Perceptions of Public Relations in Australian Aboriginal Community-Controlled Non-profit Organisations

By Natacha Wirenfeldt Petersen
B.A. Social Sciences and Cultural Studies, Roskilde University, Denmark
GradDip Graduate Diploma of Public Relations, Murdoch University

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work, which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary educational institution.

Natacha Wirenfeldt Petersen
September 14, 2016
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Signed:

Full name: Natacha Mei-Wah Wirenfeldt Petersen

Student Number: 31881724

September 14, 2016
Abstract

This thesis examines how staff working within Aboriginal community-controlled non-profit organisations (ACCOs) perceive and practice Public Relations (PR), and foregrounds how ACCO staff, in the role as the organisations’ key communicators, can be seen as facilitating communicative processes of social change that lead to positive social outcomes within Australian Aboriginal communities. This relationship between PR and social change has been increasingly acknowledged in scholarship. Although most of the PR literature continues to focus on the management of communications between organisations and their publics, recent scholarship sheds light on PR’s influence on society and culture, and vice versa. This indicates PR is more than just a practical tool for an organisation. Rather, PR has the potential to be a much-needed voice for marginalised groups in society.

More specifically, this thesis explores PR in the non-corporate environments of the Indigenous sector in Perth, Western Australia. A selection of six ACCOs based in the metropolitan area of Perth represent the sample, and seven ACCO staff members participated in this research.

Drawing on a postcolonial theoretical framework and employing a qualitative research approach and Indigenous methodology, this thesis found that ACCOs predominantly practice PR-like activities in reactive ways on an ad hoc basis due to their limited communicative resources or lack of knowledge on how to integrate PR into their organisational structure. It was further established that short-term government funding programs challenge the ACCOs’ ability to budget for PR. A key finding was the importance of Aboriginal culture and kinship systems that must be factored in to understanding the ACCOs’ working environments and ways of communicating with members, communities and other stakeholders. This thesis calls for further research and development of theoretical frameworks embracing and extending the cultural diversity of PR practices. Moreover, it contends that there is a need to introduce culturally sensitive and sector-specific PR that sheds light on Indigenous contexts particularly within postcolonial societies, as PR holds the potential to give voice to and drive social change for minorities in our communities locally and abroad.
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Chapter One: Introduction

Over the past few years funding cuts have been made to the Indigenous sector in Australia, which raise concerns for the future provision of frontline social services to “society’s most vulnerable members, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander [ATSI] peoples, women and children” (Davidson 2015). An article published in The Guardian on March 25, 2015, suggests this is due to the increased competition over federal funds, which now includes non-Indigenous organisations, such as non-Indigenous government departments and sporting organisations that can access funds previously earmarked for the Indigenous sector. These federal cuts to the Indigenous sector call into question the Australian government’s attempts to recognise the at-risk situation of ATSI peoples. Sullivan (2011) refers to these welfare reforms as “strangling the third sector’s creativity” due to red tape and a “culture of government-by-grant” (Sullivan 2011: 3). In addition, the funding cuts and red tape can be seen as a neglect of the Indigenous sector’s crucial role in Australian society.

In response to these political events and based on a passion for public relations (PR), this research examines the perceptions of PR practices within Australian Aboriginal community-controlled non-profit organisations (ACCOs) in order to explore the potential of PR in assisting ACCOs in their pursuit of social change. An ACCO is a non-profit organisation working in, or towards the field of Aboriginal services, with more than half of the board or steering committee members identifying as being of Aboriginal descent. Situated within the sociocultural context of Aboriginal culture, protocols and a history of invasion and colonisation, these funding cuts are particularly relevant to the ways ACCOs budget for PR. With adequate funding, this thesis suggests PR practices can aid ACCOs in fostering relationships with funding bodies, influencing government incentives, raising funds, and increasing awareness of the ACCOs' social purposes.

Centred on a postcolonial theoretical framework, this thesis draws on Treena Clark’s (2012) definition of Aboriginal PR, as “communicating to and/or on behalf of Aboriginal people, Aboriginal organisations and Aboriginal communities” (Clark 2012: 20). Moreover,
this thesis sets out to explore ACCO staff’s perceptions of PR, their PR practices and role as their organisation’s key communicator. In particular, I examine the ACCOs’ daily communicative efforts, as experienced by ACCO staff, and consider how such activity relates to social change for Aboriginal peoples.

A growing body of scholars (Holtzhausen and Voto 2002; Dutta-Bergman 2004; Hodges and McGrath 2011; Dutta 2011; Dutta and Pal 2011; Holtzhausen 2012) combine social change and PR as a communicative tool and a communicative process to assist the voices of marginalised groups in society (Dutta 2011; 2012). These theories foreground that PR holds the potential to harness and influence power structures, and creates opportunities to enhance positive social change. Based on this theoretical backdrop, ACCOs can be seen as actively driving processes of social change, as they identify issues and provide community-based solutions by bringing together and giving voice to marginalised communities as a collective (Dutta 2011: 223). Indeed, this thesis documents some of the significant endeavours of ACCOs that provide essential social services and advocacy to ATSI peoples residing in the metropolitan areas of Perth, Western Australia.

Existing research demonstrating this relationship between PR and social change is increasingly being acknowledged in the PR literature. For example, international scholars (Fussell Sisco et al. 2013) found that research on ”non-profit public relations” is on the rise. Nevertheless, limited research exists of PR practices in the Australian Indigenous sector, which is surprising given the sector’s important role in supporting the welfare system and marginalised ATSI communities. This thesis specifically works towards closing the gap within PR research on Aboriginal organisations and their communicative resources (Sakinofsky and Janks, forthcoming: 2). This gap exists despite ACCOs carrying out a number of PR-related tasks, such as applying for tenures and grants, negotiating partnerships, creating program content, recruiting volunteers, liaising with media and promoting services to an array of stakeholders via different communication channels.

In light of these gaps in PR scholarship, this thesis aims to provide an understanding of the ACCOs’ PR practices from the vantage point of those people engaging with the ACCOs’ daily communicative tasks. If we can understand how the practice of PR is perceived in ACCOs, we might better understand how PR can be leveraged in non-corporate environments, such as the Indigenous sector.
In this thesis, “Aboriginal” refers to Australian Aboriginal peoples. However, where the literature refers to specific cultural groups, such as Noongar peoples from the South-West of Western Australia, the terminology of the source is used. Lastly, when engaging with research commenting on Aboriginal peoples in international contexts, the term “Indigenous” is used interchangeably with “Aboriginal”.

This chapter first takes a closer look at the Indigenous sector in which the ACCOs are situated. Next, the concept of PR is discussed followed by an account of some of the challenges that the organisations within the Australian Indigenous sector encounter in relation to their PR activities. The chapter then narrows down the scope of the research and presents the research questions followed by an outline of the thesis.

The Indigenous Sector

In Australia, the Indigenous sector is most commonly situated within the non-profit sector, also known as the third sector, including community-driven and non-government organisations (Lyons 2001: 9). These organisations are predominantly driven by a social purpose, not the profit or gain of individual members (ATO 2015), and they are viewed as operating for “the common good” (O’Connor and Sacco 1993).

The Australian government publication Contribution of the Not-For-profit Sector (Productivity Commission 2010) estimated there are 600,000 Australian non-profit organisations, of which 59,000 were defined as “economically significant” (Productivity Commission 2010: 53). In the period from 2012 to 2013 these economically significant organisations employed more than 1 million people and engaged a growing community of 3.9 million volunteers (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2015). Various models of non-profit organisations exist and operate within Australia, and it is beyond the scope of this thesis to categorise each of these. The sector can be divided into various sub-sectors, namely health, social services, international development, religion, culture and arts, sport and recreation, community development, advocacy and human rights, business and professional associations (Pro Bono 2014: 11). The third sector contributes significantly both economically and socially, and can be seen as promoting social cohesion in the Australian community, through its provision of social services across sectors. More
importantly, the non-profit sector represents and manifests social values other than financial gains (Costello 2015).

Although there are relatively few statistics on ATSI non-profit organisations within Australia, Sullivan (2011: 52) provides a rough estimate of slightly more than 5,000. The Indigenous sector is primarily made up of non-profit organisations focused on providing services to the Aboriginal community and being a liaison point between communities, social services, and the government. The role of individual ACCOs differ from organisation to organisation, however, the majority of ACCOs have a number of factors in common, in that they aim to represent the Aboriginal community in the best possible light, contribute to positive change for Aboriginal peoples within Australia, and provide culturally sensitive and relevant services specifically catering to Aboriginal communities. Given the Indigenous sector’s important role in providing extremely needed social services and representation, this thesis provides the foundation for further research into the role that PR plays in facilitating processes of social change, specifically for Aboriginal communities.

**Defining PR in Indigenous Contexts**

This thesis specifically explores the notion of PR as a key term referring to a discipline, profession and scholarship. According to the eminent PR scholar, Edwards (2012), PR is “the flow of purposive communication produced on behalf of individuals, formally constituted and informally constituted groups, through their continuous trans-actions with other social entities. It has social, cultural, political and economic effects at local, national and global levels” (Edwards 2012: 21). This includes formal communication processes carried out by different types of organisations, groups of people, or even individuals. In addition, PR can be seen as emerging from a mix of communicative transactions between social entities, such as governments, organisations, community members, or other stakeholder groups (Edwards 2012: 12).

Seeing PR as the management of communication between an organisation and its publics is key to dominant conceptualisations of PR (Grunig and Hunt 1984; Grunig, Grunig and Dozier 2002). In this view, PR has a documented effect on organisational effectivity (Grunig and Hunt 1984; Dozier, Grunig and Grunig 1995; Grunig, Grunig and Dozier 2002).
Moreover, PR encompasses a range of communicative processes shaping public opinion locally and between countries (Taylor and Kent 2006; Dutta, Ban and Pal 2012), fostering relationships across cultural differences (Bardhan 2011), and delivering low-budget media relations campaigns, including free editorial and promotion compared with paid marketing (Bailey in Tench and Yeomans 2014: 335-336). Dominant PR theory highlights these contributions and frames PR as an important tool for an organisation to operate efficiently and build relationships with influential stakeholders. Prominent PR theorists, Grunig and Hunt (1984), in their theoretical approach to the relationship between an organisation and its publics, promote PR as a tool for reaching organisational goals and effectively managing communication with key stakeholders.

In extending dominant perceptions of PR, this thesis situates PR more broadly by also acknowledging its powerful cultural, social and political roles. For example, Banks (1995) views PR as a powerful cultural practice because it influences both the organisations that employ PR, and affects the audiences who are subjected to these PR practices (Banks 1995: 34). In addition, PR’s connection to culture can be acknowledged through its role as “cultural intermediary” (Hodges 2011: 37) in that PR practitioners facilitate dialogue across cultures and build relationships between organisations and communities. This connection between culture, society and PR can also be found in earlier works promoting a communitarian perspective on PR (see Kruckeberg and Starck 1988; Kruckeberg 2006). Kruckeberg and Starck (1988) have done extensive theorising within this perspective and define PR as “the active attempt to restore and maintain a sense of community” (Kruckeberg and Starck 1988: 21). Kruckeberg (2006) further builds on this notion of community and presents a model which positions PR as a means for organisations, governments and corporations to liaise with all members in society that in turn develops a community through facilitation of dialogue and mutual understandings (Kruckeberg 2006: 2).

This social role of PR, which establishes the important link between PR and society, is further underpinned by literature drawing on sociological and cultural theorists, also known as the sociocultural turn in PR scholarship (Edwards and Hodges 2011). In this perspective “PR moves from being understood as a functional process enacted in the organisational context to being a contingent, sociocultural activity that forms part of the
communicative process by which society constructs its symbolic and material ‘reality”’ (Daymon and Hodges 2009 cited in Edwards and Hodges 2011: 3). Identifying the political role of PR further builds on these social and cultural aspects but employs a political lens specifically centred around PR’s role in facilitating social change and resisting dominant power structures within the organisation (Berger 2005), as well as scrutinising PR’s role in creating a voice for those who are the most deprived in society (Dutta 2011; Holtzhausen 2012; Motion, Haar and Leitch 2012). By uniting and acknowledging PR’s three core dimensions (cultural, social and political) it is possible to apply a holistic approach to PR research, which is crucial when understanding PR in ACCOs given their complex contexts, including their distinct cultural norms and traditions, and their role in serving and representing community needs. As will be shown throughout this thesis, PR in ACCOs emerges in this intersection of the cultural, social and political, in which PR is not necessarily formally integrated into the ACCOs’ organisational structure, but is predominantly practiced as a reactive form of communication and managed on an ad hoc basis.

