

“I want to create change; I want to create impact”: Personal-activism narratives of Indigenous Australian women working in public relations

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Abstract:

The role of activism is important in the field of Indigenous Australian public relations as a strategy for creating change and giving back to Indigenous people and communities. However, there is a dearth of information on how, when, and why Indigenous women employed in public relations engage in activist practices. This paper aims to help fill this gap by exploring the activist practices used by Indigenous women working in public relations in their personal lives. By considering personal activism from the perspectives of Indigenous women 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 various ways in which they engage in activism within their personal lives. This paper builds upon the ideas of activism within public relations and demonstrates the power of public relations in terms of influencing social change for Indigenous people and others.

Keywords: Indigenous people; public relations; activism; women; Australia

1. Introduction

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 the field of public relations, several types of activism exist, from the alternative approaches of activism as an integral component of the profession (which have 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). From alternative public relations perspectives, activism aims to critique and confront the power and persuasion dynamics of Eurocentric and capitalist public relations structures (Adi, 2018; Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Holtzhausen, 2012; McKie & Munshi, 2007; Rakow, 1989; Weaver, 2018).

Research on activism within the realm of Australian public relations highlights an absence of Indigenous perspectives in mainstream literature (Ali et al., 2016; Demetrious, 2013; Robertson & Crawford, 2018; Wolf, 2018). Further, within the research body on Indigenous Australian public relations and activism (Clark, 2012; Clark et al., 2019; Fitch, 2020a; Johnston et al., 2018; Petersen, 2016; Sakinofsky et al., 2019), Indigenous women’s empirical narratives and contributions are severely lacking. Particularly absent are the varying perspectives and positions of Indigenous women’s activist practices within organizations and the leverage of public relations by Indigenous women activists.

Although there has recently been an increase in studies 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), these 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 Indigenous Australian public relations and aims to provide a further understanding of how activism within the context of public relations is shaped by Indigenous women’s worldviews and ideologies (Weaver, 2018). In an

attempt to understand the relationships between the theoretical stances of critical, socio-cultural, postmodern, postcolonial, and decolonial public relations and Indigenous Australian public relations, this paper will expand on the concepts of activism within the field of public relations and investigate how the profession can be reconceptualized through further incorporation of alternative narratives and viewpoints.

2. Literature review

2.1. Alternative thoughts in public relations: Critical, postmodern, postcolonial, and decolonial activism

Critical, postmodern, postcolonial, and decolonial public relations, in their various forms, encourage the examination of power within the profession, critique its Western and capitalist concepts of organizational public relations, and engage with notions of public relations' benefits to society (Edwards, 2014; Edwards & Hodges, 2011; Heath et al., 2009; Holtzhausen, 2012; McKie & Munshi, 2007; Rakow, 1989). Over several decades, scholars have called for the examination of activist and protest theories within the realm of public relations as a reaction to the corporate view of activism as an issue management function and/or the silencing of historical and contemporary activism narratives (Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Demetrious, 2013; Edwards & Hodges, 2011; Heath et al., 2009; Holtzhausen, 2012; McKie & Munshi, 2007; Weaver, 2018).

Critical and postmodern concerns regarding the imbalance of power have led to the reconceptualization of public relations from the current corporatist and organizational landscapes to a profession that considers activism as a holistic and prominent function of public relations (Robertson & Crawford, 2018; Coombs & Holladay, 2007, 2012; Demetrious, 2013; Heath & Waymer, 2009; Holtzhausen, 2012; L'Etang, 2015; Pieczka, 2016; Weaver, 2014). Critical public relations scholars argue that activism has been an early practice within the discipline and that agencies and corporations appropriated public relations when they deemed it applicable to their practices (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Postmodern scholars, including Holtzhausen (2012), further contend that all public relations practitioners are activists themselves, both internally and externally from their organizations (Adi & Lilleker, 2017; Sen, 2014; Toledano, 2016). From the postmodern perspective, 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 their attention on the benefits of public relations to minoritized groups and global indigenous communities, along with leveraging public relations for use 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).

