - Commonwealth of Australia, 2020).

Given the fundamental role of these two critical events in 2020, the importance of Indigenous COVID-19 communication strategies and the Black Lives Matter movement

were appropriately emphasized and advocated through university studies and online seminars. Deakin University's Student Comms Chat (2020) hosted the online Facebook live session entitled "Beyond the hashtags: The role of communicators in achieving equity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples". This session stressed the importance of communication in addressing the social and political concerns of Indigenous Australian peoples (Student Comms Chat, 2020). This session involved a guest panel of three Australian Indigenous communicators, including Magaram, Wuthathi and Bindal Juru woman Nancia Guivarra (Program Manager, First Nations Media Australia), Yulluna communications practitioner Tiernan Campbell O'Brien (Senior Consultant, Cox Inall Ridgeway), and Ngoonooru Wadjari Yamatji scholar Karinda Burns (Senior Lecturer, Deakin University). These scholars emphasized that future non-Indigenous public relations practitioners must unlearn their Eurocentric biases and privileges and educate themselves about Indigenous cultures, protocols, ethics, and experiences with continued colonialism.

Public relations within Indigenous contexts centers, strategizes, and transforms the role of storytelling and rhetoric. This thesis therefore continues to advocate and advance the role and importance of public relations and communications within the Indigenous sphere. Within this thesis, I aimed to investigate the practices, roles and experiences of Indigenous Australian public relations from the standpoints of Indigenous women. Specifically, I asked:

- How can we build a process to decolonize Australia's public relations industry utilizing Indigenous standpoints?
- What is Indigenous Australian public relations in practice?

- What are the narratives and roles that Indigenous women have provided to the development of Indigenous Australian public relations?

To interrogate colonization and whiteness within the Australian public relations profession and to self-determine opposing narratives, the following chapter details the conceptual frameworks, methodologies, and methods that were chosen to investigate Indigenous Australian public relations and how I have aimed to center the narratives, practices, and strategies of Indigenous peoples, in particular Indigenous women, within public relations contexts. To increase these further knowledges and critique colonization within the profession, a decolonizing framework for the Australian public relations industry will be later introduced.

## **8.2. Theoretical frameworks and research approaches**

This thesis was guided by a conceptual framework of Indigenous Decolonization theory (Laenui, 2000; Muller, 2014) and Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory (Moreton-Robinson, 2013). These twin conceptual frameworks informed my research methodology of Indigenous storytelling (Archibald, 2008; Archibald et al., 2019; De Santolo, 2019; Kovach, 2010; Martin, 2008; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008) and the methods of Indigenous yarning (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010) and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The five-stage decolonizing process of Hawaiian scholar Poka Laenui (2000) and the additional stage (Healing and Forgiveness) contributed by Indigenous Australian woman Lorraine Muller (2014) resulted in a final six-stage framework: *Rediscovery and Recovery; Mourning; Healing and Forgiveness: Reclaiming Wellbeing and Harmony; Dreaming; Commitment; and Action: Decolonizing knowledge*. The first stage of



*Rediscovery and Recovery* emphasizes an awareness of the strategies of colonization and the harm this systemic policy inflicted upon Indigenous peoples. The second stage of *Mourning* advocates the autonomy and freedom to grieve the ongoing effects of colonization. The third stage of *Healing and Forgiveness* transitions from mourning into a rejuvenation and renewal of spirit, wellbeing, and strength. The fourth stage of *Dreaming* emphasizes action and the aspirational planning of new social structures in moving forward. The fifth stage of *Commitment* reflects thoughtful commitment to a decolonization process. Finally, the sixth stage of *Action* progresses decolonization in steps toward meaningful change.

Quandamooka woman Aileen Moreton-Robinson's (2013) Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory positions Indigenous women's ways of being and belonging (ontology), ways of knowing (epistemology), and ways of doing (axiology) as an overarching foundation to assert Indigenous women's identities and worldviews. Ways of being and belonging (ontology) directs Indigenous women to outline and convey their cultural nations, groups, and knowledges. Ways of Knowing (epistemology) guides Indigenous women to assert their knowledges, drawing on their life experiences, culture, family, community, as well as Western-based knowledge. Ways of doing (axiology) connects Indigenous women's ontology and epistemology to represent and promote their cultural and personal values and practices within their personal and/or professional career directions. For instance, my Indigenous women's standpoint, my Nunga Weena Wanggan-Mirn positioning, acknowledges my worldview and life experiences to provide insight into how my perception of public relations, my cultural identity, and my values both frame and inform the study. It was additionally a significant context of relatedness, connection, and sisterhood with my Indigenous women research participants.

Indigenous research methodologies reflect the growth of self-determination that stems from decolonizing research approaches and are strongly centered on the idea of giving back to community (Foley, 2003; Kovach, 2010; Martin, 2003; Moreton-Robinson, 2013; Moreton-Robinson & Walter, 2009; Nakata, 2002, 2007; Rigney, 1997, 1999; Wilson, 2008). Indigenous storytelling can be a process of decolonization (Sium & Ritskes, 2013) and is a culturally significant methodology that aligns with Indigenous cultural values of sharing (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2016). This thesis was inspired by Indigenous storytelling methodologies to meet an overarching need to privilege the narratives of the Indigenous women research participants (Archibald, 2008; Archibald et al., 2019; De Santolo, 2019; Kovach, 2010; Martin, 2008; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). Indigenous storytelling was intrinsic to the overall structure of this thesis and emphasized as educational formats/passing down knowledges to the next generation. It was a significant approach of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of being and doing against Eurocentric standards and methods of research. An Indigenous storytelling methodology honors and centers this culturally significant practice through the respectful conducting of research protocols and data collection.

The findings were gathered through the Indigenous method of yarning, with a series of interviews with five Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women employed in the public relations or communications professions (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Carlson & Frazer, 2018; Geia et al., 2013; Kovach, 2010; Mooney et al., 2018; Ober, 2017; Walker et al., 2013; White, 2010). The participants are either currently working, or have worked in sectors including higher education, government, private organizations, and consultancies.

The resultant data was subjected to thematic analysis in what was a flexible and culturally

respectful approach to identifying themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Gibson et al., 2020; Murrup-Stewart et al., 2020). Inspired by Indigenous storytelling values, certain extracts of their oral contributions were highlighted to privilege and center their unique voices. The Indigenous women participants were asked to be co-researchers/participants, which as a role emphasized them as the owners of their knowledges and centered collective authorship in the published findings. To decolonize Eurocentric knowledges, disseminating our collective wisdoms in journal article formats was important.

Overall, by utilizing Indigenous Decolonization theory (Laenui, 2000; Muller, 2014) and Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory (Moreton-Robinson, 2013) I aimed to provide insight into the field of public relations from the standpoints of Indigenous women. The six stages of Indigenous Decolonization theory and Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory are embedded throughout the chapters and journal articles that formulate this thesis and was attempted through the selection of Indigenous research methodologies and methods. These theoretical frameworks and Indigenous research methodologies and methods formed the backbone of six journal articles that are included within this thesis. The six journal articles (henceforth referred to as Chapters) provide a linear narrative with a common aim to challenge Eurocentric patriarchal ways of thinking and privilege Indigenous ways of perceiving and practicing public relations.

The first two chapters (co-authored with my supervisor Professor Gawaian Bodkin-Andrews), are literature reviews that reflect the initial steps of Indigenous decolonization and activism by dismantling and deconstructing systems of colonial control, both historically and contemporarily. Material presented in these chapters (2 and 3) contributed to the first three stages of Indigenous decolonization theory (*1. Rediscovery*

*and Recovery; 2. Mourning; and 3. Healing and Forgiveness* - Laenui, 2000) by highlighting how colonization is still evident in public relations narratives and practices (e.g., by ignoring Indigenous contributions to the discipline). My learnt knowledges and anger that resulted from the experiences of the first two stages were channeled through the third stage of *Healing* by asserting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practices and ensuring that respect and homage were reflected within the story of Chapter 3.

The subsequent four chapters (co-authored with the Indigenous women participants) were situated within the remaining three stages of Indigenous decolonization theory (*Dreaming; Commitment; and Action* - Laenui, 2000; Muller, 2014) and Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory (Moreton-Robinson, 2013). These Chapters center the participants' narratives to assert powerful Indigenous storytelling as they recount their experiences as Indigenous women working within the profession. The themes of *Dreaming* and *Commitment* was achieved through planning these chapters and the resulting pragmatic action and impact that these chapters will hopefully achieve, including how best to present the findings and privilege Indigenous voices over Eurocentric positions. *Action* occurred through the completion of this thesis and the resultant publication of these chapters to international and national journals. The following sections (8.4; 8.5; and 8.6) answer the three research aims and outline the narratives within the chapters under three overarching themes.