In addition, the ACCOs’ ad hoc approach to PR is often due to their limited resources or lack of knowledge about how to leverage their PR-like activities. Instead of using the term “PR”, they refer to “communication”, which is acknowledged as a core function in building relationships with stakeholders and “getting out there” in the community. Thus, PR as a concept was discussed by participants as a theory, rather than as part of their daily routine. An example of this implicit use of the term PR in ACCOs can be seen in a job advertisement for the Ngaanyatjarra Council, an Aboriginal Corporation representing 12 communities in the Central Desert region of Western Australia (http://www.ngaanyatjarra.org.au/). When advertising for a newly established position titled “Communication and Engagement Officer”, they wrote: “This position is responsible for the creation and implementation of a Communications & Engagement Strategy (…) with the aim of increasing the level of knowledge and discussion amongst Ngaanyatjarra people of key issues confronting the Ngaanyatjarra region” (Ethical Jobs 2015). The key responsibilities included tasks such as developing communication strategies and promotional material, managing social media platforms, and assisting with community consultations (Ethical Jobs 2015). In other words, PR is absent in this role description
Despite the inclusion of media relations, strategic communications, issues management and community engagement, all tasks that are core PR activities.

In order to be aligned with existing research and the participant accounts of this thesis, it is acknowledged that ACCOs often replace the term PR by using different words, such as community engagement, social marketing, event management or media management (see Chapter Four, “Communicative Infrastructures”). Thus, for the purpose of this thesis, such PR practices in ACCOs will be referred to as PR-like activities to accommodate this discrepancy between practice and theory.

**PR Challenges in ACCOs**

ACCOs carry the responsibility of meeting both the material needs of their members, representing Aboriginal political identity (Sullivan 2011: 55), and liaising with government in regards to receiving funding for the provision of social services. Therefore, ACCOs build relationships with community members and stakeholders (Dimitrov 2008: 13-14), grow social capital (Schneider 2003: 386), and unlike corporate organisations, they are largely driven by community needs.

Funding bodies and stakeholders are important for Australian ACCOs to function and access communicative resources. But ACCOs experience a few structural barriers that prevent them from leveraging PR-like activities, such as limited allocation of budgets for communicative resources such as developing communications plans and strategies, promotional material, websites and staffing social media accounts.

L’Etang (2008) compares the “information poor” third sector’s communicative resources with the “information rich” sectors, such as governments and corporations. This research highlights the power relations embodied in PR practices that often serve the interests of powerful social actors, such as governments and corporations, which have access to larger funding pools and budgets (L’Etang 2008: 233). Along these lines, Edwards (2011) also considers non-profit organisations’ access to communicative resources, which she explains as being due to the low symbolic value ascribed to the third sector (Edwards in Edwards and Hodges 2011: 71). Both L’Etang and Edwards would agree that third sector organisations are not on equal footing with bigger corporations or governments in terms of
accessing communicative resources. As a result, powerful social actors, particularly larger organisations, shape society in alignment with their interests through the use of communications (Edwards in Edwards and Hodges 2011: 73). Conversely, Moloney (2006) inverts the conversation and focuses on the low levels of PR literacy within non-governmental organisations. He expands: “The groups either do not know how to send PR messages, or transmit them incompetently, and thus the interests they represent are not adequately heard and debated in the political economy in civil society” (Moloney 2006: 95). Moreover, International PR scholar, Waters (2015) observes that in the USA non-profit organisations are not acknowledged in society despite their crucial role in working towards “common good for all” (Waters 2015: xv). This tendency is considered to be applicable within the Australian context because an ACCO’s ability to practice PR effectively is challenged by limited political recognition of the Indigenous sector and ATSI peoples, and an unstable financial environment, in which non-profit organisations are continually constrained by short-term funding programs, which are often earmarked for certain projects (Sullivan 2009: 65). It is suggested within this thesis that PR has the potential to aid ACCOs to mobilise community members politically, and through such advocacy challenge larger profit-driven companies and governments, if required. As Moloney (2006) points out, non-profits are less advanced in managing PR-like activities, and therefore less likely to influence public discourse. This dilemma may be improved if ACCOs acquire the needed know-how in order to fully leverage PR to reach organisational goals.

A more straightforward example of challenges involved with ACCOs’ literacy of, and access to, PR, is balancing PR practice with cultural sensitivity. For example, media relations, as a mode of PR, are particularly important to those organisations wanting to influence Aboriginal Affairs policy (Sullivan 2009: 60). Furthermore, relationships between ACCOs and the media are complex, and at times, media expectations clash with Aboriginal consensus-driven governance structures, for instance, “journalists often require an instant or quick response from people they interview due to tight time constraints on getting stories to air or print” (personal communication with Verity Leach, Founder of Ethical Communications, Western Australia, October 26, 2015). On the flipside, Aboriginal organisations often require longer periods of time to make a public statement as they must first consult or attain consensus from their board. Often, and this probably happens more
in regional and remote communities, consultation with elders and the broader Aboriginal community can also be required. Consequently, there is a clash of cultures. On the one hand, journalists are driven by meeting deadlines and mostly very short time frames, whilst Aboriginal organisations require time and are driven by consultation and collective decision making (Leach et al. 2012: 10).

Another challenge encountered by ACCOs is their governance structures that at times conflict with national regulations, such as, the *Corporations Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Act* (CATSI Act). The CATSI Act can be seen as the Federal government’s attempt to adapt to ATSI cultures and protocols, making it easier for ATSI organisations to incorporate (ORIC 2015). One of the criteria for incorporation is a maximum of 12 directors, the majority of who are ATSI peoples (Office of the Registrar of Aboriginal Corporations 2010: 2). These rules of incorporation reflect the on-going requirements dictated by the Australian Government to ACCOs, rather than acknowledging Aboriginal communities’ existing representative and service-delivery structures as legitimate forms of governance and leadership (Sullivan 2011: 8). As such, balancing government policies against Aboriginal law and culture is often perceived as challenging for ACCOs. For example, Edna O’Malley, previous Chairperson of the *Yawoorroong Miriuwung Gajerrong Yirrgeb Noong Dawang Aboriginal Corporation* (MG Corporation) based in Kununurra, Western Australia, observes in a video as part of Reconciliation Australia’s *Indigenous Governance Toolkit*, how the MG Corporation had to compromise its governance structure by cutting its board of directors in half in order to comply with the CATSI Act (O’Malley, YouTube, ReconciliationAus, December 2, 2012, *MG Corporation Where does culture fit*). This highlights the miscommunication between a coloniser government and Aboriginal culture, norms, and law. These political and cultural contexts underlie the politicised environment and opinions of participants expressed within the data collection of this thesis, which will be discussed further in *Chapter Five*, “Working within ACCOs”.

In this introductory chapter, I have touched on the political context of ACCOs and discussed the crucial role of the Indigenous sector in relation to ACCOs’ PR-like activities. In what follows, the research focus is further narrowed down and research questions are introduced.
Scope of the Research

This thesis focuses on individuals engaged with ACCOs’ PR-like activities in order to understand their perceptions of PR practice in such settings. Given the limited available perspectives in the PR literature specifically addressing PR in Australian Aboriginal contexts, in this thesis I will argue further theoretical work is needed in order for researchers to fully explore those processes of communication operating in less structured communicative settings, such as the majority of the participating ACCOs within this research. With that being said, although PR-like activities are highly valued in ACCOs, budget constraints and literacy about PR often leave the organisations unable to deploy the full potential of these tools. That is, the participating ACCOs were at times limited in their capacity to embrace the potential PR brings in terms of reaching organisational goals, giving a voice to its community members, and driving social change to their benefits.

This thesis and the job advertisement by the Ngaanyatjarra Council provide evidence that real communicative needs exist in ACCOs, but also that while PR-like activities are constantly carried out, PR is yet to be professionally acknowledged as a means of reaching the ACCOs’ organisational goals or social purposes. Thus, this thesis sets out to further explore these links between PR and ACCOs through a small case study of six selected ACCOs representing the diverse Indigenous sector in Perth, Western Australia.

In order to explore the perception of PR in ACCOs, this thesis is informed by an exploratory qualitative research approach using semi-structured interviews as outlined in further detail in Chapter Three, “A Culturally Sensitive Research Strategy”. The research participants identify as being mainly responsible for their ACCO’s communication tasks and strategies. Six semi-structured interviews were carried out and email correspondence occurred with the seventh participant. These accounts were analysed in depth using a basic qualitative research approach (Daymon and Holloway 2011; Merriam 2014). In addition, an Indigenous Advisory Group was formed to provide support and guidance that would ensure a culturally sensitive research approach (see Chapter Three, “Indigenous Advisory Group”).

By exploring perceptions of PR-like activities within Australian ACCOs, and building upon, critiquing and extending dominant PR theories, this thesis highlights the need to include Aboriginal perspectives in PR theory. This can help advance PR practices in terms of
developing culturally sensitive strategies that take into account local, cultural contexts when communicating with, or on behalf of Aboriginal communities. Furthermore, the importance of adhering to the local norms and unique voices of Aboriginal communities is a factor that is necessary to give voice to ATSI peoples, who have been invaded and colonised, and continue experiencing social disadvantage. Although a focus on Australian politics is beyond the scope of this thesis, in focusing predominantly on ACCO staff’s perceptions of PR this thesis acknowledges that these are affected by various factors such as the broader political context of invasion and colonisation.

Furthermore, I believe that we must illuminate the power relations at work to make a real difference for the most disadvantaged communities, such as the ATSI peoples in Australia. With this in mind, I have tried to honour Indigenous knowledge by integrating Indigenous culture and protocols into the research process. These choices were made with inspiration from Kurtz (2013), who argues it is dissatisfactory to only position research in an academic field. Instead, historic details of the researcher must be shared as a gesture of respect to one’s family background and connection to land (Kurtz 2013: 218).

My cultural heritage is rooted in Chinese and Danish cultures. My academic journey crystallised into a passion for minorities, Indigenous cultures, and, later on, PR. As this thesis shows, I centre my scholarly work on cultures, identity and difference, which aligns with my political beliefs in solidarity and community. My university degrees have aimed to better understand the unequal power relations between minority groups and mainstream society, reflecting critically on my white privilege, and explored the injustices played out in everyday life. This thesis is my attempt to contribute to understanding societal conditions experienced in ACCOs through the lenses of PR, as I view PR as an underused tool with great potential to drive meaningful social change for the most disadvantaged communities both locally and abroad.

By focusing explicitly on ACCOs, this thesis is situated between theory and practice. Theoretically, it contributes to research in the field by researching the concept of PR in its less corporate forms, and specific to Aboriginal contexts. Practically, it sheds light on PR perceptions and PR-like activities in ACCOs, and the daily management of these, which will be useful knowledge in terms of evaluating PR’s role in the delivery of social services to ATSI communities.
Moreover, ATSI communities are less privileged in Australian society due to a history of invasion and colonisation, which makes this topic important in terms of providing a voice for ATSI communities in a time where funding has decreased. As Fussell Sisco et al. argue: “In times like these [heavy economic instability] scholarly evaluation of the effectiveness of PR in order to aid these organisations is imperative”(Fussell et al. 2013: 293). In accordance with Fussell et al., this thesis argues that scholarship must continue questioning PR’s role, specifically in ATSI community-controlled non-profit organisations, if we are ever to make real changes in our communities. On this quest, new ways of doing PR may be identified and valuable contributions can be made to theory and the PR profession.

Based upon my research interests, a review of the literature, and grounded in a qualitative research design, this thesis specifically addresses how people working in Perth metropolitan-based ACCOs perceive PR. This is explored through how they perceive their PR-like activities and roles as the ACCOs’ key communicators. In doing so, this thesis addresses following research questions:

- **On the backdrop of the PR literature, what kinds of PR-like tactics and activities are identified by ACCO staff?**
- **In what ways do ACCO staff communicate their messages and engage with their stakeholders, such as members and communities?**
- **How do ACCO staff perceive their ACCO work environment and their roles as key communicators?**

All interview participants volunteered to take part in this research and the Murdoch University Human Research Ethics Committee granted the ethics approval for this research (Project No. 2014/074). Finally, the research reported in this thesis was conducted in line with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007).
Chapter Outline

This thesis is structured into six chapters. The first chapter introduces the thesis, and the second reviews the literature pertinent to the research. The third chapter clarifies the chosen methodology and recruitment of research participants. The last three chapters present the analysis and findings and conclude the thesis.