Research into critical, postmodern, postcolonial, and decolonial public relations provides insights into the concepts of activism within the profession and from varying nations. Given the strong influence of colonization within public relations, alternative positions address whiteness and colonial practices within the profession (Dutta, 2016; Munshi, 2005; Sison, 2016). However, there is still an absence of research into Indigenous Australian activism (and Indigenous Australian decolonial lenses) within the context of public relations (Clark, 2012; Clark et al., 2019; Fitch, 2020a; Petersen, 2016; Sakinofsky et al., 2019). Considering the rich and vital First Nations standpoints within public relations theory and practice, including the significant research conducted from our Māori New Zealand neighbors (Dutta & Elers, 2019; Love & Tilley, 2014; Munshi et al., 2011), further investigations into Indigenous Australian practices are essential to build and conceptualize activism frameworks.

2.2. Activist practices within Indigenous Australian public relations

Activism plays an integral role within Indigenous Australian public relations and involves organizations, informal groups, and individuals who are campaigning and working toward change (Clark et al., 2019). Indigenous Australian public relations centers on the philosophy of self-determination to reinforce healthy cultures,

communities, families, and people (Clark et al., 2019). The strategies of activism described within research on Indigenous Australian public relations demonstrate a fundamental purpose of supporting social change and equity and to combating negative reporting of Indigenous people (Clark, 2012; Clark et al., 2019; Fitch, 2020a; Johnston et al., 2018; Petersen, 2016; Sakinofsky et al., 2019).

The mainstream media has an ongoing history of discounting Indigenous stories or promoting deficit discourse/negative narratives of Indigenous people, while Indigenous-owned media attempt to choose and frame stories in a culturally appropriate and empowered way (Bacon, 2005; Proudfoot & Habibis, 2015; Thomas et al., 2019). Sakinofsky 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 the difficulties faced by them in securing positive news stories within mainstream news outlets. To acquire media coverage regarding 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 the *Flinders Ranges Aboriginal Heritage Consultative Committee* to form the *Alliance Against Uranium* as a means to collectively share strategies, skills, and resources (Sakinofsky 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 (Sakinofsky et al., 2019).

Social media provides Indigenous people with the autonomy to create and disseminate news and stories outside of the control of the mainstream media, and more in line with Indigenous media outlets (Carlson & Frazer, 2016; Sweet et al., 2013). The public relations strategies utilized by Indigenous people and activists on social media provide insight into their communication and promotion skills (Carlson et al., 2017; Carlson & Frazer, 2016; Hutchings & Rodger, 2018; Petray, 2013; Sweet et al., 2013). Within the body of research on Indigenous Australian public relations, there is little information about social media activist practices; however, Petersen's (2016) study provides some insight within Indigenous organizations. From the perspectives of the public relations officers working in seven Aboriginal community-controlled organizations, Petersen (2016) found that their social media practices revolved around e-marketing,

networking, event promotion, and their Facebook presence. Examples of social media activism in the broader Indigenous public sphere include hashtag movements and extensive campaigning. For example, the Twitter hashtag “#Indigenousdads” was developed as pushback to a racist news cartoon by Bill Leak (which depicted Indigenous fathers as being unfit and incapable of raising children). This led to a barrage of positive posts 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 #SOSBLAKA AUSTRALIA generated significant global awareness via social media (Carlson & Frazer, 2016; Cook, 2015). This movement operated across digital and traditional media platforms, leading to worldwide marches through the international arm of *Global Call to Action* (Carlson & Frazer, 2016; Cook, 2015).

It is clear from these examples that Indigenous people and organizations can leverage media campaigns and social media movements to highlight self-determination, along with positive and empowering stories. The conversation surrounding Indigenous strength and empowerment is 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.” This research provides some insight into Indigenous Australian public relations activist practices; however, much more research is required to achieve an adequate understanding 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 in public relations research, all women’s roles and contributions to the profession must be assessed, along with how gender influences the strategies of activism within public relations.

2.3. Women’s and feminist activism within public relations

The emergence of women’s perspectives within the field of public relations has tended to focus on the burgeoning overrepresentation of women and the exploration of the issues and practices that impact women working within (and/or utilizing) public relations (Demetrious, 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, diverging from the traditional concepts of organizational public relations (such as the dominant paradigm/Excellence theory) and activism as an issue management function, call for the further examination of gendered approaches to activist public relations (Edwards, 2018; Edwards et al., 2020; Vardeman et al., 2020).