### **8.3. Dismantling colonization and whiteness within Australian public relations**

Modern forms of colonization and whiteness still occur today, often in epistemic contexts, and are manifest within professional or career disciplines. Historical practices of public relations display the colonial and racist practices of negative typecasting, and deficit framing of discourses that usually target certain ethnic or racial groups (Edwards, 2018; Munshi & Edwards, 2011; Munshi, Kurian & Xifra, 2017). Today, colonialist forces continue to employ racially based control tactics through the pervasive influence of global capitalism, which imbues all practices of public relations (Dutta & Elers, 2019; Edwards, 2018; Munshi & Edwards, 2011). The first research question of this thesis asked, *How can we build a process to decolonize Australia's public relations industry utilizing Indigenous standpoints?* Chapters 2 and 3 provide insight into the various ways to initiate the process of decolonization within public relations and reflect the standpoints of both myself and my supervisor, Professor Gawaian Bodkin-Andrews (of the D'harawal Nation).

In Chapter 2, the impact of colonization within the history of Australian public relations was critiqued using the framework of Poka Laenui's (2000) five interrelated stages of colonization. These are:

1. *Denial and Withdrawal*
2. *Destruction/Eradication*
3. *Denigration/Belittlement/insult*
4. *Surface Accommodation/Tokenism*
5. *Transformation/Exploitation.*

The first stage of *Denial and Withdrawal* refers to attempts of colonizers to disregard and remove the livelihoods of Indigenous peoples. The next stage of *Destruction/Eradication*

highlights continued attempts to remove and eliminate Indigenous people's cultures and practices. Next, *Denigration/Belittlement/Insult* moves to the stage of devaluing Indigenous peoples and cultures. This is done, for instance, by applying stereotyped descriptors to Indigenous people, such as "savage" or "uncivilized". The next stage, *Surface Accommodation/Tokenism* superficially acknowledges aspects of Indigenous cultures but only with a tokenistic level of acceptance; this might include, for example, romanticized depictions of Indigenous people and their way of life. Finally, the stage of *Transformation/Exploitation* transitions to exploitation and corruption by the colonizer, who seeks to use Indigenous peoples and communities for their own benefit and without any compensation.

As we examined the impact of colonization on the Australian public relations profession, the five stages of colonization (Laenui, 2000) represented a useful way to highlight a continuation of Eurocentric and racist practices. Early historical examples include the justification of land ownership made by the white colonizers through the principle of *terra nullius*, and stereotypes of Indigenous peoples as "savage" and "primitive" that were reproduced widely in the media, government campaigns, and school teachings (Molnar & Meadows, 2001; Turnbull, 2010). These historical examples are clearly situated within Poka Laenui's (2000) first two stages of *Denial and Withdrawal*; and *Destruction/Eradication*.

The effects of colonization in contemporary times extend to public relations' organizational contexts. One quoted example in Chapter 2 illustrates contemporary Eurocentric practices concerning the Channel Seven *Sunrise* program. In 2018, a panel of white journalists discussed the status of Indigenous childcare and resulted in negative

publicity and poor issues management (Hirini, 2018). Their poor issues management included a complete lack of awareness of the very colonial stance the program was assuming and continued deficit discourse about Indigenous peoples and their communities. This illustration of *Sunrise* was identified in Chapter 2 as representing the third stage of colonization theory (*Denigration/Belittlement/Insult*).

The public relations discipline is founded on Eurocentric ideas that discount the lived experiences of diverse Australian populations, fail to engage with Indigenous communities, and play a significant role in maintaining deficit discourses (Fitch, 2020a; Macnamara, 2012; Public Relations Institute of Australia, 2016; Sakinofsky et al., 2019; Thomas, Jakubowicz & Norman, 2019). This phenomenon stems from whiteness within dominant public relations theories (especially the Excellence theory), which still define contemporary public relations practice (Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Edwards & Hodges, 2011; Fitch, 2016; L'Etang, 2013; Pieczka, 2016). This ideology continues to silence, marginalize, and demoralize Indigenous Australian history, culture, and peoples, and thus falls within Stage 4 of the colonization framework (*Surface accommodation/Tokenism*).

Another example concerned two experiences by the same Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara artist, Elizabeth Close, and her encounters with the phenomenon of “corporate Indigenizing.” Two organizations (*Qantas* and the *Adelaide36ers*) separately approached Close to request her artistic services, but seemingly without payment. In response to this negative publicity, the two organizations implemented differing issues management strategies (Adelaide36ers, 2019; Boti Nagy, 2019; Burton-Bradley, 2017). Their poor behaviors were identified as falling within the final stage of colonization theory.

Following a critique of colonial systems and practices within Australian public relations, the third chapter considered the reconceptualization of the industry by exploring Indigenous public relations strategies and tactics that have been practiced since time immemorial. Critical public relations scholars have explored alternative historical narratives to move away from the profession's corporate and capitalist foundations (Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Edwards, 2018; L'Etang, 2015). Within this new historical narrative, many critical and postcolonial scholars argue that we should pay attention to the significant role that activism has played in historical public relations practices (Robertson & Crawford, 2018; Edwards, 2018; L'Etang, 2015; Macnamara & Crawford, 2010; O'Brien, 2018; Vardeman, Kennedy & Little, 2020). Indeed, Coombs and Holladay (2007) argue that activists were the first public relations practitioners.

In contrast, the official historical timeline of the Australian public relations profession boasts its beginnings as during World War II. In response, Macnamara and Crawford (2010) pointed out that the start of Australian public relations may be tagged as the earliest Australia Day celebrations, albeit from Eurocentric contributions. Within these texts, Indigenous involvement is rarely mentioned. When it is recognized, it is often classed as an example of activism to combat government propaganda, rather than as any substantial pioneering activism that came under the banner of Australian public relations (Macnamara, 2012; Sheehan, 2007; Sheehan & Galloway, 2014; Turnbull, 2010). Chapter 3 attempted to rectify this gap by critiquing the prevailing Eurocentric public relations historical narrative and asserting that Indigenous practices of public relations could be identified from pre--and-post-colonization.



Public relations-type practices from Indigenous peoples prior to colonization included message sticks used as letters, maps or passports, traditional versions of the modern Welcome to Country ceremonies, diplomatic and cross-Country engagement protocols, and cultural traditions such as rock art, smoke signals, and songlines (Bodkin, 2013; Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2016; Carlson & Frazer, 2016; Cheal, n.d.; De Santolo, 2019; Farman, 2018; Hmorek, 2019; Kwaymullina, 2017; Macnamara, 2012; Martin, 2008; Muller, 2014; Murkett, 2012; Turnbull, 2010). Many of these traditions are still extant, whether symbolically, ceremonially, or professionally (AIATSIS, 2018; Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2016; Murkett, 2012).

Following colonization in 1788, the Sydney region witnessed the Frontier Wars between the Aboriginal inhabitants and the new European invaders (Newbury, 1999; Reynolds, 2013). During this conflict Aboriginal groups used sophisticated communication strategies, military campaigning, guerrilla tactics, and strategic alliances (Newbury, 1999). In the 1840s, a group of Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples petitioned Queen Victoria and resulted in the return of Aboriginal prisoners from Flinders Island to the Tasmanian mainland (Burrows, 2014; Molnar & Meadows, 2001; Sheehan & Galloway, 2014; Rimon, 2006). This is arguably the first documented form of written Indigenous protest (Dudgeon & Bray, 2016; Gamboz, 2012). The mid-to-late 1800s witnessed the initiation of marches, involving Indigenous spokespeople using the media in what were forms of structured and organized political campaigns (Attwood & Markus, 2004; Newbury, 1999). These included the 1870s–1880s land rights protests from the members of the Victorian Aboriginal Coranderrk Mission (Attwood & Markus, 2004; Newbury, 1999) and Indigenous boycotts of the 1888 Australia Day celebration (Clarke & Safi, 2016; Heiss, 2013).

From the early 1900s until the 1940s, sophisticated public relations campaigning emerged through the founding of national organizations: the Australian Aboriginal Progressives Association, the Australian Aborigines' League, and the Aborigines Progressives Association (AIATSIS, n.d.; Attwood & Markus, 2004; Burrows, 2014; Aborigines Progressive Association et al., 1938; Foley & Anderson, 2006; Maynard, 2007). Their collective strategies included public meetings, petitions, media coverage, letters to newspapers, relationship management (with non-Indigenous supporters and sympathizers), collaborations with other Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations, propaganda, and marches (AIATSIS, n.d.; Attwood & Markus, 2004; Burrows, 2014; Aborigines Progressive Association et al., 1938; Foley & Anderson, 2006; Maynard, 2007). Notably, on 26 January 1938, both the Australian Aborigines' League and the Aborigines Progressives Association led the Day of Mourning protest, a large-scale civil rights demonstration and campaign to mark the 150-year anniversary of the invasion of Australia and the following impact of colonization on Indigenous people (Aborigines Progressive Association et al., 1938; AIATSIS, n.d.).