Chapter One has introduced the thesis and its rationale, as well as explained the Indigenous sector in relation to recent funding cuts to the Australian third sector. In Chapter Two, various theoretical perspectives and concepts are presented, and relevant literature is reviewed. More specifically, the literature review is organised around five topics to give an overview of the recent shift in PR literature, from the more dominant research that deals primarily with corporate PR practices, to a more contextual and sociocultural approach that focuses on marginalised and disempowered groups. The breadth of writings of different communications theorists over time and across cultural backgrounds is explored with special emphasis on PR in relation to cultural contexts, norms, beliefs and values, and linked to the broader social impacts of communicative activities. A subsection discusses PR practitioners as mediators across cultures and organisational boundaries in the role as change agents or organisational activists, and connects PR with theory on communication and social change. The literature review specifically considers how alternative approaches to PR theory challenge the dominant theoretical perspectives of PR often written by Western-based researchers. As will be argued, Western perceptions of PR cannot be taken at universal because they neglect the social and cultural contexts in which PR is embedded. In contrast to dominant PR theory, Chapter Two also brings in PR theorists who argue that PR can be used as a political tool for mediating positive social change and representing diverse social groups and organisations.

Chapter Three outlines the methodological framework by drawing on qualitative research approaches and Indigenous methodologies. The chapter justifies the selection of methods and recruitment of the research participants and foregrounds the importance of applying culturally sensitive methodologies when researching Indigenous contexts. A description of the coding process and an outline of the analysis is made to connect the methodology with the interpretative work carried out in Chapters Four and Five.
The analysis comprises two chapters. *Chapter Four* focuses on the participants’ perceptions of their ACCO’s PR-like activities and the concept of “PR”, which is associated with marketing, media relations, relationship-building and reactive PR. Following an outline of these four perceptions, the chapter provides an overview of each of the various tactics employed. It also describes the PR-like strategies used to communicate messages to community members and other stakeholders. Special emphasis is drawn to the Aboriginal way of communicating, which is steered by the Aboriginal imperative of building personal relationships with their members and community representatives. *Chapter Five* explores participants’ working environments including their relationships with colleagues and board members, Western Australian government funding policies, and the importance of Australian Aboriginal cultural protocol and kinship. In continuation, participants’ roles as key communicators and mediators are discussed in relation to the ACCOs’ organisational purpose of driving social change.

*Chapter Six* concludes the thesis, summarises the findings and explores ideas for future research.
Chapter Two: PR Reconsidered

This chapter probes the body of PR literature and identifies scholarship pertinent to this study. Diverse cultural perspectives of PR are highlighted and key concepts are explained to inform the understanding of PR practice within ACCOs. Much PR theory and the predominant perceptions of PR practice have long been trapped in Western-based theoretical frameworks that focus on the relationship between organisations and strategic relevant publics, leaving out the unique cultural, social and political contexts that also inform PR practices. In contrast, Sison (2012) argues: “Let us facilitate participation from scholars of diverse backgrounds and have the courage to ask questions beyond the comforts and conventions of our linguistic and cultural familiarity” (Sison in Mahoney, Sison and Chia 2012). Following Sison’s advice, this review draws on scholars from across disciplines and with different cultural backgrounds to inform the perception of PR used in this thesis.

The chapter focuses on the perception of PR as mediating interests on behalf of powerful organisations and social actors, but also as a vehicle to empower disadvantaged groups, such as Indigenous populations worldwide and ATSI peoples in Australia. Moreover, the deficits of research drawing on Excellence theory (Grunig, Grunig and Dozier 2002) are outlined and contrasted with literature describing PR and its connection to concepts of culture and social change. Specifically, this chapter emphasises the PR practitioner’s diverse roles in mediating interests on behalf of different social groups and organisations, and foregrounds her ability to build relationships for the benefit of both the organisation and its broader social surroundings.

Moving from research that views PR as a corporate practice to scholarship addressing PR’s sociocultural contexts, the literature review is structured into five sections: 1) PR Past and Present, 2) Sociocultural Approaches, 3) PR Practitioners as Mediators, 4) Power and Interests, and 5) Social Change and Activism. The first section focuses on the transition
from dominant views of PR to sociocultural approaches within the PR literature. These approaches are elaborated on in section two, to explain the interdependency between PR, society and culture. Section three focuses on the PR practitioner, in the role as mediator in cultural contexts, to show the complexity of PR practice. Section four further builds on these broader sociocultural contexts by foregrounding PR as a powerful tool in mediating interests on behalf of various stakeholders, organisations and communities. The last section wraps up the chapter by discussing literature on activism and social change to foreground alternative understandings of PR practice within less corporate settings. Such perspectives position PR within the political landscape of marginalised communities and contend further research is warranted on less formalised processes of organisational communication.

To limit the review, certain debates within the literature will be omitted including scholarship on ethics (see Fitzpatrick and Gauthier 2001), PR as a profession (see Grunig and Hunt 1984), and issues and crisis management (see Rahim 2002; Jaques 2002; Coombs and Holladay 2011). By reviewing relevant literature, this chapter clarifies the critical theoretical foundations underpinning this research, and helps us to understand and interpret PR-like activities in ACCOs.

**PR Past and Present**

PR-like activities have been practised in diverse national contexts. Nations such as Australia (Macnamara and Crawford 2010) and USA (Grunig and Hunt 1984; Cutlip 1994) have their own unique PR-like practices given their distinct social, cultural and political contexts. This diversity within PR practice extends to include PR professionals, organisations, institutions and state governments as social actors engaging with PR, but also less formalised processes of PR being carried out by, for example, activist groups (Wolf 2012) and community members (Zoller 2000). These less formal processes of PR tend to be overlooked by research drawing on Excellence theory, a theory that explores relationships between organisations and publics, overlooking complex cultural contexts in multicultural societies (Weaver 2011: 262-263). As Pieczka (2006) underlines, Excellence theory has become “the dominant paradigm of PR”, having reached a status of ideology in PR
This thesis acknowledges this Western-based inheritance rooted in theory by Bernays and Grunig, two of PR’s “most influential thinkers” (Moloney 2006: 54), who planted the seeds of what PR has become today.

Throughout time PR has evolved into an academic discipline as well as a profession. In the 1980s a prominent shift took place transitioning PR theory away from propaganda and the manipulation of the public mind (Bernays 1928: 960), to a business and management perspective. Grunig and Hunt (1984) identify four stages in this historic development: 1) Press agent/publicity, 2) public/information, 3) one-way asymmetric and 4) two-way symmetric, with the last model being the most advanced (Grunig and Hunt 1984: 14). In short, symmetry arises when the organisation’s and public’s interests are being looked after equally. This implies an equal relationship between the organisation’s management and its publics, in which both parties can influence each other’s behaviours and values through the use of PR (Grunig and Hunt 1984: 23). Additionally, this two-way symmetric model promotes “negotiation, compromise, and understanding” (Grunig and Hunt 1984: V), and prompts the PR practitioner to use research and dialogue in order for the organisation to operate efficiently (Grunig, Grunig and Dozier 2002: 308). Moreover, Grunig and Hunt characterise PR as “the management of communication between an organisation and its publics” (Grunig and Hunt 1984: 6). This is still the most prominent concise definition. However, later definitions have focused on the purpose of this communication. For example, a member survey by the PR Society of America defines PR as, “a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organisations and their publics” (PRSA 2013). Following such views, PR can be seen as “moving messages” between publics and organisations; as such, PR practitioners play two roles, by both communicating for and bringing in information to the organisation.

Another prominent piece of research, the Excellence study (Dozier, Grunig and Grunig 1995; Grunig, Grunig and Dozier 2002), involved fifteen years of inquiry informed by a comprehensive quantitative research design. It pioneered PR scholarship by claiming a causal relationship between PR and organisational effectiveness (Grunig, Grunig and Dozier 2002: ix). The study argues the goal of PR is “communication excellence”:

Communication excellence describes the ideal state in which knowledgeable communicators assist in the overall strategic management of organizations, seeking
symmetrical relations through management of communication with key publics on whom organizational survival and growth depends. (Dozier, Grunig and Grunig 1995: X)

Ideally, PR builds strategic relations between the organisation and strategically chosen publics. Moreover, PR excellence depends on the organisation’s ability to consult with publics in a manner that does not compromise the organisation’s nor the public’s interests in the pursuit of organisational goals (Grunig and Grunig 2008: 328). The relationship between the organisation and the public is the focal point in much literature drawing on Excellence theory, which has led to much inspiration in recent scholarship (see Sriramesh and Vercic 2009) and is still used as a yardstick within the PR industry.

Nevertheless, Excellence theory has its flaws. Scholars (e.g. Curtin and Gaither 2005; Edwards 2005) argue such managerial views limit PR practitioners to only serving organisational interests, thus dismissing PR’s social and cultural impacts. Other critics (Motion and Weaver 2005; Waymer and Heath 2007; Weaver 2011) hold that such managerial views exclude perspectives addressing unequal distribution of power between an organisation and publics, which often benefits those already in powerful positions economically and politically. Grunig (2011) disagrees and defends Excellence theory as a framework for analysis, because it stresses how PR professionals empower and voice the public’s concerns in organisational decision-making (Grunig 2011: 15). Grunig’s contributions are appreciated for recognising PR practitioners as central members of any organisation’s management, also termed “the dominant coalition” (Berger 2005), but the focus on communication excellence tends to suppress other ways of practising and understanding PR (Holtzhausen 2002: 33). In turn, this affects the role of the PR practitioner, whose role is to both conform to organisational goals and serve public interests.

In contrast to the dominant PR paradigm, emerging theories drawing on sociology and cultural studies, but not limited to these disciplines, depict a different view of PR. In these works, PR is socially constructed and PR practitioners are social agents working in a constantly changing organisational environment, in which communication flows are less controllable and predictable. These emerging works can be positioned under the sociocultural “turn” within PR theory (Edwards and Hodges 2011: 3). Scholarship writing from this perspective acknowledges the reciprocal relationship between PR, society and culture by positioning PR as a sociocultural activity. The following sections will further
elaborate on PR literature that provides such broader sociocultural conceptualisations of PR.

Sociocultural Approaches

Edwards and Hodges (2011) explain the connection between culture and PR by emphasising PR’s fundamental role in producing, sustaining and regulating the processes through which people make sense of themselves and others (Edwards and Hodges 2011: 3). In doing so, they conceptualise PR as a space that enables the production of emerging social and cultural meanings, which shapes how we think and the ways we practice PR (Edwards and Hodges 2011: 4). This link between PR and culture is further elaborated by the prominent anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973), who describes culture as “an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life” (Geertz 1973: 89). Geertz’s acknowledgement of communication processes and their close connection to cultural specificity is pivotal when considering our increasingly globally connected world, which demands more dynamic conceptualisations of communication and culture altogether (Bardhan 2011: 78).

Other scholars provide a global perspective to understanding the link between PR and culture. For example, Bardhan (2011) suggests culture “walks over, under, and in-between national boundaries, and is far from static” (Bardhan 2011: 79). In this view “public relations becomes transcultural when public relations action and communication occur at the junctures (spaces) of global forces and the cultural realities of a locality” (Bardhan 2011: 79). Though, Bardhan acknowledges the extended timeframe necessary for building long-term cultural transformation and mutual relationships across cultural differences (Bardhan 2011: 91).

In contrast to Bardhan’s global focus on PR, Kruckeberg and Starck (1988) comment on PR in relation to building mutual relationships from a communitarian perspective. They define PR as “the active attempt to restore and maintain a sense of community” (Kruckeberg and Starck 1988: 21). In this view, PR assists organisations, governments and
corporations in liaising with all members in society that in turn develop a community through the facilitation of dialogue and mutual understandings between them (Kruckeberg 2006: 2).