Across historical and contemporary timeframes, the practices of activism within the context of Western women's and feminist public relations primarily utilize various campaigns and social media outlets (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, harnessing them 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 putting up a controversial genetic engineering billboard to create shock value (Weaver, 2014). Social media practices from six women employed at *Rape Crisis England & Wales* indicated that social media is a double-edged sword for women employed in an organization (Edwards et al., 2020). The women warned of the negative ramifications of adopting a potentially controversial stance when using the organization's social media channels, and advocated for the use of individual social media accounts (separate from 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 intersectionality, as it predominately targeted white, middle-class mothers. Similarly, in the study on *Rape Crisis England & Wales*, women of color were not identified, and the results were obtained from a rather homogenous sample.

Most public relations studies involving women of color acknowledge historical figures and contemporary localized case studies (Dutta & Thaker, 2019; Pain, 2020; Vardeman et al., 2020). The narratives and contributions of men toward the civil rights movement are predominately emphasized in the field of public relations, while women's contributions are only superficially acknowledged (Vardeman et al., 2020). Vardeman et al. (2020) argue that Rosa Parks played a large role in the Civil Rights movement, yet is far more well-known for her involvement in the 1950s Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Dutta and Thaker's (2019) research on the resistance efforts of female Indian farmers against 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 policymakers, universities, the media, and community members, promoting a transition towards a "sovereignty of seeds" through annual seed events, decentering colonial knowledge production, decolonizing individualized western farming practices, and recentering community support (Dutta & Thaker, 2019). The silencing of Black women's contributions and experiences within the Civil Rights movement demonstrate underlying implications of social class, patriarchal dominance, and oppression. Equally, in the study from Dutta and Thaker (2019), the research is produced from men's standpoints and Indian women appear to lack direct voices.

These women's roles and contributions to public relations activism demonstrate instances of how gender can impact the research perspectives and freedom of speech. The Western research strongly reinforces the need for further intersectional examinations in public relations, activism, and the recognition of women's contributions, which may have been silenced. The studies on women of color demonstrate the concerns of women who have long been sidelined, which is especially relevant in the context of Indigenous Australian people (Dudgeon & Bray, 2016). There is a research gap between studies on Indigenous Australian public relations in terms of Indigenous women's narratives and standpoints. 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 impacting women working within, and utilizing, public relations.

3. Research approach

3.1. Positioning: Indigenous women's standpoint theory

Aboriginal (Quandamooka) Australian woman Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2013) developed a specific Indigenous women's theory to represent the unique positioning of Indigenous women living within a Eurocentric patriarchal society and advocated for the perspectives, experiences, and knowledges of Indigenous women. Therefore, from the perspective 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 (Moreton-Robinson, 2013). As we, the co-authors, are Indigenous women, our positionings as Indigenous women and our representation within a modern patriarchal and Eurocentric nation, are intersectional. This is further explained by Moreton-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 academia as does our different disciplinary training.

Indigenous women's standpoint theory is embedded throughout this paper—via the framing of the literature review, the research methods of data collection, and importantly, the privileging of narratives of the Indigenous women participants (Moreton-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 the implementation of an Indigenous yarning method and resulting thematic analysis. To accurately describe the narratives of the Indigenous women participants, and to ensure that the 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 in centering the positions and voices of Indigenous women.

3.2. Participants

Five Indigenous women participated in this research, and were given 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 the participants, which outlined the collaborative nature and ethical roles of the research. This research paper is based on a PhD dataset of the narratives of Indigenous Australian women working within public relations. Four papers resulted from the dataset which, in combination, explore the complexities of the practices of Australian and Indigenous Australian public relations for Indigenous women. The Indigenous women participants discussed the value of public relations as a career and shared their positive and negative experiences within the profession. This paper presents and evaluates the women's intersectional narratives of what activism means to them as Indigenous women, both within and outside of the context of work.

3.3.Method

An integral aim of the Indigenous research methodological approach is to elevate the voices and lived experiences of Indigenous participants (Rigney, 1997). Indigenous research methodologies strongly advocate for collaboration; in this research, the women told their stories in their own way, reviewed their own transcripts and/or journal papers, and determined whether to participate as co-researchers. Yarning, as an Indigenous research method, was selected to gather voices in a culturally appropriate and respectful manner, promoting familiarity, collaboration, and the idea of co-research (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010).