From these historical facts, Chapter 3 presented three main points that contribute to further awareness of an Indigenous presence within the public relations discipline. Firstly, Indigenous peoples have been practicing forms of public relations long before the arrival of white settlers/invaders. Secondly, the modern form of Australian public relations commenced from the Aboriginal military and protest campaigns during the Australian Frontier Wars. Thirdly, the establishment of the Australian Aborigines Progressives Association in the 1920s heralded sophisticated and comprehensive public relations campaigns and strategies.

In answering the first research question of this thesis and initiating a decolonizing agenda within Australian public relations, our work in Chapter 2 provided a rationale for the need for decolonization and Chapter 3 argued for the reconceptualization of the Australian public relations profession through the assertion of Indigenous theory and practice. This was attempted by first identifying the whiteness and racism that is evident within the profession, followed by a period of mourning the harmful effects of colonization, and finally transforming these painful findings into a celebration of Indigenous culture and strength. Personally, I have experienced racism and discrimination within the public relations profession, and this was empowering for me to substantially delve into and critique the whiteness and racism in the industry through the lens of a colonizing framework (Laenui, 2000). Of course, with uncovering harmful truths comes Mourning and it was hard at times to further learn about racist policies and propaganda within public relations, both from the past and presently. Through Healing, I centered an increased understanding of the powerful knowledges of Indigenous Australian cultural practices, narratives, and contributions of communications. Chapter 2 was incredibly inspiring, empowering, and revering, and was an ideal springboard into the following Chapters which situated self-determining Indigenous Australian public relations practices into contemporary times.

#### **8.4. Self-determining Indigenous practices and protocols within Australian public relations**

Postcolonial and decolonial stances within public relations seek to interrogate whiteness, support oppressed and minority groups, and advocate for self-determination (Dutta, 2016;

Dutta & Elers, 2019; Love & Tilley, 2014; Munshi, Kurian & Xifra, 2017; Sison, 2016). With a focus of decolonial and decolonizing strategies, Indigenous Australian public relations examines the foundations of activism, uses of media and social media, and publicity strategies for Indigenous community organizations (Clark, 2011, 2012; Fitch, 2020a; Johnston, Forde & Robertson, 2018; Petersen, 2016; Sakinofski et al., 2019). However, to date there has been no research that centers Indigenous women's voices. To address this gap, the second research aim asked, *What is Indigenous Australian public relations in practice?* and the following chapters of four and five considered the role that Indigenous women scholars and practitioners can play in highlighting and countering the evidence of whiteness and colonial control that imbues the profession.

The fourth chapter examined the practice of Indigenous Australian public relations in detail and offered a first attempt at articulating a theoretical framework and academic protocols for the profession. Several definitions of Indigenous Australian public relations have already been provided (Clark, 2011, 2012; Petersen, 2016; Sakinofsky, 2013) and in Chapter 4 (p. 153) we suggested the following updated definition of Indigenous Australian public relations practices:

*The deliberate act of establishing and maintaining relationships between stakeholders, incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural protocols and values and/or communicating for social change and self-determination with and/or on behalf of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.*

Prior research on Indigenous community-controlled organizations has identified that Indigenous values and activism for social change were adopted as guiding principles. Studies also noted within these organizations an emphasis on relationships and

community engagement, seeking out positive media opportunities, and flexible work roles (Clark, 2011, 2012; Petersen, 2016). Partly based on these findings, we developed an expanded theoretical framework of Australian public relations to include the important elements of decolonization and self-determination as well as Indigenous cultural communication practices. This new theoretical framework is presented in Chapter 4 as a seven-themed structure, as set out below: 1. Versatility of roles, 2. Indigenous philosophy and cultural understandings, 3. Indigenous justice and social change, 4. Indigenous storytelling, 5. Indigenous diplomatic practices, 6. Interrelatedness and dialogical communication, and 7. Narrative empowerment.

The first theme, *Versatility of roles*, considers that the usual terminology of public relations roles, (for example, described as communications or marketing), could be flexible if used within Indigenous Australian public relations practices. We argue that any definition of public relations is complex and could go beyond the traditional understanding of public relations. The second theme, *Indigenous philosophy*, entails learning about culturally appropriate and respectful ethical protocols and provides a basis for public relations professionals to respectfully engage with Indigenous communities. The third theme, *Indigenous justice*, sees public relations as a catalyst that could assist with healing the effects of colonization and promote Indigenous self-determination so that Indigenous ways of communication can be privileged and ultimately lead to social change.

The fourth theme, *Indigenous storytelling*, emphasizes public relations as a valuable medium for visual, written, or aural story, which can certainly be a powerful tool to promote the ideals of an organization or social movement. The fifth theme, *Indigenous*

*diplomacy*, recognizes that Indigenous public relations practitioners need to work, communicate, and engage across both Eurocentric and Indigenous contexts. The sixth theme, *Interrelatedness*, asserts that respectful communication approaches with Indigenous peoples should be reciprocal, ethical, and two-way. The final and seventh theme of *Narrative empowerment*, underlines the importance of positive storytelling within public relations. This applies in the context of providing stories to the media or when communicating in other forms such as advertising, websites, and newsletters.

Activism in the shape of positive media stories is a critical area of contemporary Indigenous Australian public relations, and this is reflected in Chapter 5 which covers Indigenous activist theory and its relation to public relations practices. Prior research on Indigenous activism within Australian public relations literature has addressed the need to reverse negative narratives about Indigenous people and communities (Clark, 2011, 2012; Fitch, 2020a; Johnston, Forde & Robertson, 2018; Petersen, 2016; Sakinofski et al., 2019). This research has illuminated effective strategies of public relations practitioners working within Indigenous organizations or Indigenous activists harnessing public relations strategies (Clark, 2011, 2012; Fitch, 2020a; Petersen, 2016; Sakinofski et al., 2019). To further emphasize the link between activism and Indigenous organizations, research outside the public relations discipline has demonstrated some strategies of Indigenous media campaigns and broader uses of social media (Bacon, 2005; Carlson et al., 2017; Carlson & Frazer, 2016; Cook, 2015; Hutchings & Rodger, 2018; Petray, 2013; Proudfoot & Habibis, 2015; Sakinofski et al., 2019; Sweet, Pearson & Dudgeon, 2013; Thomas, Jakubowicz & Norman, 2019). Chapter 5 discussed themes that emphasize Indigenous peoples' strong connection to activism: the activism practices that Indigenous

women working in public relations use in their personal lives, and the connections between fashion and activism or public relations strategies.

The theme of *Indigeneity as activism* is expressed in the central Indigenous value of giving back to community and in the constant lived experience of Indigeneity for the five Indigenous women. The women discussed the explicit and implicit activist roles that Indigenous public relations practitioners can play. This led to a consideration of additional intersectional layers of oppression in, for instance, gender and ethnicity labels. This recalls Dudgeon and Bray's (2016, p. 2472) comment that for Indigenous women "the very act of living is a form of resistance in itself." Chapter 5 connects the idea of Indigenous women as activists to other research that sees all public relations practitioners as potential activists (Adi & Lilleker, 2017; Holtzhausen, 2012; Sen, 2014; Toledano, 2016).

The theme of *Connections of Indigeneity, professional activism and personal activism* considers Indigeneity as a form of living activism and a blurring of lines between professional activism and personal activism (Holtzhausen, 2012). For example, the findings from the women demonstrate performance and utilization of their name and persona in professional and personal contexts of activism. As the women participants have experience and knowledge in public relations methods, they extend these skills to their personal practices of private and public social media accounts, submission of articles to Indigenous or Indigenous-friendly media (*NITV*, the *Koori Mail* and *The Guardian*), guest speaking, and consultations through board membership or committee work. Given that there is a continuation of professional and personal working practices, and/or community expectations of work, the issue of emotional labor, wellbeing, and stress was

raised and considered as needed insight (Bridgen, 2011; Clark et al., 2021; Edwards et al., 2020; Pain, 2020; Yeomans, 2019).

The theme of *Communicating Indigeneity and personal activism through fashion* recognizes that fashion is often used as a communication tool and can also be part of activist storytelling for Indigenous people. Two of the women enjoyed wearing Indigenous-designed jewelry, Aboriginal flag designs and t-shirts with political slogans as a form of activist messaging. Several Indigenous curators/writers have previously discussed fashion as a platform to make a statement and communicate Indigeneity (Hayman, 2015; Miller, Blacklock & Wilson-Miller, 2002). Within the Australian public relations profession, fashion can be used to strategically resist patriarchal domination, but it still predominately reflects Eurocentric women's voices and positions (Demetrious, 2014; Fitch, 2020b, 2020c).