Banks (1995) supports Kruckeberg and Starck’s emphasis on community, but criticises their communitarian view as being better suited for explaining communicative processes within community and social services organisations. Instead, Banks expands Kruckeberg and Starck’s definition of PR by proposing that all organisations take part in building community, through their communicative efforts. By accepting two-way communication as the founding principles, Banks observes PR “has a mediating and translating role in the communication activities of a society” (Banks 1995: 19). Banks argues that a better grasp of PR practices includes emphasis on PR’s social consequences and its role in maintaining and fostering communities. In order for organisations to operate sustainably, and on a long-term basis, they must foster attitudes of social responsibility among community members, in order for them to establish and maintain healthy communities. Summing up, Banks finds the most important task of PR is to develop and ensure an organisation has a vested interest in building “positive and supportive” communities (Banks 1995: 21).

Although drawing on Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) seminal work Managing Public Relations, Banks views PR practice through a cultural lens and extends the notion of publics to include communities that are constituted by various kinds of peoples with different interests, attitudes and behaviours.

With a similar focus on community, Zoller (2000) analyses how a community-driven movement initiated by the World Health Organisation (WHO) facilitates dialogue and participation among community members. Based on ten months of fieldwork doing participant observations, Zoller describes the issues of bigger organisations, like WHO, in implementing a framework based on pre-defined ideals of creating community dialogue. These preconceived ideals conflicted with the community members’ perceptions of community dialogue, which eventually jeopardised their participation in the movement. Zoller’s study shows the importance of accommodating community members’ expectations and perceptions with an open mindset, detached from predetermined ideas of defining and practising dialogue.
All four theorists, Kruckeberg and Starck, Banks, and Zoller, highlight the potential of driving social change via community-based communicative activities. But, as they point out, this requires acknowledging community members’ “cultural realities” by involving them and respecting their local settings.

The majority of scholars employing a sociocultural approach to researching PR agree there is an interdependent relationship between PR, culture and society, meaning that PR is both influenced by and shapes cultures and societies. In drawing on such sociocultural approaches, the organisation and its publics are located in complex webs of communicative activities. This complexity has become accentuated during a time of technological development and increasing globalisation. For example, Kent and Taylor (2011) apply a global perspective on PR to stress the immediate influx of communications made available through new technological developments. As the world is getting smaller in terms of communicative distance, uncertainty and ambiguity challenge the organisation, due to the increase of culturally diverse publics and new situations an organisation faces (Kent and Taylor 2011: 50). Another example is the rapid use of social media, which shows how communicative processes have increased in speed and connected people across national borders. Consequently, PR is valuable to the organisation in navigating global challenges (Kent and Taylor 2011: 50) because PR becomes a means for the organisation to better operate in changing surroundings, and communicate and empathise with stakeholders from diverse cultural backgrounds (Kent and Taylor 2011: 71). In continuation, Kent and Taylor argue that it is no longer sufficient to plug publics into models; rather, it is a matter of understanding that organisations, publics (people) and society are in flux and not independent entities.

Summing up, sociocultural approaches within PR scholarship specifically acknowledge the importance of locally context-based PR practices often taking place in multiple places, including Aboriginal organisations. As indicated in this section, today all kinds of organisations are “embedded in and constitutive of a world where cultural differences are rapidly interfacing and reconfiguring through the heightened interactions of people and practices” (Bardhan 2011: 76). As Weaver (2011) argues, this global interconnectedness brings the opportunity for PR scholarship to enter the “second generation of inquiry” (Weaver 2011: 258). Such a transition, however, requires looking beyond the formal
relationship between organisations and publics, and not solely relying on Excellence theory and its derivatives, but employing a range of theoretical perspectives. Thus, viewing PR as a sociocultural practice is essential in order to accommodate the many different perceptions and practices of PR, but also to understand its influence on society, whether it be forging a global community and shared experiences, or less enabling outcomes, such as increasing segregation and inequality.

Qualitative researchers (Edwards 2009; Hodges 2011) continue this discussion on the purpose of PR practice, but from the perspective of the PR practitioner. This will be a focal point in the following sections.

**PR Practitioners as Mediators**

The previous sections highlighted how sociocultural contexts are shaping our perception of the relationship between community organisations and their stakeholders. This section continues along these lines, but with the PR practitioner as the focal point, to better understand her role in forging relationships between organisations and community members locally and globally. The PR practitioner is key in determining the purpose of PR practice. For example, many scholars stress the PR practitioner’s ability to negotiate power (Motion and Weaver 2005; Holtzhausen 2012) in order to legitimise and challenge social, cultural, political, and economic structures (Weaver, Motion and Roper 2006; Dutta, Ban and Pal 2012), or to foster relationships between publics and nation states (Taylor and Kent 2006). Two social roles of the PR practitioner encapsulate these characteristics: cultural intermediary (Curtin and Gaither 2005) and discourse technologist (Motion and Leitch 1996). These roles provide a useful framework for understanding the influential work carried out by ACCO staff responsible for communicating with community members and other stakeholders.

In contrast to the dominant Western-based approaches, Curtin and Gaither (2005) foreground a theoretical framework for analysing PR as a cultural practice. In this theoretical framework, PR practitioners are perceived as cultural intermediaries intertwined in the production and consumption of information that people draw on to
create meaning (Curtin and Gaither 2005: 107). Moreover, Curtin and Gaither avoid economic terms to conceptualise PR, and position it as a “meaning-making practice” (Curtin and Gaither 2005: 105) that operates in a “synergetic, nonlinear, dynamic process” (Curtin and Gaither 2005: 93). They contend PR practice emerges in the circuit of culture, which is a term comprising complex discursive processes that can be divided into five overlapping circular moments: 1) representation, 2) production, 3) consumption, 4) identity, and 5) regulation. Within these overlapping moments, meanings are constantly represented in discourses. Through this production and consumption of meaning, people constantly negotiate and renegotiate meaning, including their own identity. In addition, the fifth moment of regulation spans over individual, organisational and national levels and takes into account the broader cultural systems of governance, such as conventional rules and policies, as part of analysing PR practice. As cultural intermediaries, PR practitioners “continually generate representations at the articulation of production and consumption to help structure how publics think, feel, and act within a particular regulatory context” (Curtin and Gaither 2005: 107). Furthermore, in their role as cultural intermediary the PR practitioner facilitates dialogue across cultures, and builds relationships between various cultural entities, such as organisations, stakeholders, and publics (Hodges 2011: 37).

Hodges (2011) brings this notion of the cultural intermediary into a Mexican context through her two years of ethnographic inquiry on PR occupational culture in Mexico City. Hodges shows that Mexican PR practitioners experience their roles, as uniting people through the facilitation of information exchange (Hodges 2011: 43). Another main finding is the practitioners’ emphasis on humane relations at the core of their PR practices. This focus can be reasoned on the backdrop of the Mexican political and historical context of corruption, in which the Mexican PR practitioner must possess a strong ethical commitment in order to enact her role truthfully and deliver authentic communications.

Weaver, Motion and Roper (2006) have studied the role of the PR practitioner from another angle. They characterise PR practitioners as “discourse technologists” and draw on a Foucauldian approach to understanding PR practice. Following Foucault, discourses are “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault in Weaver, Motion and Roper 2006: 9). The PR practitioners enact their role as discourse technologists through maintaining and transforming discourse (Motion and Leitch 1996: 298). By
drawing on particular discourses, the PR practitioner gives advantage to the interests of organisations, publics, and practitioners, but not on equal terms. For example, Weaver, Motion and Roper refer to the issues brought by Western corporate capitalism, which limits the discourses available in order to advance corporations’ interests.

Similarly, Motion and Weaver (2005) illuminate the issues of power through a discourse analysis of an advocacy campaign by the Life Sciences Network, which took place during the 2002 national government election in New Zealand. Motion and Weaver analyse campaign material, such as media kits, websites and advertorials in newspapers, and discuss the Life Sciences Network’s strategic choices in regards to crafting content in the pursuit of shaping public opinion. The study shows how the PR practitioner creates social impact, by drawing on specific discourses when crafting information to be dispersed to the public and influential stakeholders. Motion and Weaver conclude: “Through discursive play the PR practitioner advances the hegemonic power of certain groups and supports them in gaining public consent to achieve organisational goals” (Motion and Weaver 2005: 50).

Together, the two roles of the PR practitioner as cultural intermediary or discourse technologist depict the complex universe in which practitioners must work; bound by local, cultural and historical contexts, practitioners are constrained by the discourses available to them, but also powerful in their ability to construe and maintain certain discourses. This ability to mediate interests demonstrates the PR practitioner’s influence on organisations, publics, communities and individual stakeholders. Next, this political aspect is highlighted to better understand the potential issues arising in mediating interests on behalf of communities, organisations and stakeholders.

**Power and Interests**

A political perspective emphasises the power within communicative action, and frames ACCOs’ PR-like activities as purposeful and directive, acknowledging their organisational goals of representing and serving Aboriginal communities’ needs. However, it also raises the dilemma of an organisation’s ability to equally represent members, and achieve organisational goals at the same time.
Extensive works within PR scholarship (Berger 2005; Taylor and Kent 2006; Moloney 2006; Waymer and Heath 2007) explore this political side of PR practice by exploring PR as a means of exerting power over others, or as a way to give voice to disadvantaged groups of society. The purpose of this thesis is neither to investigate government rhetoric, nor discuss how ACCOs mobilise their members in regards to certain social needs and political issues. Nevertheless, it is insightful to draw on knowledge from the PR literature situated within a political and economic context because it provides a critical understanding of the ACCOs’ role of representing community needs.

Viewed as a political phenomenon, PR can be seen as a powerful form of mediation, building relationships between organisations and publics, among various social actors, and even across nations. For example, Taylor and Kent (2006) demonstrate PR’s political character through an analysis of its contribution to nation building theory. In perceiving relationships as socially constructed, they analyse nation-building processes with special focus on “the relationships that communication creates, maintains and alters” (Taylor and Kent 2006: 345), and posits that PR can contribute to fostering national identity and unity. They conclude that PR theory gives us a better understanding of nation building as a strategic process of fostering relationships and national identity, which is essential in order for nation states to reach national goals. In this view, PR is a strategic communicative process that shapes the collective consciousness of individuals, peoples, social groups, communities and the nation (Taylor and Kent 2006: 346). However, Taylor and Kent do not reflect on the consequences of nation building, nor do they apply a critical lens to understanding processes of inclusion and exclusion in defining the criteria for national membership.

PR’s capacity for nation building and issues of political representation refer to the PR literature, which considers PR as a vehicle for social change (Dutta 2011), or as a means of obtaining social justice (Moloney 2006). Here PR is positioned as the voice of the people, and as a tool for gauging political influence and equal representation. In accordance with Western-based ideologies of governance, such political mediation of interests can be recognised as acts of democracy. For example, Weaver, Motion and Roper (2006) positioned PR as ideally being “a particular form of communicative practice, which purportedly advocates for not only organisational interests but also the public interest”
(Weaver, Motion and Roper 2006: 7). However, the less popular mode of PR, known as propaganda, prevents such an ideal in practice. Weaver, Motion and Roper specifically criticised this mode of PR, as a “lying” PR practice that compromises the interests of marginalised groups in favour of advancing organisational goals (Weaver, Motion and Roper 2006: 7). This view puts PR in a negative light, seen as anything but authentic or true. Moreover, this view of PR practice as manipulative is often associated with “spin-doctoring”. However, as this section discusses, there is much more to understanding all facets of PR practice.

Scholars have questioned whether PR generates positive outcomes, such as fostering mutual relationships, or facilitates public debate that is equally accessible to all parties involved. Waymer (2009) examines government rhetoric and discusses "how communication brings us together as humans, but also how it pits peoples’ interests against one another” (Waymer 2009: 334). In analysing organisational rhetoric, Waymer points out the dilemma that governments must serve as an organisation with its own stakeholders, agendas and aims, while also obligated to serve the public at the same time (Waymer 2009: 335). According to Waymer, it seems impossible for governments, or any organisation, to be “of the people, by the people, and for the people” (Waymer 2009: 336). This is problematic in terms of viewing PR practice solely as an act of “doing good”. Put into perspective, and in terms of understanding the political space surrounding ACCOs, it can be argued that the Indigenous sector is a result of governments not being able to accommodate everyone’s interests; hence the Indigenous sector closes this gap by providing social services and representing the needs of ATSI communities.