The research method of Indigenous yarning took the form of a semi-structured interview approach, with broad themes to guide knowledge exchange. The question "How do you view, and take part in, Indigenous activism today?", posed with cues to spark ideas, generated conversation. Presents—a gift card and a pair of *Haus of Dizzy* (www.hausofdizzy.com) Aboriginal flag earrings—were given at the beginning or end of each yarning session to represent and symbolize collaboration, gratitude, and Indigenous women's solidarity. The one-on-one yarning sessions were audio-recorded with the lead author, and transcribed and authenticated through an initial audit of the transcripts. From this, early themes were noted, followed by major thematic data analysis using the NVIVO software. Evaluation of data followed the six-phase steps of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which promote (1) becoming familiar with

the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for emerging themes; (4) reviewing these themes; (5) defining these themes; and (6) conducting the write-up.

4. Results and discussion

The women participating 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 owing to its ability to create change and advocate self-determination for Indigenous peoples and communities. Most of the women identify as Indigenous feminists, which—as an ideology—resists the various types of oppression (racism, sexism, and classism) that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experience (Behrendt, 1993; Fredericks, 2004; Huggins, 1987; Moreton-Robinson, 2000). All the women explained what activism means to them and detailed how they undertake activism in their personal lives. The following three themes emerged from the findings: i. *Indigeneity as activism*; ii. *Relationships between Indigeneity, professional activism, and personal activism*; and iii. *Communicating Indigeneity and personal activism through fashion*.

4.1. Indigeneity as activism

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

For instance, owing to 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 with 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 people, especially within her line 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 people]. 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; Petersen, 2016). Giving back to the community is reflected in the Indigenous ethical notion of reciprocity and is often asserted within Indigenous research and guidelines (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, along with Indigeneity rendering you an automatic activist, were ideas professed by both Lily and Susan. Within research on Australian public relations, this theme is not explicitly considered; however, it has been expressed by Indigenous peoples repeatedly 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.

From another perspective, Aboriginal (Bardi) woman Pat Dudgeon and non-Indigenous woman Abigail Bray (2016, p. 2472) 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 was not explicitly mentioned by the women in terms of their activist roles. However, this concept was minimally covered by the same women in a separate paper on their experiences working in public relations (Clark et al., 2021). For example, the women discussed working within Western contexts, and with white men in public relations, and the consequent gender issues (Clark et al., 2021).

In considering Pearson's point regarding a set of skills and strategies representing activism, an Indigenous public relations practitioner who leverages their public relations skillset for social change is indeed an activist. The additional layer of gender also complicates the understanding of who an activist is, especially regarding Dudgeon and Bray's (2016) statement 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 call for further research into the concept of the public relations practitioner as activists (Adi & Lilleker, 2017; Holtzhausen, 2012; Sen, 2014; Toledano, 2016).

4.2. Relationships between Indigeneity, professional activism, and personal activism

All the five women included in this study have skills and experience in public relations that are useful in their personal lives, including writing articles, networking with media contacts, and applying social media expertise. Drawing from a previous study, the five women articulated that part of their professional work involves activism-type strategies, such as "[u]tilising public relations as a vehicle for social change and activism" and "[a]dvancing positive stories in the media and public" (Clark et al., 2019, pp. 55-58). Two of the women provided specific insight into the crossover of activist practices from their professional work to their personal lives, whether that included traditional forms, such as face-to-face protests, 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 statement regarding the importance of Indigenous women having a media platform was not expanded upon further, however, within public relations research, there is an 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 Indigenous culture on social media platforms; she originally began this 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, along with the importance of social and print media—suggesting a seamless transition of their professional 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 have experience in various public speaking roles, writing pieces, and board positions in advocating for and promoting Indigenous people and cultures. Implicitly, these activities may be seen to include activist elements. For example, Nicole has a burgeoning career and is accepting guest speaker spots. Susan has a wide range of experiences and skills, speaking at conferences, writing articles for the media, and accepting consulting work. Stacey is a regular guest speaker and a known presence within the field; she is frequently asked for advice and is a member on 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 related to activism, it is clear that the women in this study do continue their professional work in their personal lives. Women's roles in public relations and activism additionally raise concerns of wellbeing and emotional labor (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 affected 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 headspace to want to do it outside of work. But, it just happens naturally all the time.