In answering the second research question of this thesis and journeying into privileging Indigenous Australian public relations contemporary practices, Chapter 4 developed a theoretical framework of Indigenous Australian public relations and Chapter 5 provided insight into the unique connection between activism and Indigenous Australian public relations. These chapters align with the Indigenous decolonizing conceptual framework by offering a detailed definition of Indigenous Australian public relations and proposing a new framework which Indigenous and non-Indigenous public relations practitioners and scholars can draw on to enrich the profession. In aligning with Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory, the Chapters centered the knowledges from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women as foundational insight into the profession. This is significant as there is a lack of information on Indigenous Australian public relations and, this thesis,



in contributing to the knowledges, has done so through the voices and insights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. This is substantially evident in Chapter 5 through Indigenous women's standpoints on activism as a form of public relations, both within their professional and personal contexts. Given their pioneering insight into the practice, the need for understanding the motivations of the women and their struggles in working in the profession were focused upon in the final two chapters.

#### **8.5. Indigenous women's motivations and experiences working within Australian public relations**

Historically, the employment and career opportunities for Indigenous women and girls from colonization until the 1970s were contentious. Many were forced from the age of 12 to work in domestic service in privately owned properties of white Australians (Best & Fredericks, 2013). Racist and inhumane employment policies often meant that the women/girls received no wages (rather, the wages were stolen and at times provided to the government). They were overworked, had no leave entitlement, and encountered all sorts of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse (Best & Fredericks, 2013). Since the late 1950s, educational opportunities have opened, and Indigenous women have slowly started to resist the patriarchy in academia. Yet, despite these pioneering achievements, Indigenous women still experience significant racism within the workforce, and deal with complications due to family and community responsibilities (Fredericks, 2007; Fredericks & White, 2018; Moreton-Robinson, 2007; O'Sullivan, 2019b; Thunig & Jones, 2020; White, 2010). The final research aim, *What are the narratives and roles that Indigenous women have provided to the development of Indigenous Australian public*

*relations?*, answers and demonstrates the working experiences of Indigenous women within Australian public relations.

The following two chapters examined the Indigenous women's worldviews of their career rationales and their lived experiences of their careers within the Eurocentric patriarchal structures of public relations. Chapter 6 examined Indigenous women's career motivations and rationales and confirmed the need for Indigenous representation within the discipline. Previous research on the experiences of women of color working in international public relations contexts found an overall shortage of both African American and Hispanic public relations practitioners (Pompper, 2004, 2007; Tindall, 2009), but noted opportunities for growth through, respectively, the National Black Public Relations Society (2017) and the Hispanic Public Relations Association (2018) advocacy groups. Chapter 6 identified that the five Indigenous women participants chose their career in public relations to give back to community and to help create change. This stated desire for community reciprocity (AIATSI, 2020) is similar to other disciplines where Indigenous practitioners were motivated by Indigenous cultural values (O'Sullivan, 2019a; White, 2010). The Indigenous women in this study held degrees in media, journalism, communications, and public relations, which relates to public relations literature generally where journalism, media, and marketing have been noted as the usual tertiary qualifications held by Indigenous women who enter public relations and associated fields (Petersen, 2016).

Most of the women interviewed for this study stated a preference to stay within an Indigenous career space; however, some expressed a desire to move away from-public relations roles or to open their own consultancy. This finding contrasted with the existing

public relations literature, which identified racialized and arguably subservient (non-managerial) assigned employment roles for women and minority public relations practitioners (Edwards, 2018; Pompper, 2004, 2007; Tindall, 2009). Previous research on working experiences and employment for Indigenous people also suggested racist undertones in the practice of pigeonholing or being the token “go-to” person for all matters Indigenous (Bargallie, 2020; Thunig & Jones, 2020). However, given that most of the Indigenous women participants in Chapter 6 deliberately chose the public relations profession to assist with bringing about social change for Indigenous peoples, their experience of career pigeonholing was mentioned less often than in the other literature.

The women discussed the lack of Indigenous practitioners within public relations and the negative ramifications of this for Indigenous organizations and campaigns. These included non-Indigenous representations/appropriations and the potential absence of Indigenous protocols and cultural engagement when working with Indigenous peoples. This also extended to the ramifications of Indigenous gendered contexts and differences within Australian public relations—namely gender-based cultural complexities across community engagement, research considerations, and campaign planning.

Chapter 7 probed the Indigenous women’s working conditions and experiences of the multilayered oppressions of whiteness and gender that are inflicted upon them as Indigenous women. The current state of the profession of public relations is that it is a white female majority, but white male-managed profession—with white men still over-represented in high-level positions (Fitch, 2016; Fitch & Third, 2010; Wolf, 2016). Australian public relations women scholars have been interrogating and critiquing patriarchal (and at times also Eurocentric—see the work of Sison, 2016) privileges within

the profession, and highlighting instances of sexism and sexualized representations of women (Demetrious, 2014; Fitch, 2016, 2020b, 2020c; Fitch & Third, 2010; Keating, 2013, 2016a, 2016b; Rea, 2002; Sison, 2016; Wolf, 2016). For instance, Demetrious (2014) and Fitch (2020b, 2020c) highlighted and critiqued the sexualization within Australian public relations and the industry's dress standards for both sexes, both historically and contemporarily.

Currently, most research on women's employment within Australian public relations still reflects the voices of white women—and this makes for complications when we try to understand Indigenous women's perspectives. This is particularly evident in scholarship on sexualization and dress standards. Here historical stereotypes of Indigenous women as “sexualized” and “immoral” (imposed on Indigenous women by both white men and white women) still emerge and put Indigenous women under particular pressure (Moreton-Robinson, 2000; Sullivan, 2018). The Indigenous women participants cited examples of continued Eurocentric patriarchal control within the Australian public relations profession (Fitch, 2016; Fitch & Third, 2010; Wolf, 2016). Their stories provided insight into Indigenous women's experiences of working with white, privileged male colleagues and their resulting professional difficulties. Two of the Indigenous women discussed their experiences with privileged white men (for instance during business meetings) and the intersectional stressors they faced as Indigenous women confronted with continuing oppression due to a combination of Indigeneity, gender, and class. This intersectional oppression highlighted the need to understand such issues in the light of Indigenous feminism.

There is no doubt that Indigenous women experience special challenges, compared to non-Indigenous women, certainly within public relations. We need to examine the ramifications of Eurocentric patriarchy, which still extend to experiences related to the white male gaze and sexualization. For instance, one of the women related that she had a problem with the industry standards of dress. She had even experienced imposter syndrome when attempting to conform to the image of a white female employee (Demetrius, 2014; Edwards, 2018; Fitch, 2020b, 2020c; Kriyantono & Rakhmawati, 2020; O'Byrne, 2010). Attempting to comply with Eurocentric patriarchal standards, but at the same time to avoid any hint of sexualization took a personal toll, as was explained by some of the women. Work burnout was discussed, and this is also a common theme in broader public relations literature (see Keating, 2016a, 2016b; Yeomans, 2019) and within Indigenous contexts (see Bargallie, 2020; Petray & Collin, 2017). Two of the women spoke of the stress and distress they experienced due to long and hectic work hours, but they also described the toxic mental toll of racism, Eurocentric, and patriarchal hegemony. Combined with the pressures of family and cultural responsibilities, this had led some to suffer work burnout.

In answering the third research question of this thesis and delving into the rationales and experiences of working in public relations for the Indigenous women, Chapter 6 provided insight into why the women entered the profession of public relations and Chapter 7 centered their challenges and potential struggles. Through the strong combination of Indigenous decolonizing theory and Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory, these chapters contextualized some of their issues surrounding Indigeneity and gender. This has highlighted the need to fight against the white patriarchal system and to dismantle Eurocentric power that still operates within Australian public relations. Chapter 6 also

makes some specific recommendations for decolonizing the Australian public relations profession by advocating for an increase in the number of Indigenous public relations practitioners; the establishment of an Indigenous Australian public relations association; and the incorporation of Indigenous protocols within the mainstream Australian public relations discipline. Chapter 7 calls for an urgent need for strategic changes and solutions that will challenge entrenched whiteness and patriarchy. Not least is the need to respectfully address the mental health issues of those Indigenous women who currently work in Australian public relations.

#### **8.6. Moving forward: the research limitations**

Throughout these various six journal articles, there have been numerous recommendations and suggestions in further decolonizing public relations and moving the profession forward progressively. Although there has been some recent attention paid to Indigenous perspectives in Australian public relations research, this thesis was only able to address one small, but important, theme. Further research needs to be Indigenous-led within the public relations discipline, and it is hoped that this thesis has contributed to its foundational literature. It is important to note that there are vast cultural variations across the Indigenous nations of Australia. Each nation and community have their own unique cultures, languages, and ways of being, along with locale (urban, regional, and remote), gendered, and sexual orientated understandings. This thesis could only expand on one small segment of that complexity (Bennett, 2014; Farrell, 2017; O'Sullivan, 2015, 2020; Sullivan & Day, 2019) and thus should be read in the light of the following identified limitations.