Much literature drawing on Excellence theory does not acknowledge these issues of unequal distribution of power between an organisation, for example the Australian government, and various publics, such as the ATSI peoples. According to Weaver (2011), this is because of the two-way-communication model, and the belief in equal dialogue between the organisation and publics. In reality, though, this pans out asymmetrically and unethically due to the exclusion of those publics that are often disregarded as influential to organisations’ bottom-lines (Weaver 2011: 257). Thus, PR practice is neither “good” nor “bad”, but a powerful tool in terms of building relationships, political support, and giving voice to communities and organisations, both disadvantaged and empowered.
As an example of PR’s powerful role, Waymer and Heath (2007) demonstrate how PR practice can create a voice for less privileged groups in society during crisis situations. They applied a discourse analysis to two U.S. Senators’ comments after Hurricane Katrina. The study shows how PR, as a mode of crisis communication, can create a space in which organisations’ and publics’ interests are equally represented (Waymer and Heath 2007: 90). The U.S. Senators managed to frame the crisis to the advantage of the victims and created a discursive space in which the victims could voice their concerns. However, Waymer and Heath point out such an outcome is the exception rather than the rule. Usually there is an overwhelming focus on organisational interests “forgetting” those publics that are most affected by crisis. They conclude: “Communication results from the need for sense making, which is a collective co-creative activity” (Waymer and Heath 2007: 92), but only through dialogue or “co-creative activity” can we better craft policies and protocols and empower marginalised groups. Thus, PR’s potential impact is twofold; it can both suppress and voice public opinion.

In contrast, Moloney’s work *Rethinking Public Relations* (2006) challenges perceptions that hail PR as the creator of mutual relationships and goodwill. He points out the lack of an equal distribution of communicative resources, which is needed in order for organisations and people to practice “good” PR and foster relationships through such practice. Through analysing PR practice in the UK and the USA, he argues: “PR makes public debate more equal, more vigorous, more appealing, more likely to conclude with some truth” (Moloney 2006: 2), or at least PR can do so if everybody has equal access to PR services. However, equal access to communicative resources requires state interventions, through subsidies and public funding, to those organisations and social groups who otherwise would not be able to afford PR (Moloney 2006: 80). In addition, Moloney acknowledges that such ideas of “equal public debate” are hallucinations in today’s promotional culture, where the purpose of communicative activities is largely to “display-for-attention-and-advantage” in order to influence others (Moloney 2006: 5).

Altogether, dialogue and symmetric relationships are ideal but difficult to practice, because power relations and various interests complicate the issue. In addition, PR practices that are driven by organisational interests often turn into one-way communication, primarily advancing the position of the organisation. Thus, publics and
communities must be integral to the processes of decision-making, in order to practise more effective and just PR.

A political understanding of PR-like activities within ACCOs is particularly fruitful because it highlights ACCOs as representatives of community interests, needs, and concerns. Also, it pays attention to what particular interests are foregrounded in discourses, and reveals the social actors involved with setting the agenda. In this political framework, ACCO staff and communities can be positioned as actively involved in negotiating interests and power structures like government policies. In particular, the ACCO staff responsible for the communicative activities, take part in effecting social change through mediation and representation of interests. Although the broader political contexts are beyond the focus of this thesis, they are important to acknowledge to fully understand the practice of PR in organisational contexts. The effect of PR practice will be a focal point in the final section, in which this political aspect of PR practices and PR practitioners, as influencing social change, will be discussed further.

Social Change and Activism

This final section places emphasis on a growing area within PR scholarship that is driven by social change and giving voice to marginalised groups in society. As discussed in the previous sections, it is plain to see that PR practice is a complex phenomenon involving diverse social, cultural, historical, economic and political elements, including the PR practitioners’ ability to effect change and disrupt power relations. Despite its contributions, the literature presented above has merely touched on those communicative processes affecting publics or communities that are less advanced in acquiring PR knowledge or benefitting from PR practice. To explain this relationship between PR and social change, attention is put onto the less examined realms of PR practice, such as Indigenous organisations, and the PR practitioner as in-house activist.

A number of scholars (Holtzhausen and Voto 2002; Berger 2005; Holtzhausen 2012; Ciszek 2014; Coombs and Holladay 2012) have researched activism in relation to PR. Besides addressing the broader social impact of communicative activities, these activist approaches to PR share a few characteristics and can be mapped out as follows. PR in
relation to activism involves paying attention to the agency of the PR practitioner (Holtzhausen 2012), and her ability to give a voice to marginalised groups (Dutta-Bergman 2004; Dutta 2011), but also stresses the practitioner’s influence on organisational processes of decision-making (Berger 2005). Moreover, activism encourages PR practitioners to follow their own ethics while supporting the cause of the community, which at times conflicts with the party line of the organisation’s management (Holtzhausen and Voto 2002: 58). Grunig and Hunt (1984) describe activism as something that is practiced by “people who constantly strive to make their organisations responsible to the publics they affect” (Grunig and Hunt 1984: IV). In contrast to this “excellent” view of activism, Holtzhausen and Voto (2002) and Berger (2005) point out the power differences and examine how activism is practiced when PR practitioners resist power structures that prevail in large corporations.

The PR practitioner’s ability to create change from within the organisation is stressed in Holtzhausen’s and Voto’s (2002) qualitative analysis of 16 PR practitioners’ accounts, which demonstrates PR’s emancipatory potential. For example, Holtzhausen and Voto found that the majority of the participating practitioners stood up for their colleagues by disagreeing with management and acted based on their personal values and morality rather than the organisation’s interest. Holtzhausen and Voto conclude that both the PR practitioner’s personality and the organisational environment affect PR practice, which underpins the importance of viewing PR practitioners as influential individuals and not as a homogeneous group (Holtzhausen and Voto 2002: 76). Additionally, Holtzhausen’s and Voto’s purpose is to stress the PR practitioner’s agency and ability to disturb the meta-narrative of PR as supporting powerful knowledge regimes that constrain subjectivities and further marginalise social groups (Holtzhausen and Voto 2002: 63-64). In addition, Holtzhausen and Voto foreground a new understanding of the PR practitioner as “change agent” (Holtzhausen and Voto 2002: 60), who brings about change both external to, and within, the organisation’s management (Holtzhausen and Voto 2002: 78).

Berger (2005) further builds on this understanding of the PR practitioner as organisational change agent. Based on in-depth interviews with 21 PR executives, Berger criticises the perception of practitioners as acting on behalf of the organisation, publics and society (Berger 2005: 5). Similar to Holtzhausen and Voto, Berger considers the PR
practitioner as an activist, who carries out actions “to support and supplement advocacy in the organisation and larger social system” (Berger 2005: 24). Berger identifies different strategies that practitioners use to resist management decisions, for example, leaking information to the media or networks that in turn force management to change their decisions (Berger 2005: 20), or building alliances with other colleagues, or groups within the organisation, to mobilise an internal pressure against the management’s direction (Berger 2005: 19). Berger goes on to suggest the establishment of a national movement formed by PR practitioners, academics and students to push political agendas in favour of organisations being more transparent and socially accountable (Berger 2005: 22).

Both of these studies on PR practitioners as activists, or change agents, can be seen as representing a broader trajectory within PR scholarship consisting of those scholars that attempt to frame PR as a practice that serves the interests of the many, rather than primarily serving organisational interests (Berger 2005: 6).

Eminent communication scholars (Dutta-Bergman 2004; Dutta 2011, 2012) continue this debate from the perspective of PR as serving marginalised groups in society, and by situating PR in relation to social change. Dutta-Bergman observes (2004: 243):

social change is achieved through the presence of the marginalized voices and through the participation of these voices in changing policy, securing resources, and achieving redistributive justice; those systems of domination that privilege certain forms of meanings over others are exposed and challenged.

PR can be seen as a means of giving voice to marginalised groups in society, and securing their participation in public discourse that in effect drives social change. In alignment with Dutta-Bergman’s view on social change, Dutta, Ban and Pal (2012) argue that both researchers and PR practitioners should collaborate and employ participatory approaches in PR practice and research, to mobilise marginalised peoples and thereby create social change (Dutta, Ban and Pal 2012: 3). Similarly, Dutta-Bergman points out the importance of the researcher’s involvement in solving issues in partnership with the community, although it is imperative that the community is the driver in defining the solutions to issues that they have identified locally (Dutta-Bergman 2004: 242-243). In theorising PR and social change, both Dutta-Bergman and Dutta apply a culture-centered approach grounded in the discipline of “development communications”, which predominantly involves research on health promotions, campaigns and programs. The aim of the culture-centered
approach is “to theorize the absences (of alternative articulations of health problems, for example,) by engaging in dialogue with voices that have typically been erased from the discursive space” (Dutta-Bergman 2004: 242).

In continuation of Moloney’s (2006) perspective on the unequal access to communicative resources as mentioned in the previous section, Dutta’s works (2011, 2012, 2014, 2015) can also be seen as a critique of the negative consequences brought by unequal access to communicative processes. Dutta specifically discusses this issue from the perspective of marginalised communities’ capacity, or lack thereof, to taking action and voicing their concerns. Dutta (2014) explains: “exploitation is rooted in the denial of the communicative capacity of the margins and in the co-optation of the margins as the subjects of top-down communication directed at the margins” (Dutta 2014: 68). In relation to this thesis, PR scholarship that is concerned with activism and social change provides a useful framework. As I argue in this thesis, such literature enables a focus on the local meanings ascribed to PR activities and their potential of driving social change. Following the culture-centered approach, PR becomes the means to resist the dominant power structures manifested through ignorant or biased policies, such as some of those imposed on the ATSI Peoples of Australia. Additionally, the aim of such PR activities is to provide a voice for these marginalised groups by creating a communicative space in which their voices are represented.

As shown through this review, a more holistic conception of PR is made possible when acknowledging the various dimensions of PR (social, cultural, historical, economic and political), one that encourages the study of diverse communicative contexts in which PR practices emerge.

**Conclusion**

Drawing together the literature presented in this chapter, it was shown that the dominant PR paradigm of Excellence theory puts forward an ideal image of PR’s organisational functions, such as building strategic relationships with stakeholders, and serving organisational goals and the public’s interests on equal footing. By reviewing
sociocultural approaches to PR, the chapter exposed the flaws of dominant PR theories and suggested that cultural diversity and difference are an equally important aspect of PR theory and practice; without acknowledging and accommodating such diversity, it is not possible to understand ACCOs and their use of PR. As Sison suggests in the opening paragraph of this chapter, there is a need for PR practice and scholarship to acquire alternative mind-sets that reflect the diverse practices of PR.

By exploring this gap further, this chapter outlined the benefits brought by the sociocultural “turn” in PR scholarship, which brings together a multitude of PR narratives depicting the PR practitioner as a social actor, who takes part in shaping society through the roles of cultural intermediary, discourse technologist and organisational activist. Based on this literature review, I argue that PR practice is complex and more than a practical tool, as it holds potential to facilitate inclusion for those groups in society that are less privileged and disempowered.

This chapter has aimed to provide a conceptual framework for better understanding PR-like activities in ACCOs, with a particular focus on the cultural specificities of PR practices. Methodologically, the literature reviewed indicated that in order to pay attention to such cultural specificities of PR practice, the researcher must employ culturally sensitive research strategies. With this in mind, the methodology and research design used in my exploration of PR perceptions in ACCOs will be discussed in the next chapter.
In the previous chapter, I established that diverse explorations of PR are warranted, particularly in Indigenous contexts, given that heterogeneous PR practices can help facilitate processes of social change that can materialise into more just workplaces and societies. This thesis considers PR through the lens of a post-colonial theoretical framework that acknowledges the importance of post-colonial, cultural, economic, social, historical and political contexts. In addition, this is opposed to viewing PR as a functional entity promoted through dominant theories like those of Grunig and Hunt (1984), which often unproblematically assume mutual, equal and manageable relationships between organisations and publics (Brown 2012: 94-95). As Brown (2012) observes, “PR thought is epistemologically problematic where it approaches the idea, practice, institution and history of PR in misleading or simplistic terms” (Brown 2012: 90).

In alignment with Brown, this thesis explicitly situates PR in complex cultural and social contexts, and applies the critical insights of qualitative methods and modes of analysis when researching PR (Brown 2012: 91). The theoretical framework in this thesis develops a post-colonial, critical and adaptive PR, which acknowledges the multiple and informal practices of PR. In addition, the specificities of Aboriginal cultures and knowledges are recognised as essential to understanding PR-like activities within ACCOs. Likewise, the Australian history of invasion and colonisation are accounted for because of the way they shape the participant accounts and perspectives (see Chapter Five, “Communicating Aboriginal Culture”).