From these findings, it is clear that 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. For instance, some of the women mentioned the importance of fashion and the conscious effort of communicating a unique persona, gender, and Indigeneity through clothing and dress.

4.3. Communicating Indigeneity and personal activism through fashion

Fashion and clothing can often be viewed as being trivial or superficial; however, like social media platforms and events, fashion has the power to communicate a message through body adornments and clothing (Barnard, 2003; Fitch 2020b; Motion, 2020; Widders Hunt, 2020). This is evident through the personal activism messages communicated by fashion practices, elucidated 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 opinions of other Indigenous people, who have stated that Indigenous fashion is 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 using Indigenous women’s bodies (such as Aboriginal Wiradjuri woman Kristy Dickinson’s brand *Haus of Dizzy*). Public relations research on the language of fashion and the body highlights Eurocentric patriarchal notions of body image and appearance (Demetrius, 2014; Fitch, 2020b, 2020c; Kriyantono & Rakhmawati, 2020; Motion, 2020; O’Byrne, 2010). However, little research exists on the activism effects of fashion within the context of public relations. 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), but it did not focus on

fashion and style in great 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. Conclusion

The centering of Indigenous women’s standpoint theory as a contextual position in this paper facilitates the critiquing of colonial and patriarchal constructs in the field of public relations (Morton-Robinson, 2013). Through the lenses of ontology (ways of being), epistemology (ways of knowing), and axiology (ways of doing), Indigenous women’s positions and worldviews were reflected within the stories they shared, their lived experiences working in public relations, and their activist skillsets practiced in their personal lives.

As Indigenous Australian women’s voices have been lacking in the field of public relations, this research focuses on the perspectives of Indigenous women in public relations research, defining three themes: *Indigeneity as activism; relationships between Indigeneity, professional activism, and personal activism; and communicating Indigeneity and personal activism through fashion*. These three themes are explained 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 the community and the constant lived experience of Indigeneity provide both explicit and implicit, and professional and personal activist roles for the Indigenous women. In combination with the additional layer of being a woman, along with the intersectional oppression faced by Indigenous women, it could be said that, for these women “[t]he very act of living is a form of resistance in itself” (Dudgeon & Bray, 2016, p. 2472). This is identified as a point of concern for Indigenous women, given the potential ramifications to their wellbeing. For instance, Indigenous women may have different roles and responsibilities as activists (personal and professional) in comparison to Indigenous men.

Relationships between Indigeneity, professional activism, and personal activism: Indigeneity as activism, reflected by the cultural values of communal and reciprocal responsibilities, was found to be related to the idea of a public relations practitioner as an activist (Holtzhausen, 2012). The women all have public relations skills and experience that they utilize in their personal lives, especially when performing activism in Indigenous contexts. These interchanging connections between professional and personal activism, however, do raise concerns regarding 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). For example, in maintaining a presence on social media, Indigenous women may experience different forms and levels of abuse, and/or may struggle with switching off and escaping more than Indigenous men.

Communicating Indigeneity and personal activism through fashion: It was identified that fashion and dress can be a positive outlet for wellbeing and channeling activism. Fashion was found to be an extension of Indigeneity and an external expression of culture. In line with existing literature on Indigenous fashion communication practices, fashion and jewelry were highlighted as useful communication tools for activism. These findings reveal that, within both Indigenous and public relations contexts, fashion can serve to resist patriarchal structures and control. However, within Australian research, fashion—as expressed in public relations—still predominately focuses on the voices of Eurocentric women.

This paper has contributed to several research topics relevant to public relations by relating Indigenous women's activist narratives to broader critical, postmodern, postcolonial, decolonial, and Indigenous Australian contexts. It presents current research on the activist practices of Indigenous women in the field of public relations. These practices are also performed outside of their employment, suggesting the need for further empirical research on the concept of public relations practitioners as activists. For Indigenous people, this paper advocates and encourages the leveraging 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 potential emotional labor and mental distress of Indigenous women who perform activism in both professional and personal contexts.

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