#### 8.6.1. *The focus is exclusively on Indigenous women, not Indigenous men*

Indigenous men's perspectives are relatively absent from this research since its chosen approach was Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory (Moreton-Robinson, 2013). Originally this research set out to include the voices of both women and men; however, it evolved into an Indigenous storytelling endeavor to capture Indigenous women's voices. Indigenous women are frequently cited as living around the margins or at the lower end of the Eurocentric patriarchal hierarchy that is imposed on all First Nations people in Australia (Behrendt, 1993; Fredericks, 2007; Moreton-Robinson, 2000, 2013). For this reason, it is critical to focus attention on the positions of Indigenous women, especially as I am one myself. I realized early on that I wanted Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory to be embedded in this thesis as a sound framework that can support the issues and experiences that Indigenous women encounter (Moreton-Robinson, 2013). There is more important work emerging on Indigenous gender and sexualities (see Aboriginal Health Council of South Australia Ltd., 2019; Mukandi et al., 2019; O'Sullivan, 2015; Sullivan & Day, 2019) that will point the way for future research that can include the positions of Indigenous men within Australian public relations.

#### 8.6.2. *The small number of Indigenous women research participants*

Although we know that white women are perhaps over-represented within Australian public relations (Fitch, 2016; Fitch & Third, 2010; Wolf, 2016), this study confirms there are few Indigenous women employed in the industry. This thesis has explored explanations for this lack of female Indigenous public relations practitioners (see Chapter 6). Certainly, when seeking Indigenous women participants, there was a difficulty in

obtaining them, as some of the women were busy, unwilling to be interviewed, or did not respond to my invitations. The resultant small number of participants made it important to extract as much data as possible to reveal complexities within a rich database. This means that, unfortunately, these findings may not be generalizable to all Indigenous women's experiences within public relations. However, this small sample size was still able to provide a snapshot of Indigenous storytelling narratives from the perspectives of the group, and effectively provide a basis for further research.

### 8.6.3. *An urban-based study rather than a mixture including regional and remote participants*

Urban locales were not explicitly discussed within this thesis—yet it is important to note this as a critical research limitation. The locales of Indigenous research participants are well documented, and many urban Australian Indigenous peoples are now detailing their experiences or researching from urban perspectives (Behrendt, 1995; Fredericks, 2013; Mukandi et al., 2019; Murrup-Stewart et al., 2020). Although an urban Indigenous individual can often be perceived as not a “real” Aboriginal person (Behrendt, 1995; Fredericks, 2013), it is a fact that 37.4% of Indigenous people now live in urban areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2018). I was born and raised in a city (Adelaide), lived in Sydney for several years, and have never lived outside of an urban landscape. Therefore, my worldview is very urban Indigenous-based. The metropolitan space is where most of the Indigenous women working in public relations live and it is where I had good access and connections. That being said, the findings of this thesis cannot be generalized to the lived experiences of Australian Indigenous women working in rural and remote locations. Further research is certainly needed in that area.

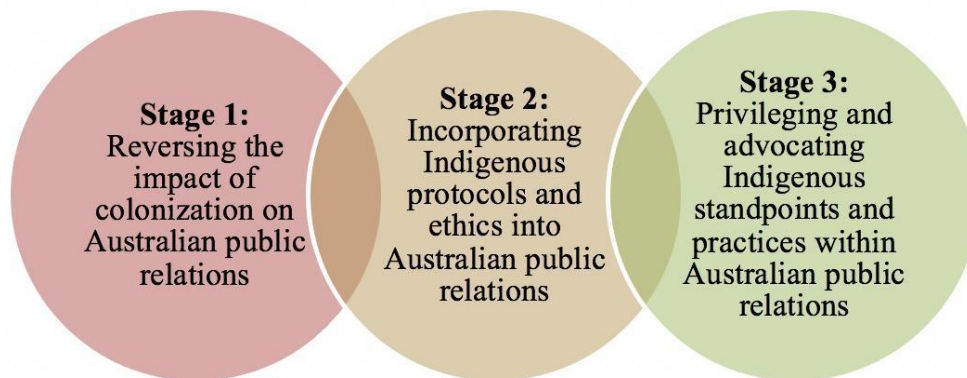


In consideration of these three stated research limitations, this thesis recommends further research in the Australian public relations discipline with a recommendation of an explicit decolonizing framework informed by this study and identified gaps of further research.

### **8.7. Toward a professional decolonizing framework for Australian public relations**

The chapters in this thesis include recommendations, many of which are integrated within the following three-stage decolonizing framework that could underpin future work. This framework incorporates Indigenous Decolonization theory (Laenui, 2000; Muller, 2014) and is designed in accordance with the six stages set out in that theory. These are: *Rediscovery and Recovery*; *Mourning*; *Healing and Forgiveness*; *Dreaming*; *Commitment*; and *Action*.

The first two stages of the new framework are predominately for the attention of non-Indigenous public relations scholars and practitioners. The first stage analyzes the effects of colonization on Australian Indigenous peoples (aligned with Laenui's stages of *Rediscovery and Recovery*; *Mourning*; and *Healing and Forgiveness*). The second stage advocates for the implementation of Indigenous ethics and protocols within Australian public relations (aligned with Laenui's stages of *Dreaming*; *Commitment*; and *Action*). The third stage is intended for Indigenous public relations scholars and practitioners and encourages the privileging and advocating of Indigenous standpoints and practices within Australian public relations. The three stages of the new decolonizing framework are illustrated below in Figure 2.



**Figure 2:** Decolonizing framework for Australian public relations

8.7.1. *Stage 1: Reversing the impact of colonization on Australian public relations*

The first stage of the new public relations decolonizing framework (see Figure 2) starts with education about the effects of colonization on Australian Indigenous peoples and communities. It also initiates healing processes to remedy the ongoing impacts of colonization. This stage invites non-Indigenous scholars and practitioners to reverse the impact of colonization through:

- a) Learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories
- b) Critiquing Western-centric patriarchal public relations theories and practices
- c) Understanding how Eurocentric and patriarchal worldviews and positions contribute to neo-colonialism within public relations
- d) Rewriting and reconceptualizing the narrative of Australian public relations' historical beginnings.

Colonization is an ongoing process and Chapter 2 critiqued the continuing colonization practices and Western-centric theories that permeate the Australian public relations profession, as well as its outward lack of diversity. Future research is needed to interrogate these issues, especially research from an Indigenous-led and focused base. Public relations scholars can assist by developing training programs that include awareness of stereotypical assumptions based on outdated colonial thinking. The article presented as Chapter 3 explored how Australian public relations could advocate for and promote the public relations and communications strategies and practices of Australian Indigenous peoples pre-and post-colonization. This discussion focused on a timeline up until the 1940s – and so further research in highlighting and examining Indigenous public relations practices from the 1940s until modern times is recommended. Research could celebrate Indigenous Australian public relations pioneers and contemporary practitioners and scholars to promote and continue the decolonization process.

#### 8.7.2. *Stage 2: Incorporating Indigenous protocols and ethics into Australian public relations*

Stage 2 of the framework (see Figure 2) urges the Australian public relations profession to meaningfully and respectfully engage with Indigenous Australian organizations, communities, and individuals (aligned with Laenui's framework, stages of *Dreaming*; *Commitment*; and *Action*). This stage asserts purpose toward actioning decolonization plans and strategies. This stage may be carried out in collaboration with Indigenous peoples (either internal or external to the profession and will often take a multidisciplinary approach). Non-Indigenous public relations researchers and practitioners must recognize

and accept Indigenous ways of being and doing. The values, protocols, and research ethics of Indigenous communities must be engaged by the following means:

- a) Promoting Indigenous-led definitions of Indigenous Australian public relations and protocols
- b) Adopting Indigenous research ethics when exploring Indigenous issues and strategies
- c) Recognizing and citing the roles and contributions that Indigenous peoples have made to public relations
- d) Increasing coverage of Indigenous Australian perspectives in public relations journals and books
- e) Collaborating with Indigenous Australians to produce public relations literature.

Understanding Indigenous protocols is essential and integral in public relations, especially when researching Indigenous issues. This means showing respect when approaching and engaging with Indigenous people and communities for research purposes. If non-Indigenous Australian public relations professionals set out to research Indigenous history and practices, they must understand the harmful role of past research practices that have been inflicted upon Australian Indigenous people. For instance, it has only been since the 1970s that Indigenous researchers have been able to self-determine their own research methods (Fredericks, 2008).