In what follows, I will outline the research approach applied to the study of ACCO staff perceptions of PR-like activities and their roles as key communicators. This chapter specifically describes the facets involved when carrying out an exploratory, qualitative study, including the application of semi-structured interviews (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009), incorporation of Indigenous methodologies (Wright 2011; Smith 2012), and the
establishment of an Indigenous Advisory Group. In establishing the value of combining Indigenous research approaches and qualitative methods to collect data within an Aboriginal context, it is considered how this combination can help develop our understanding of PR from the perspectives of people working within ACCOs.

The chapter is divided into ten sections. The first four sections introduce the research questions, qualitative research approach and semi-structured interviews, and the importance of accounting for Indigenous methodologies and the researcher’s cultural sensitivity when doing research within ACCOs. In this context, cultural sensitivity refers to the acknowledgement of the researcher’s influence on the researched, the colonial history of Australia and the cultural specificities of Aboriginal culture. Following this, the method of establishing an Indigenous Advisory Group is described leading into the sixth section, which highlights the recruitment of participants and introduces the ACCOs and participants. Section seven and eight describe the processes of data collection and analytical process of coding and thematising the data. The last two sections consider the potential limitations of the research approach and reflect on my position as researcher.

Research Questions

Informed by a culturally sensitive methodology and qualitative research strategy, this thesis explores how people working in Perth metropolitan-based ACCOs perceive PR, their PR-like activities and roles as the ACCOs’ key communicators. Based upon a review of the literature, and a desire to shed light on PR in Aboriginal organisations, this thesis is guided by the following questions:

• On the backdrop of the PR literature, what kinds of PR-like tactics and activities are identified by ACCO staff?

• In what ways do ACCO staff communicate their messages and engage with their stakeholders, such as members and communities?

• How do ACCO staff perceive their ACCO work environment and their roles as key communicators?
Since the term “PR” may be unfamiliar to many people who work within ACCOs, I apply a critical and adaptive PR approach to understanding how PR-like practices are conceived in such organisations. This approach is outlined in the following sections.

**Qualitative Research Design**

This exploratory study employs what is known as a generic or basic qualitative research approach (Daymon and Holloway 2011; Merriam 2014) and incorporates Indigenous methodologies to enable an in-depth analysis of participant accounts that is sensitive to Aboriginal culture within an Australian context. This section describes the benefits of qualitative inquiry and the method of semi-structured interviews.

Qualitative research seeks to explore people’s meaning-making processes, perceptions of their lives and experiences, develops data in local settings, and recognises the influence of the researcher’s social and cultural background (Creswell 2013: 44). Merriam (2014) offers a straightforward definition of what she terms basic qualitative research, which aims to understand the meanings of a social phenomenon based on the perspective of those people involved; the researcher uncovers and interprets these meanings that people construct when making sense of their lives and experiences (Merriam 2014: 24). Furthermore, qualitative research has an adaptable nature involving an on-going process of reflecting on the choice of methods, gathering data, analysing it through different phases of interpretation, and writing up reflective notes alongside the research process (Daymon and Holloway 2011: 303). The advantage of such an adaptable qualitative research process is this on-going interaction with the data as it goes through several interpretive iterations (Corbin and Strauss 2008: 49-50).

Qualitative research was adopted in this thesis due to its focus on creating knowledge that is “context bound and provisional” (Daymon and Holloway 2011: 107). In the context of my research, this meant understanding the phenomenon of PR in ACCOs by specifically exploring participants’ perceptions of their roles and PR-like activities. Also, choosing a qualitative approach is in line with the recommendations of PR scholars Sriramesh and Vercic (2012), who observe: “Occupational differences within public relations are not of a quantitative nature that can be measured as more or less knowledge, practice, or
resources but are of a qualitative nature that can best be described by different occupational cultures” (Sriramesh and Vercic 2012: 3). Given that PR in ACCOs has received little attention within the PR literature, a qualitative approach was fitting to the purpose and scope of this study, enabling analysis of participants’ multiple views of PR practice.

Another key component of qualitative research is to elucidate how people create meaning, and in doing so, acknowledge the rules that organise those meaning-making processes (Baxter and Babbie 2004: 297). In this thesis, participants were asked about their views of PR, how they saw their roles as key communicators, and were prompted to reflect on broader social, political, cultural and economic constraints affecting their daily tasks, such as relationships with colleagues, Aboriginal cultural protocols, government support, funding and allocation of resources to communication within the organisation.

As reviewed in Chapter Two, several PR scholars, such as Holtzhausen and Voto (2002), Berger (2005) and Hodges (2009), have researched PR through a qualitative framework, interviewing and observing practitioners in different social settings. For example, Holtzhausen and Voto interviewed 16 PR practitioners (Holtzhausen and Voto 2002: 64) and Berger carried out 21 in-depth interviews with corporate PR executives (Berger 2005: 9), whereas Hodges conducted an ethnographic study in Mexico City (Hodges 2011: 34). I similarly employ a qualitative framework that pays attention to the individual’s role in PR practice and society as a whole, and her experiences and knowledge of PR-like activities. As Daymon and Holloway (2011) observe, “communicators and stakeholders (and often the media) are relationally active in creating, amending and re-constructing meanings and, thus, in transforming their social worlds” (Daymon and Holloway 2011: 4). Therefore, in order to explore participants’ individual PR perceptions, qualitative semi-structured interviews were employed, and an Indigenous Advisory Group was established to ensure that the research process remained authentic to Aboriginal culture and knowledge.

**Semi-structured Interviews**

Interviews have an advantage of creating “open-ended, in-depth exploration of an area in which the interviewee has substantial experience” (Charmaz 2014: 85). Interviewing is about getting to know people through a conversation (Kvale 2007: 1). However, the
interview is not like any conversation; it is staged, and bears unequal power relations because it is the interviewer who poses the questions (Kvale 2007: 2). In essence, interviewing is “a construction site for knowledge” (Kvale 2007: 7) established between the participant and the researcher. Daymon and Holloway (2011) highlight this relationship between the researcher and the interview participant as “a means of collaboratively exploring the meanings, ideas, feelings, intentions of various stakeholders or publics, and of those involved in managing formal communications” (Daymon and Holloway 2011: 220). Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) use the metaphor of the interviewer as a “traveller” to describe the research interview as a mode of exploring and interpreting the lives of others (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009: 48-49), whereas Corbin and Strauss (2008) position the researcher as the “go-between” in translating and mediating participant accounts to an audience (Corbin and Strauss 2008: 49). However, interviewing is not merely a matter of extracting information from another person; instead it involves listening, learning from the participant, and interpreting meanings conveyed through this interaction.

There are different kinds of interviews but choosing the “right” interview style depends on the objective of the research and its methodological framework (Kvale 2007; Alvesson 2011; Daymon and Holloway 2011). Furthermore, with less structure than a formal interview method, and relying on a flexible set of “indicative” questions, it is easier for the researcher to find new and unexpected views on the research topic (Alvesson 2011: 52). Thus, semi-structured interviews were applicable to this research process as the direction of the conversation is only partially led by the interviewer, empowering participants to discuss topics that are meaningful to them. For example, the indicative questions were adapted after conducting the first couple of interviews and two changes were made. The first was to include the question “How would you describe public relations?” to prompt participants to share their perceptions of PR. The other change concerned my awareness of posing culturally sensitive questions, such as avoiding questions aimed at participants being Aboriginal, but to maintain focus on the organisation being Aboriginal-controlled.

In general, I attempted to carry out a culturally sensitive research strategy by employing Indigenous methodologies, which I will discuss in the next section, followed by an outline of the establishment of the Indigenous Advisory Group.
An Indigenous Perspective on Research

The qualitative research design is informed by Indigenous methodologies as these two approaches intersect in many ways, such as paying attention to the local context of the research, acknowledging the researcher’s active role and the bias that she brings to the research process, and ensuring transparency during and after the research process. As Corbin (2008) states, qualitative researchers are particularly interested in connecting with participants at a human level (Corbin in Corbin and Strauss 2008: 13). Similarly, Indigenous methodologies encapsulate research as processes of relationship-building between the participants, researcher and the community. Castellano (2008) supports this point in arguing that qualitative research methods align with Indigenous teaching methods that are predominantly based on oral communication; that is, the qualitative inductive process is readily adaptable to the context of study as well as transferable to new situations (Castellano 2008: 426). In addition, both research approaches are directed by principles of trust and reciprocity rather than rigid procedures that seek objective truth.

When combining the two approaches, it is important to understand the underlying differences distinct to Indigenous research. For example, Martin (2003: 209) and Rigney (1999: 119) identify this overlap between qualitative research and what they term “Indigenist research”, but see the need to borrow from other research disciplines in order to further develop Indigenous methodologies. In addition, Rigney strongly supports Indigenist research that is carried out by Indigenous Australians and predominantly involving Indigenous participants with the purpose “to serve and inform the Indigenous struggle for self-determination” (Rigney 1999: 117). Therefore, in constructing my methodological framework I acknowledge the political context underlying Indigenous methodology and primarily draw on its principles of respecting local knowledge and understanding the social, cultural and political contexts of this study.

Sharing the knowledge produced, ensuring the wellbeing of research participants, and acknowledging Indigenous people’s rights to self-determination and social justice is important to Indigenous methodologies (Wright 2011; AIATSIS 2012). Kurtz (2013) describes Indigenous methodologies as non-linear and unpredictable, informed by values of respect, commitment and accountability (Kurtz 2013: 217). In order to be accountable, a non-Indigenous researcher undertaking research with Indigenous communities must
acknowledge her role in constructing Indigenous knowledge. This demands that the researcher reflectively navigates non-Indigenous and Indigenous worldviews (Kurtz 2013: 218). However, this is not to imply that there is one all-encompassing definition of Indigenous knowledge (Kurtz 2013: 220). Scholar Marlene Brant Castellano (2008: 425) suggests that it is:

a way of engaging with reality rather than an artifact surviving from the past. Indigenous knowledge is specific to place and rooted in history, described in some traditions as reaching back seven generations and looking forward seven generations. It is holistic, involving body, mind, feelings and spirit. It emerges in dialogue and is acquired over time. Indigenous knowledge is expressed in symbols, arts, ceremonial and everyday practices, narratives, and (especially) relationships.

Wright continues in a similar vein by arguing that non-Indigenous researchers carry a responsibility “to do no harm, and secondly to ensure the research they are conducting is transformative in ways that shape policy and practice improve the health and wellbeing of those most vulnerable” (Wright 2011: 32). Therefore research must positively inform participants and the community as a whole. This is most commonly done through informing participants about the outcome of the research, and during the research process, it requires continuously reflecting on the thesis’ aim and acknowledging Indigenous peoples as owners of the knowledge produced (Weber-Pillwax 2004: 80-81). Such consideration is vital to develop respectful, ethical, sympathetic and useful research (Smith 2012: 9). Wright (2011) stresses trust as a key element, as without it, the researcher is unable to develop the reciprocity and consensus that are indispensable when doing research (Wright 2011: 30-31). This point of building trust between participants and myself in the role as researcher was a primary reason for engaging with the Indigenous Advisory Group. In addition, the Indigenous Advisory Group ensured that I complied with established Indigenous ethical protocols, understood the unequal power relations at play, and helped me to establish and maintain connections with the participants involved.

Summing up, this thesis draws inspiration from Indigenous methodologies and the way Indigenous research interprets the complex relationship between knowledge, communities, participants and the researcher. In doing so, this thesis acknowledges that any research examining Aboriginal communities should support self-determination (Nakata 2013), cultural relativism (Sutton 2009), or notions of Indigenous culture (Hill 2014). Therefore, writing as a non-Aboriginal researcher and combining marginalised knowledges
with Western perceptions of PR, is done with an awareness of the ever-present tensions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal world views. Next, I will describe in more detail the composition of the Indigenous Advisory Group that played a key role throughout the research process.