An initial research process therefore should be to consult the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) *Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research* (2020). This Code of Ethics is a vital framework for identifying valid Indigenous research approaches (both in theory and practice) when

working with Indigenous individuals, communities, and organizations. Understanding and respecting Indigenous peoples' inherent beliefs regarding autonomy, empowerment and working in partnership is a key lesson for non-Indigenous public relations scholars and practitioners. Further information on ethical Indigenous research protocols can be sourced through the existing literature on Indigenous reporting and presenting (Janke & Guivarra, 2006; Media Diversity Australia, 2018) and international First Nations research on public relations (Dutta & Elers, 2019; Love & Tilley, 2013, 2014; Motion, Haar & Leitch, 2012).

Application of this decolonizing framework will assist non-Indigenous public relations scholars and practitioners to promote Indigenous issues, thus reconceptualizing public relations scholarship and enhancing other types of communication. Non-Indigenous academics and practitioners should facilitate the opening of research opportunities for exploration of Indigenous perspectives. For instance, *PRism* hosted the first special edition on global Indigenous public relations and communications practices (see *Indigenous theorizing: Voices and representation*, 2019). When discussing the contributions that Indigenous people have made to public relations, scholars and practitioners should look beyond public relations scholarship and investigate journalism, media, and other communications disciplines for additional Indigenous context. In researching material for public relations literature, for example, a book chapter, authors should seek out Indigenous perspectives and/or collaborate with Indigenous people.

8.7.3. *Stage 3: Privileging and advocating Indigenous standpoints and practices within Australian public relations*

The final stage of the new decolonizing framework is intended to assist Indigenous public relations scholars and practitioners to create structures for further Indigenous-led research and will create a safe space where fellow Indigenous peoples can contribute to and self-determine public relations research. The aims of this stage are set out below:

- a) Increase research on Indigenous perspectives and positions within academic and/or practical contexts
- b) Build structures to address and rectify the issues that Indigenous people encounter within the public relations profession
- c) Initiate an Indigenous Australian public relations association
- d) Promote the profession of public relations as an area of employment to other Indigenous Australian peoples
- e) Produce Indigenous-led public relations literature, including handbooks, tertiary courses, and workshops.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 collectively recommend further empirical research on the historical and contemporary practices of Indigenous activism within Australian public relations. Examples of topics include accounts of public relations practitioners as activists, the beneficial role of public relations for Indigenous communities, and social change movements/campaigns (including the strategies of Indigenous activists). In identifying its limitations, this thesis also noted the lack of research centered on regional and remote areas. Further research on the practices and experiences of Indigenous women (led by other Indigenous women) in the field of public relations is also suggested within a number of chapters of this thesis.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 advocate the need for more research on the career experiences of Indigenous women. Suggested topics include Indigenous women's salaries (and potential inequities); career difficulties due to family and community responsibilities; narratives of career progression, retention rates, and experiences within social media. Chapter 7 closely examined the experiences of the Indigenous women participants within public relations. It considered issues such as whiteness, gender imbalance and patriarchal control and advocated the need for strategies to examine and resolve those issues. This chapter further recommends new structures within Australian public relations theory and practice that will support the cultural needs and improve the mental health of Indigenous women practitioners. Chapter 6 considered the lack of sexuality and gender practices within public relations, and further research on intersectional factors of class, disability, and Indigenous Australian Queer and Gender Diverse peoples (O'Sullivan, 2015; Sullivan & Day, 2019) is encouraged.

Chapter 6 discussed strategies to promote public relations as an area of employment to Indigenous peoples studying or working in similar occupations, including journalism, community engagement, and the arts. For those living in remote areas, the existing research of Clark (2011, 2012) and Sakinofsky et al. (2019) is a useful guide on alternative pathways into public relations. This chapter also recommended the establishment of an Indigenous Australian public relations association. Such an association could identify and promote many roles that Indigenous public relations practitioners could undertake, improve existing networking structures, and focus on issues for women in the profession. Ultimately, this could lead to the development of an Indigenous Australian public relations handbook, tertiary course(s), and/or workshop(s)

for the benefit of future and current Indigenous and non-Indigenous practitioners and scholars.

## **8.8. Conclusion**

Throughout this thesis I have attempted to provide varying accounts of public relations practices from the standpoints of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and organizations. I have deliberately centered this thesis on the standpoints of Indigenous women to form an overarching Indigenous women's decolonizing narrative. This was achieved by drawing on the six stages of Indigenous Decolonization theory from Hawaiian scholar Poka Laenui (2000) and Aboriginal Australian woman Lorraine Muller (2014). I also referred to Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory devised by Quandamooka woman Aileen Moreton-Robinson's (2013). These frameworks, and an Indigenous storytelling methodology, were embedded throughout the chapters and journal articles.

Decolonization approaches emphasize an ongoing process of Indigenous healing from the harmful ramifications of colonization by empowering Indigenous peoples to self-determine their own histories, knowledges, narratives, and practices (Dudgeon & Walker, 2015; Muller, 2014; Smith, 2012). Within the decolonization theoretical framework of Laenui (2000) and Muller (2014), the first, second, and third stages (*Rediscovery and Recovery*, *Mourning*, and *Healing and Forgiveness*) can be used to raise awareness of the extent of the public relations profession's role in colonization. Reflecting on those stages also illuminated my own personal journey toward healing, as I learned of the powerful knowledges entwined within Indigenous Australian cultural practices, narratives, and



contributions. The *Dreaming* and *Commitment* stages came into play when I contemplated the final significance of this research and considered culturally appropriate and impactful strategies to disseminate its findings. The final phase of *Action* is reflected in the finished product of this thesis, which uncovers the colonial practices that have imbued Australian public relations and asserts a counter-narrative that speaks the truth about Indigenous people's roles and contributions.

Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory allowed me to position my worldview and to center and privilege the Indigenous women participants' contributions. This was achieved and contextualized through my Nunga Weena Wanggan-Mirn positioning, which has provided insight into my worldview and frame of researching/conceptualization of academic storytelling within an Indigenous Australian public relations space. The decolonization of Eurocentric patriarchal hegemonies is central to Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory, and thus my own positioning, and formed a conceptual framework for this study's attempt to dismantle whiteness and patriarchy within Australian public relations (Moreton-Robinson, 2013).

An Indigenous storytelling approach was considered throughout the research, significantly within the journal articles as a communication of knowledges. In keeping with Indigenous storytelling, the journal articles are arranged as a linear narrative, moving from the initial era of colonization to the particular issues of contemporary Indigenous lives. The format of PhD by Compilation was specifically chosen so that I could include journal articles that could be submitted to appropriate publications and thus spread its message widely. Indigenous storytelling methodologies were chosen to center direct

quotations from the Indigenous women participants and ensure their unique voices and messages were not distorted.

The twin conceptual frameworks and Indigenous storytelling methodology were reflected in the three research questions that were answered in the thesis:

1. *How can we build a process to decolonize Australia's public relations industry utilizing Indigenous standpoints?*
2. *What is Indigenous Australian public relations in practice?*
3. *What are the narratives and roles that Indigenous women have provided to the development of Indigenous Australian public relations?*

The theme of *Dismantling colonization and whiteness within Australian public relations* underpinned the first two journal articles (co-authored with my supervisor Professor Gawaian Bodkin-Andrews). Chapter 2 situated Poka Laenui's (2000) five stages of colonization and critically reviewed contemporary public relations practices, pointing out its lack of diversity and Indigenous perspectives. Chapter 2 thus contributed to Australian public relations research by highlighting whiteness and colonial power structures within the industry. Chapter 3 examined historical activism within Australian public relations. This chapter sought to reconceptualize Australian public relations by asserting the communication practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities prior to and since colonization.

The theme of *Self-determining Indigenous practices and protocols within Australian public relations* demonstrated decolonization attempts in practice by centering the lived experiences of a group of Indigenous women public relations practitioners. Chapter 4

updated the definition of Indigenous Australian public relations and suggested a new theoretical framework based on Indigenous practices, strategies, and standpoints. This theoretical framework is developed to serve both Indigenous and non-Indigenous practitioners and academics within public relations and in its peer-reviewed published form has already attracted minor attention and citation (see Fitch, 2020a). Chapter 5 expanded on concepts of public relations activism and contributed to existing scholarly work on the strong and significant link of activism to public relations. By connecting Indigeneity with public relations' understandings of activism, this chapter provided new insights into the connections and uses of professional and personal activism and fashion activism within public relations.

The theme of *Indigenous women's motivations and experiences working within Australian public relations* is the subject of the final two journal articles (chapters 5 and 6) and focused on Indigenous women's experiences of working in public relations. Chapter 6 recognized a fundamental need for the Indigenous women to be in a career that gives back to their Indigenous community(ies) and a majority preference to stay within the Indigenous space. Chapter 6 also noted an absence of Indigenous representation within the profession: for example, non-Indigenous public relations practitioners often work on Indigenous matters even though they may not know cultural protocols or may lack suitable connections. Patriarchal male privilege has been strongly critiqued in mainstream women's public relations contexts (Fitch, 2016; Fitch & Third, 2010; Wolf, 2016) and Chapter 7 added to this by considering the specific issues of Indigenous women's lived experiences. This chapter referred to Indigenous women's struggles in resisting Eurocentric patriarchal control and the everyday stress of being an Indigenous woman working within an oppressive hierarchical system.