**Indigenous Advisory Group**

An Indigenous Advisory Group was formed to provide oversight and guidance for the duration of this thesis. Mentoring is a common method in Indigenous research (Wright 2011; Kurtz 2013) as part of ensuring cultural awareness is integral to the research process. Thus, the aim of the Indigenous Advisory Group was to seek advice from people representing diverse backgrounds with relevant experience in Indigenous knowledge and research, the field of communication in industry and academia, and Aboriginal non-profit organisations. The Indigenous Advisory Group was recruited through my professional networks and consisted of three people (see Appendix F to view the profiles of the Indigenous Advisory Group): Cassandra Ryder, a Noongar woman with several years of experience working in social services, Nick Abraham, a Noongar Elder, with much experience in governance of Aboriginal organisations, and Verity Leach, founder of the Perth-based communications agency Ethical Communications. Most important, the Indigenous Advisory Group was critical to the research topic and contributed with insider knowledge, new ideas, and cultural advice, but without compromising confidentiality of the participants.

I arranged casual meetings with each member of the Indigenous Advisory Group and depending on their availability I met with each of them twice. The majority of meetings were held before gathering the data though I met with Cassandra to discuss the findings. At the initial meeting, I informed them about the purpose of the thesis and received feedback on the scope of the research. These initial meetings were held in places that were considered mutually supportive, for instance, at the members’ workplace (Nick), home (Cassandra) or a café (Verity). The knowledge deriving from these informal conversations were filed as notes to help code and analyse the interviews. An example of how this insider knowledge informed the coding process is the development of the theme
“Working Environment” and two key issues of “integrating PR” and “lack of resources” that address how government constraints, such as funding cuts, hindered ACCOs from effectively integrating PR into their organisational structure. Nick raised the key issue of “communicating cultural differences”, as he discussed community consultation processes and the Western Australian Government’s requirements in regards to regulated community engagement. He stated that, “an advertisement in the newspaper and a council meeting will do (for the Western Australian Government), but not for Noongar peoples. We need more time” (Personal Conversation, Nick Abraham, October 2015). Such conversations with the Indigenous Advisory Group aided the research process, particularly when conducting the interviews and processing the data, as I better understood the political contexts of participant accounts and the importance of Aboriginal cultural protocols.

**Recruitment: Organisations and Participants**

A total of six organisations agreed to participate. The criteria for recruitment of interview participants were as follows: 1) people working in ACCOs and 2) people identifying themselves, or being identified, as the main responsible for the organisation’s communications, such as liaising with the media and government, coordinating events and promotional material, writing newsletters, and consulting with the community.

Given the diversity of Aboriginal non-profit organisations a list of selection criteria was drafted to ensure that the sample would include diverse organisations representing different industries and identifying as Aboriginal community-controlled (see Appendix C for a list of recruitment criteria). The criteria were further narrowed down based on recommendations from the Indigenous Advisory Group. Initially, the recruitment criteria demanded that the organisations were incorporated due to my belief that incorporated organisations would be more structured and therefore more likely to have established communications processes. However, during the recruitment process I discovered that incorporation was not a determining factor, as most ACCOs did not have one specific person to handle their communications. I revised the final criteria to include the following: 1) identifying as a community-controlled Aboriginal organisation, 2) based in Perth, and 3)
working within the Indigenous sector. To ensure diversity within the sample of organisations, it was decided to recruit ACCOs from across a range of service provision areas. Drawing on the *International Classification of Non-Profit Organisations* (ICNPO), I recruited organisations from the following not-for-profit groups: Culture and Arts, Social Services, Development and Housing, and Law, Advocacy and Politics (ABSc 2016).

The sample comprises seven participants representing the six different organisations, who were recruited and allocated pseudonyms, as follows:

- Claire, Media Officer (advocacy and legal services organisation)
- Ella, Director and Founder (community and social development organisation)
- Grace, Manager (social services organisation)
- Maya, Marketing Manager (arts organisation)
- Rebecca, E-marketing and Accounts Officer (arts organisation)
- Melissa, Communications Consultant (advocacy organisation)
- Thomas, Promotions and Marketing Manager (media organisation)

The following sections introduce both the participants and the ACCOs by providing background information of the ACCOs’ purposes and participants’ roles (also see Appendix B for an overview of participant backgrounds).

Claire is a Nunga woman, originally from Adelaide, South Australia and has resided in Perth since 1989. She has worked within the *advocacy and legal services organisation* for nine years and is responsible for liaising with the media and the ACCO’s Senior Management team, Executive Committee, and community members. The organisation provides legal advice and represents ATSI peoples in WA in criminal, family, and civil and human rights law, and provides community legal education and advocacy. These services are offered regionally across WA. They employ various communication tactics, such as quarterly newsletters, a national radio program, media releases, press conferences, legal pamphlets, promotional materials, involvement in community events, along with in-house and external workshops, public talks and liaison with key community and organisational stakeholders. Claire holds a tertiary education in Journalism, Media Studies and Aboriginal and Intercultural Studies, and has extensive experience from working in the media industry. She specifically took on her role because of an interest in social justice issues and a desire to effect change in her community.
The community and social development organisation works towards furthering education and health outcomes for ATSI peoples. The organisation is family-run, supported by extended kinship, and lead by a Board of Directors that includes a mix of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal members. Although the number of staff varies depending on grants income, the organisation maintains three key staff of two Directors and an Accountant and additional staff members to coordinate community programs. They provide community services based on community needs, including cultural programs for Elders, youth-focused research projects and camps to teach Aboriginal culture, and outreach programs to support homeless Aboriginal peoples. In terms of PR-like activities, Ella consults the community and strategic stakeholders, influential people, and potential funding bodies. Being a traditional owner of Wadjuk boodja, Ella has dedicated a majority of time to driving change from within Academia as well as in her community working specifically towards driving social change in Indigenous health.

Grace has cultural connections to the Noongar Nation through her grandmother who is from the South-West of Perth; Grace used to be part of the of the social services organisation’s membership base, and was recently encouraged to take on a position on the board. Instead, she was offered the Manager position in which she works across roles to perform daily tasks, such as developing term programs, organising events, and liaising with potential partners, community members and the Committee of ten people. The social services organisation has provided a range of social services to the local community for more than ten years and is established by community members from across kinship groups. Their activities include events and community services, such as grief and loss support groups, women’s and men’s groups, and Noongar language classes. Usually, key staff includes an Administrative Officer, Program Coordinator and a Manager, and volunteers are recruited on an as-needs basis.

Maya and Rebecca are mainly responsible for promoting the services provided by the arts organisation, including theater shows, youth programs that teach culture and arts performances for primary schools. The organisation has an extensive online network, which requires updating social media (Facebook, Twitter and YouTube), developing promotional material, writing media releases, and organising and attending community events. The organisation is overseen by a Board of nine members and has ten staff.
members. They are driven by the organisational goal to improve the cultural health of Aboriginal peoples by giving voice to Aboriginal stories through arts performances. Maya has a professional background in Marketing, but wanted to further connect with her Indigenous heritage; a reason why she relocated back to Perth and initially applied as a volunteer working for the arts organisation, which further developed into her being recruited in a managerial role responsible for the organisation’s marketing. Similarly, Rebecca also feels a strong connection to the Aboriginal culture and perception of family, which reminds her of her cultural background of Eastern European culture. She initially worked casual hours that grow into a full-time position contributing with her skills in accounting and marketing.

The advocacy organisation represents the Noongar community in working towards strengthening Aboriginal culture, language, heritage and society through advocating and negotiating native title claims. The organisation predominantly consults the community and holds workshops at the organisation as a means to inform community members. Melissa works approximately twice a week depending on the ACCO’s available funding. She holds a background in Communication and Marketing, and 12 years experience working in Indigenous Affairs. Her main tasks involve updating social media (Facebook and Twitter), creating promotional material, and providing advice on communication. The organisation’s Board of Directors consists of six people, and they recently had to reduce staff due to funding cuts.

Thomas is a non-Aboriginal Australian with extensive experience from working in Marketing for bigger corporations. In his current role he reports to his Manager and is mainly responsible for getting sponsorships and marketing the media organisation by partnering with like-minded organisations to promote their cause, which is to give voice to Aboriginal peoples through radio broadcasts that are produced based on community needs. These include a range of discussions on different topics, such as mental health, legal advice, children rearing practices, employment, and talk-back radio. The organisation has a Board of seven people and the broadcasters work from different locations across the South West regions of Perth. The organisation is active on Facebook and attends various community events to do live shows.
Data Collection

Steered by principles of heterogeneous sampling that seek to recruit people with different experiences of a certain phenomena (Daymon and Holloway 2011: 214-215), it was important to involve different kinds of organisations representing various areas of the Indigenous service sector, as well as letting the organisations themselves identify people who they regarded as mainly responsible for their communications. Consequently, 14 organisations were shortlisted as potential participants. The organisations were contacted via email and follow-up phone calls (see Appendix E to view the phone script). The seven participants were then recruited based on their willingness to share insights and reflect upon their work experiences (Alvesson 2011: 49-50) of which two participants represented the same organisation. Five participants completed an online mini-survey (see Appendix I to view the mini survey), six people participated in the interviews and one participant responded via email due to other commitments. The online mini-survey was used to prepare for the interviews, collecting contact details and encouraging the participants to reflect on their public relations practice.

Notably, the interviews are not necessarily representative of other ATSI non-profit organisations in Perth, as each organisation has its own ways of engaging in PR-like activities, their own structural and economic constraints, and comprise a spectrum of services ranging from arts performances, legal advice, radio broadcasting, community events and programs, research projects and political representation. Interviews were conducted in November 2015 and full transcripts were returned to participants for their approval via email within seven days. The locations of the interviews were adapted to suit the participants’ availability. All interviews were carried out at the research participants’ workplaces or nearby cafés. Each interview varied between 30 to 60 minutes. The interviews focused on the participants’ perception of their daily PR-like activities and the contributions and challenges they encountered (see Appendix A, “Interview Guide”). At the beginning of the interviews the purpose of the thesis was reiterated. Participants will receive a plain-language summary of findings upon completion of the thesis.
## Analytical Process

The analysis serves the purpose of exploring and interpreting participants’ individual perceptions of their ACCO’s PR-like activities and roles. More specifically, the analysis is a result of qualitative coding, categorising, and thematising procedures (Merriam 2014) consisting of three circular stages.

First, I initially coded the transcripts manually, using keywords grounded in the data to define actions or experiences described by participants (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009: 202). Next, the codes were revisited to further develop them into categories or key issues, such as “reactive PR” and “Aboriginal way” that were created by comparing the codes for similarities and differences based on how the participants described PR and the ACCOs’ PR-like activities. In addition, the key issues were extracted from synthesising the codes. For example, the codes of “Aboriginal/Noongar grapevine”, “word-of-mouth”, “passing things around”, “building relationships”, and “writing for ones own mob” developed into the key issue of “the Aboriginal way”. Furthermore, making sense of the data was also aided by writing up reflective notes in order to capture on-going insights throughout the process of analysing the transcripts. Finally, eleven key issues evolved from this process and represent particular facets of PR-like activities in ACCOs. To further organise the findings emerging from the analysis, I grouped the key issues under five themes.

In the process of analysis, I drew on participant statements and PR theory, not to validate theory, but to understand and interpret the issues that participants had raised. The table below illustrates these connections identified through analysing the data. Each theme is numbered and highlighted in blue, together with a brief description. Below this the relevant key issues are grouped, with the codes for each issue listed in the left-hand column, and an example quote from the interviews provided in the right-hand column.
# Overview of Themes, Key Issues and Codes

## Chapter Four

### Theme #1

**PR Perceptions**

**Description**

Participants’ general perceptions of the concept of PR.