This thesis makes recommendations for further research and practical strategies. A decolonizing framework for Australian public relations was developed from both the research limitations and the resulting recommendations from the six journal articles. This three-stage framework is based on Laenui's (2000) original Indigenous Decolonization theory and Muller's (2014) additional stage: *Rediscovery and Recovery; Mourning; Healing and Forgiveness; Dreaming; Commitment; and Action*. The first two stages (of the new framework) are intended for non-Indigenous public relations scholars and practitioners. They advocate for the examination and critique of the legacy of colonial thinking that still imbues Australian public relations. Stage 2 recommends that non-Indigenous public relations scholars and practitioners center Indigenous protocols and ethics within all coverage of Indigenous issues and strategies. Combined, these two stages situate within the six stages of Laenui (2000) and Muller's (2014) theory—the first within stages one to three, and the second within stages four to six. The third stage of the proposed new framework is designed for Indigenous public relations scholars and practitioners. It stresses the importance of self-determining our own cultural practices and creating structures and spaces for us to gather and collaborate.

Through the overarching frameworks of Indigenous Decolonization (Laenui, 2000; Muller, 2014) and Indigenous Women's Standpoint (Moreton-Robinson, 2013), this thesis has provided a strong foundation for the worldviews of Indigenous women to be heard and acknowledged within the public relations discipline. This thesis has examined and critiqued the effects of colonization and whiteness within public relations and the wider social sphere (Dutta, 2016; Dutta & Elers, 2019; Dutta & Pal, 2011; Munshi, 2005; Munshi, Kurian & Xifra, 2017; Sejrup, 2014). Several scholars have previously called for

Indigenous voices to be heard in the profession, and this thesis has attempted to address that need (Clark, 2011, 2012; Fitch, 2020a; Petersen, 2016; Sakinofski et al., 2019; Sison, 2016; Wolf, 2016). As this thesis was developed by an Indigenous woman, and includes the intertwined narratives of other Indigenous women, it presents a new application of both Indigenous Decolonization theory (Laenui, 2000; Muller, 2014) and Indigenous Women's Standpoint theory (Moreton-Robinson, 2013). It has been said that Indigenous feminism can be a tool of decolonization (Green, 2007), and I hope that through representing the voices and narratives of strong and resilient Indigenous women this thesis has made a significant contribution to Indigenous feminism and decolonization.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Participant information and consent form



### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

#### *Indigenous public relations, feminism and resistance in Australia (ETH17-2055)*

##### WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?

My name is Treena Clark and I am a PhD student at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), in the Centre for the Advancement of Indigenous Knowledges (CAIK). My professional and academic knowledges are in the fields of public relations and activism. My supervisor is Associate Professor Gawaiian Bodkin-Andrews from the Centre for the Advancement of Indigenous Knowledges, Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences, University of Technology Sydney.

##### WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research is to find out about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of conducting public relations (including activism, media and the arts) and to privilege the voices and contributions that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women have made to the profession and our resistance and survival.

##### WHY HAVE I BEEN ASKED?

You have been approached because you are an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander woman, you either work in (or previously worked in) public relations, communications, media, or marketing in an Indigenous context or you have a strong online, activist presence on social media. I also may know you through a professional or community capacity, or through a mutual friend.

##### IF I SAY YES, WHAT WILL IT INVOLVE?

I will invite you to take part in one in-depth, informal, yarning session where you and I will share stories, and collaborate on ideas and themes. The interview will be conducted by me, and the questions will orientate towards the themes of Australian public relations, activism, and Indigenous feminism. The location of the yarning session will be held in a city of your choosing, and in a place that is convenient for you. All yarning sessions will be audio recorded and transcribed, and your data will be stored securely for a period of five years within CAIK at UTS. It is estimated that the yarning session will take up to two hours, with an extra one to two hours for me to ask follow-up questions via email or phone, and for you to validate and approve of your transcripts and stories. You will be offered a \$50 gift card to compensate you for your time. If you choose to join me as a co-researcher on a journal article/academic publication, your involvement time may increase. Alternatively, if you choose to be anonymous in the research, your transcript and the journal article/academic publication will be edited for anonymity. You will have the option to approve and/or remove any appropriate information in both the transcript and the finished journal article/academic publication. Collaboration with you in this study is important, and I aim to have this happen organically, with feedback on how best you would like to participate.

##### ARE THERE ANY RISKS/INCONVENIENCE?

My research topic may be sensitive, particularly in terms of discussing feminism, the lack of acknowledgment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' contributions, and the activism and public relations work. As an Aboriginal woman myself, I will be yarning with you about our roles, our struggles, and our futures, and will aim to create a safe and empowering space by allowing you to decide on the direction of the discussion, and to check context and remove any information that you deem sensitive, upsetting, or identifying. If you choose to be de-identified, all identifying information will be kept confidential and will be removed from the data and stories. This includes any published data in news articles or academic articles. You are also free to withdraw at any time, and without giving a reason.

##### DO I HAVE TO SAY YES?

Participation in this study is voluntary. It is completely up to you whether or not you decide to take part.

#### WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I SAY NO?

If you decide not to participate, it will not affect your relationship with me or the University of Technology Sydney. If you wish to withdraw from the study once it has started, you can do so at any time without having to give a reason by contacting me on [REDACTED]. If you withdraw from the study, your yarning session audiotapes will be erased, and your transcripts will be destroyed.

#### CONFIDENTIALITY

By signing the consent form, you consent to me (Treena Clark) to collect personal information about you for this research project I will ensure that all of your recordings, transcripts, and data will be treated confidentially and securely stored electronically in password protected folders/files on a computer in the Centre for the Advancement of Indigenous Knowledges for a period of five years. You will have the option to become a co-researcher (which means you will be identified in the data and journal articles), or to be de-identified and given a pseudonym in the data. You will be given the opportunity to review your transcripts and withdraw any data that you deem identifying or unsettling. Your information will only be identified with your permission. Please know that I understand that our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in online media and activism are well-connected. I will ensure no data is reported on in any manner until you are comfortable that the level of protection you have chosen for your confidentiality has been met. The final, published data may also be archived with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) so that it can be available to any interested parties in the future (but only if you agree to this).

#### WHAT IF I HAVE CONCERNS OR A COMPLAINT?

If you have concerns about the research, please feel free to contact my supervisor Associate Professor Gawaian Bodkin-Andrews on 02 9514 3951 and [gawaian.bodkin-andrews@uts.edu.au](mailto:gawaian.bodkin-andrews@uts.edu.au), my nominated local Adelaide community contact Mrs Deanne Hanchant-Nichols on 08 8302 2202 and [Deanne.Hanchant-Nichols@unisa.edu.au](mailto:Deanne.Hanchant-Nichols@unisa.edu.au), or the UTS Research Ethics Officer on 02 9514 9772 (by quoting this number - ETH17-2055). Alternatively, if, for any reason, you feel the need for counselling services due to taking part in this project, it is recommended that you contact either your local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health service, 24 hour Lifeline Australia (131114), Beyond Blue support (1300223243), or your General Practitioner.

#### NOTE:

This study has been approved by the University of Technology Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee [UTS HREC]. If you have any concerns or complaints about any aspect of the conduct of this research, please contact the Ethics Secretariat on ph.: +61 2 9514 2478 or email: [Research.Ethics@uts.edu.au](mailto:Research.Ethics@uts.edu.au), and quote the UTS HREC reference number. Any matter raised will be treated confidentially, investigated and you will be informed of the outcome.

## CONSENT FORM

### *Indigenous public relations, feminism and resistance in Australia (ETH17-2055)*

I \_\_\_\_\_ *[participant's name]* agree to participate in the research project **Indigenous public relations, feminism and resistance in Australia** (ETH17-2055) being conducted by Treena Clark (PhD student) from the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), Centre for the Advancement of Indigenous Knowledges (CAIK), Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences, University of Technology Sydney, P: \_\_\_\_\_, E: treenaanne.clark@student.uts.edu.au.

I have read the Participant Information Sheet, or someone has read it to me in a language that I understand.

I understand the purposes, procedures and risks of the research as described in the Participant Information Sheet.

I have had an opportunity to ask questions and I am satisfied with the answers I have received.

I freely agree to participate in this research project as described, and understand that I am free to withdraw at any time without affecting my relationship with the researcher or the University of Technology Sydney.

I understand that I will be given a signed copy of this document to keep.

I agree to be:

Audio recorded

I agree that the stories gathered from this project may be published in a form that:

Identifies me

Does not identify me in any way

I agree to having my stories archived with:

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) research archives

I am aware that I can contact Treena Clark or her supervisor Gawaian Bodkin-Andrews if I have any concerns about the research. I also understand that I am free to withdraw my participation from this research project at any time.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name and Signature [participant]

\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name and Signature [researcher or delegate]

\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix B: Indigenous Yarning plan



### Yarning plan

#### Public relations professionals

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this study!

As part of the yarning session, we will discuss a number of topics, which you are free to answer and talk about at your own leisure. You will also be free to ask me any questions about the research and my experiences as an Aboriginal woman working and studying within public relations. Following are some of the themes that may emerge:

- Roles, strategies and tasks in Indigenous Australian public relations;
- Self-determination and activism;
- Sexism and racism in public relations and activism;
- Indigenous feminism;
- Differences between Indigenous Australian public relations and Western public relations;
- Crossovers into other areas (marketing, social marketing, health promotion, media, campaigning, journalism);
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture; and
- Women's issues.

Based from these themes, the following questions may be explored in an informal way:

- **What is your name, age, and Aboriginal Nation/language group?**
- **What are your experiences and roles working in Indigenous Australian public relations?**

#### Conversational cues may include:

- What you do for work
- How you view Indigenous Australian public relations
- The differences between Indigenous Australian public relations and Western public relations

- **How do you view, and take part in, Indigenous Activism today?**

#### Conversational cues may include:

- The role Indigenous activism plays in public relations
- The role of social media in Indigenous Activism
- Your role in activism

- **What are your thoughts on Indigenous feminism?**

#### Conversational cues may include:

- What Indigenous feminism means to you
- How feminism/Indigenous feminism impacts how you perform your work
- Where you see Indigenous feminism going in Australia

Thank you, again. At the end of the yarning session, you will be offered a small \$50 gift card to compensate you for your time.

## Appendix C: Co-author statements of contribution

26 November 2020

Centre for the Advancement of  
Indigenous Knowledges  
Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences  
University of Technology Sydney  
Jones Street Ultimo NSW 2007

To whom it may concern,

I, Treena Clark, was the major contributor to the conceptualisation and coordination of the research resulting in the following publications:

Clark, T., & Bodkin-Andrews, G. (2020). Colonization and Whiteness within Australian public relations. [Manuscript submitted].

Clark, T., & Bodkin-Andrews, G. (2020). Reconceptualizing public relations since Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander time immemorial. [Manuscript submitted].

I am the lead author of these papers and they were included in my PhD thesis. I conceptualised, collected, and analysed the data/literature. I additionally wrote and edited the majority of the work in these papers. My thesis focussed on the perceptions and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women working in the public relations profession and examined whiteness and decolonising efforts in this specialisation of Indigenous Australian public relations.

Commensurate with the extent of my contributions, I am the first author on these papers.

Treena Clark: Production Note:  
Signature removed  
prior to publication.

Date: 26/11/2020

I, Gawaian Bodkin-Andrews, as a co-author, endorse that the level of contribution specified by the candidate above is appropriate.

Gawaian Bodkin-Andrews:

Date:

Production Note:  
Signature removed prior to publication.

26/11/20

17 November 2020

Centre for the Advancement of  
Indigenous Knowledges  
Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences  
University of Technology Sydney  
Jones Street Ultimo NSW 2007

To whom it may concern,

I, Treena Clark, was the major contributor to the conceptualisation and coordination of the research resulting in the following publications:

Clark, T., Guivarra, N., Dodson, S., & Widders Hunt, Y. (2019). Asserting an Indigenous theoretical framework in Australian public relations. *PRism*, 15(1).

Clark, T., Guivarra, N., Dodson, S., & Widders Hunt, Y. (2020). "I want to create change, I want to create impact": Indigenous Australian PR women's narratives and framings of personal activism. [Manuscript submitted].

Clark, T., Guivarra, N., Dodson, S., & Widders Hunt, Y. (2020). "I liked that it could create social change and do good": Indigenous Australian women's motivations and perceptions of public relations as a career. [Manuscript under review].

Clark, T., Guivarra, N., Dodson, S., & Widders Hunt, Y. (2020). "We're not treated equally as Indigenous people or as women": the perspectives and experiences of Indigenous women in Australian public relations. [Manuscript submitted].

I am the lead author of these papers and they were included in my PhD thesis. I conceptualised, collected, and analysed the data and wrote and edited the papers. My thesis focussed on the perceptions and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women working in the public relations profession. Within this study there five women and three co-authors.

Commensurate with the extent of my contributions, I am the first author on these papers.

**Treena Clark:** Production Note:  
Signature removed  
prior to publication.

Date: 17/11/2020

I, Nancia Guivarra, as a co-author, endorse that the level of contribution specified by the candidate above is appropriate.

**Nancia Guivarra:** Production Note:  
Signature removed  
prior to publication.

Date: 24/11/2020



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17 November 2020

Centre for the Advancement of  
Indigenous Knowledges  
Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences  
University of Technology Sydney  
Jones Street Ultimo NSW 2007

To whom it may concern,

I, Treena Clark, was the major contributor to the conceptualisation and coordination of the research resulting in the following publications:

Clark, T., Guivarra, N., Dodson, S., & Widders Hunt, Y. (2019). Asserting an Indigenous theoretical framework in Australian public relations. *PRism*, 15(1).

Clark, T., Guivarra, N., Dodson, S., & Widders Hunt, Y. (2020). "I want to create change; I want to create impact": Indigenous Australian PR women's narratives and framings of personal activism. [Manuscript submitted].

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Clark, T., Guivarra, N., Dodson, S., & Widders Hunt, Y. (2020). "We're not treated equally as Indigenous people or as women": the perspectives and experiences of Indigenous women in Australian public relations. [Manuscript submitted].

I am the lead author of these papers and they were included in my PhD thesis. I conceptualised, collected, and analysed the data and wrote and edited the papers. My thesis focussed on the perceptions and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women working in the public relations profession. Within this study there five women and three co-authors.

Commensurate with the extent of my contributions, I am the first author on these papers.

Production Note:  
Treena Clark: Signature removed  
prior to publication.

Date: 17/11/2020

I, Yatu Widders Hunt, as a co-author, endorse that the level of contribution specified by the candidate above is appropriate.

Production Note:  
Yatu Widders Hunt: Signature removed  
prior to publication.

Date: 24/11/20

17 November 2020

Centre for the Advancement of  
Indigenous Knowledges  
Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences  
University of Technology Sydney  
Jones Street Ultimo NSW 2007

To whom it may concern,

I, Treena Clark, was the major contributor to the conceptualisation and coordination of the research resulting in the following publications:

Clark, T., Guivarra, N., Dodson, S., & Widders Hunt, Y. (2019). Asserting an Indigenous theoretical framework in Australian public relations. *PRism*, 15(1).

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Commensurate with the extent of my contributions, I am the first author on these papers.

Production Note:

Treena Clark: Signature removed  
prior to publication.

Date: 17/11/2020

I, Shannan Dodson, as a co-author, endorse that the level of contribution specified by the candidate above is appropriate.

Shannon Dodson:

Date:

Shannan Dodson <[redacted]>  
Tue 17/11/2020 3:38 PM  
To: Treena Anne Clark <TreenaAnne.Clark@student.uts.edu.au>  
Hi Treena,

Congrats on almost finishing! So exciting!

I Shannan Dodson, as a co-author, endorse that the level of contribution specified by Treena Clark above is appropriate.

Sent from my iPhone

> On Nov 17, 2020, at 3:19 PM, Treena Anne Clark <TreenaAnne.Clark@student.uts.edu.au> wrote:

> I [name], as a co-author, endorse that the level of contribution specified by Treena Clark above is appropriate."

Treena Anne Clark <TreenaAnne.Clark@student.uts.edu.au>  
Tue 17/11/2020 3:18 PM  
To: shannan.dodson@[redacted]

1 attachments (23 KB)  
Coauthor confirmation\_SD.docx;

Hi Shannan,

I hope you are well 😊

I am almost ready to submit my PhD (yayy) - I just have some extra admin work to do.

One of this is to get your confirmation that you are a co-author on the papers within the thesis.

I provided evidence that you have already confirmed your involvement, but the university wants more evidence.

Therefore, could you please sign the attached letter.

Or could you reply the following to this email: "I [name], as a co-author, endorse that the level of contribution specified by Treena Clark above is appropriate."

Treena Clark  
PhD Candidate  
Centre for the Advancement of Indigenous Knowledges | Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences | University of Technology, Sydney  
Building 10, Level 3, Rm: 561, Jones Street Ultimo NSW 2007 (PO Box 123)



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