### Key issues

1) PR as marketing, media relations, relationship-building, 2) Reactive PR

### Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example quote</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PR as marketing</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>PR is important because it’s free and less time-consuming; PR is getting people on the hook; Encroachment of marketing; ‘just’ PR; ‘c’est la vie’-promotion; Promotion is time-and-resource wasting; Marketing goals</td>
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<td>“You know what I think. The marketing person is taking on the responsibilities of PR like with me. Yeah, that's what I think it is”</td>
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<td><strong>PR as media relations</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>PR is mainly media relations; Creating image of the organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>“I don’t have my own publicist to handle all the public relations. It’s all these other things in my job: event management, doing all the copy, and what not, and advertising, and sometimes PR can get, you know, almost like a last minute thought”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>PR as relationship-building</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Engaging with people face-to-face; PR connects the organisation to the ‘world’; PR is informing and educating the wider community; Using PR to tell stories; Being the face of the organisations; PR reaches the community</td>
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<tr>
<td>“For us it’s all relationships and it’s all essential and they [marketing, public relations and communications] are just tools to be used for the outcome being relationships ‘cos that’s part of our values, you know”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Reactive PR</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Reactionary; No concerted plan; base level; Ad hoc promotion; Developing PR to avoid it being a ‘last minute thought’; Integrating PR into the organisational structure; Avoiding reactive processes; Wishing to plan in advance; Organic working processes; Communicating sporadically; Getting around things ad hoc; Ad hoc communication processes; “Going with what we can”; As things happen; reactive kind of approach; Wishing to plan in advance; Planned communication have a stronger effect</td>
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<td>“(...) you’ve got more than one job to do at a time [laughing], and secondly is that it's quite reactionary at times”</td>
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<td><strong>Theme #2</strong></td>
<td><strong>PR-like Tactics and Strategies</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provides an overview of the PR-like tactics and strategies identified and employed by participants.</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Key issues</strong></th>
<th>3) Tactics and strategies; 4) Aboriginal way</th>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Codes</strong></th>
<th>3) Tactics and strategies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communicating with members;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mailing regularly; Snail-mailing;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Strategic communication; Visual identity as promotion;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Writing speeches; Designing brochures/programs; Cross-promotion; Organising community event; Event planning;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Networking; Partnering with other organisations; Coffee-ing with potential partners; Attending community events; Building social capital; Liaising with stakeholders;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Describing relationship with web and graphic designers; Describing communication processes with donors; Utilising organisational networks; Using technology;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Using social media; Getting out there; Doing E-Marketing;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communicating with the general public; Developing website;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Updating website(s); Facebook as the main channel; Aiming at enhancing connections with the community;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reaching local businesses</td>
</tr>
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</table>

| Example quote | “My responsibilities are growing by day and if I’m going to specifics: It’s the whole website, and we have two, so updates (...) I do e-marketing, so it’s Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, all that. Then we have [name of program] and donations program. I’m doing that separate, sending them emails, letters, this is what I’m working on right now, specific projects, whatever is needed...” |

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<tr>
<th><strong>Aboriginal way</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aboriginal/Noongar grapevine; Word-of-mouth; “Passing things around”; Building relationships; Writing for ones own mob; Old-fashioned communication strategies; “Straight forward’ ways of communicating; Steered by cooperation rather than financial gains; Orally transmission of information; Communicating through internal networks;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Communicating through word of mouth and personal contacts;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Communicating through internal networks</td>
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</table>

| Example quote | “Different Cultural protocols, languages, Country, mean that information and knowledge is best gained through learning and listening to the local knowledge of community members from different regions” |
### Chapter Five

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Theme #3</strong></th>
<th><strong>Working Environment</strong></th>
<th><strong>Description</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Describes factors identified by participants as influencing their PR-like work, such as organisational structures, support and relationships with management, and funding policies.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Key issues</strong></th>
<th>5) Integrating PR; 6) Lack of resources</th>
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</table>

#### Codes

- Integrating PR
- Formal organisational structure;
- Working long hours; Balancing full time job with casual hours;
- Comparing volunteering with extensive working hours;
- Feeling overwhelmed by tasks;
- Support from management and board members; Challenging to persuade people of the value money-wise; Experiencing more structure; Integrating PR; Being organised and prepared; Writing long-term marketing plan

- Lack of resources
- Rationalising the barriers due to lack of funding; Living up to government’s expectations;
- Lack of communication plan and strategy; Wanting a plan and a strategy; Lack of resources;
- Funding issues; PR is possible if there is funding; Low finances because of being a NFP; Tough prioritisation;
- Funding requirements; Little money and resources; Human resources needed; Rationalising the barriers due to lack of funding;
- Uncertainty with funding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Example quote</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“It was very, very hard just to be able to find certain logos, resolutions, photos, you know, their processes for certain things like, you know, which photos can you use for the website... that kind of stuff. There is no really structure around those sorts of things”</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Example quote</strong></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“We don’t get any operational, on-going current funding from anyone. We ‘live and die’ by grants to the point where [name of colleague] and I don’t get paid”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theme #4</td>
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| Key issues | 7) Communicating cultural differences, 8) Relational working environment, 9) Kinship practices; |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Communicating cultural difference</th>
<th>Example quote</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aboriginal worldviews; Cultural clashes; Non-Aboriginal organisations not understanding Aboriginal culture; Wanting to know more about Aboriginal heritage; Preserving Aboriginal culture and history; Fostering political support for Aboriginal sovereignty; Connecting networks of people; Knowing one’s cultural heritage; External expectations of knowing one’s cultural heritage</td>
<td>“Unfortunately in the non-Aboriginal world it doesn’t work like that. They don’t like it when you work with your family unit”</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relational working environment</th>
<th>Example quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Being inclusive; Working together; Explaining the interdependency; The interdependency of communication; The organisation is a gathering place; Collective family ties; Family oriented; “Members come to us”; Connecting through personal networks</td>
<td>“Working in an Aboriginal organisation ensures shared values and goals and provides a sense of ‘family’ for staff members”</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Kinship practices</th>
<th>Example quote</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not knowing where you’re from; Getting access to information of family ties; Acquiring cultural knowledge through organisational networks; Kinship practices; Explaining kinship system and Aboriginal culture; Culturally safe because of the understanding of kinship systems; Basing the organisation on kinship support</td>
<td>“For Noongar people and for down here is obviously where traditions have been lost, but fundamentally our kinship systems still work because we gotta know, we have to know whom we are talking to”</td>
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</table>
### Theme #5

**Communicating Social Change**

**Description**
Describes participants’ perceptions of the broader historical, political and cultural contexts in which they carry out PR-like activities, and outlines participants’ various roles and perception of themselves as communicating social change for ATSI peoples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key issues</th>
<th>10) PR-like roles, 11) Aboriginal culture and invasion</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Codes</strong></td>
<td><strong>Example quote</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PR-like roles</td>
<td>“Instead of flying people in to do a photo shoot, this is how we’re getting around it, we’re illustrating everything; everything has been illustrated opposed to imagery. So it’s not gonna be photographic image on our posters next year, the look is gonna be graphic”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different organisational roles; PR is a collective effort; PR gets the community ‘out there’; PR-like practitioner roles; Constantly changing scenarios; Eliminating uncertainty; Making short-cuts; Adapting to change; Changing tactics; Working into the setting; Media Officer/Social Marketer; Showcasing competent Aboriginal people (when doing events); Using Noongar language; Feeling responsible for protecting Aboriginal culture;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aboriginal culture and invasion</td>
<td>“(...) in some ways it’s educating people about Aboriginal people, you know, we’re living on Aboriginal land and that they feel comfortable in, you know, engaging with us that it’s not ‘them-and-us’ scenario”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transcending the role as service provider; Driven by personal goal to pre-empt racism; Communicating visually (flag raising, events); Educating about Aboriginal culture; Resisting the past; Educating about key community issues</td>
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These codes, key issues and themes form the basis of the two analytical chapters. *Chapter Four* focuses on the ACCOs’ communicative infrastructures by providing an overview of the participants’ perceptions of PR-like activities including tactics and the strategies they employ. As illustrated in the table above, *Chapter Four* provides an overview of these PR-like activities by specifically addressing the two themes of “PR perceptions” and “PR-like Tactics and Strategies”. *Chapter Five* is structured around the three themes: “Working Environment”, “Communicating Aboriginal Culture” and “Communicating Social Change”. The identification and interpretation of the key issues and themes is supplemented by insights gained from contemporary PR literature and research.
Potential Limitations

A key limitation encountered during the research process was the geographically narrow sample of organisations and participants, as they all resided in the metropolitan areas of Perth, excluding perspectives of those organisations operating in regional and remote Western Australia. Such a narrow sample challenges the level of diversity that this thesis represents. Moreover, the recruitment of participants was challenging given the lack of PR as an established profession within ACCOs, which made it difficult to explain the scope of the research. Also, participants did not have official PR positions and rarely referred to PR when describing their communicative tasks. Another key limitation was to ensure the confidentiality of participants within a closely-knit Noongar community in Perth. This meant that I had to leave out some information or statements as this may have identified particular individuals or other ACCOs or government departments that could lead directly to identifying participants or the organisations. This restricted the extent to which I could explore the link between PR-like activities and organisational types, as well as other areas of the analysis, including the ACCOs’ stakeholder engagement, networks (online and offline), and organisational events.

Researcher Positionality

As discussed in this chapter, it is important to make explicitly clear any potential influences or biases held by the researcher that may have influenced the interpretation of the data (Creswell 2013). Corbin and Strauss (2008) argue that striving for sensitivity means recognising the biases that the researcher brings to the research process, informed by her own professional experiences and worldviews; but also, sensitivity is a skill that enables the researcher to carry out a more authentic and trustworthy analysis, because she can pick up on relevant issues in the data and present the views of participants (Corbin and Strauss 2008: 32-34). In fact, Corbin and Strauss believe that a sensitive research approach leads to substantive analytical outcomes. Therefore, I acknowledge my previous experiences of volunteering and working for Aboriginal organisations, as well as my Western cultural background. In this case, I specifically acknowledge my influential role as a researcher in crafting the analysis and findings.
Moreover, when researching PR within an Aboriginal cultural context, it is helpful to acknowledge broader structures of power and knowledge within which the participants and the researcher are embedded. For example, Smith (2012) observes that “indigenous research is ‘a humble and humbling activity’” (Smith 2012: 5), but also a site of struggle between Western and Indigenous ways of knowing (Smith 2012: 103). With the history of invasion and colonisation in mind, I was aware of the connection between PR practice and a history of dispossession. Moreover, identifying as Caucasian, Danish, and a woman, I was constantly aware of my positioning in the field as representative of a Western perspective. Although, my interpretation of PR-like activities within ACCOs may be considered biased given my interest in Aboriginal self-determination and more equal power relations amongst Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians, I have tempered and contextualised my political standpoint by adhering to analytical procedures in making sense of the data, and interpreted the data by expanding on theoretical perspectives of others such as Holtzhausen (2012) and Dutta (2011).

**Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the combination of qualitative research and Indigenous methodologies that inform this study. The chapter established the value of using semi-structured interviews and forming an Indigenous Advisory Group to explore the PR perceptions of ACCO staff. Besides outlining the methods used to collect data, the chapter explained the recruitment of participants, data collection and analytical process. Followed by reflections on potential limitations of the research, the final section discussed my own positionality as a researcher.

In the following chapters, I share the findings that followed from the analysis, in which I have foregrounded participants’ views on PR with respect for the broader social, cultural and political contexts.
Chapter Four: Communicative Infrastructures

This chapter presents the ACCOs’ PR-like activities as perceived by participants, such as their tactical use of social media, and various ways of liaising with government stakeholders, community members, and the media. In particular, this chapter discusses the research question of how participants communicate their messages and engage with members, communities and stakeholders in general, and as a result of such discussion, shows that ACCO staff employ multiple tactics performed with sensitivity towards Aboriginal culture. In addition, this chapter challenges dominant PR theories, such as Grunig and Hunt (1984), by presenting a culturally distinct form of communicating, the Aboriginal way. The Aboriginal way reflects the importance of culturally sensitive communications and fostering personal relationships that are key in Aboriginal culture.

These findings emerged from the analytical process, which resulted in the two themes: “PR Perceptions” and “PR-like Tactics and Strategies” that developed from coding and thematising the data (see the table in “Analytical Process” on page 45 to view the codes, key issues and themes). Building on this, the chapter is structured around the four key issues of “PR as marketing, media relations and relationship-building”, “reactive PR”, “tactics and strategies”, and “the Aboriginal way”, and expand on the participants’ PR perceptions by drawing on extant research that helped make sense of these issues.

The first part of this chapter describes the participants’ four general perceptions of PR as marketing, media relations, relationship-building and reactive PR. Relationship-building comprises the participants’ perceptions of the relational aspects of communicating and the key issue of “reactive PR” encapsulates the participants’ perceptions of their often chaotic working environment, and ad hoc use of communication. Following this, the second part of the chapter describes the ACCOs’ different use of PR-like tactics and strategies including media relations, social media, partnerships and networks, event management, community
engagement and of particular importance, the Aboriginal way, which participants define as particularly unique to the Aboriginal non-profit organisational space.

**PR Perceptions**

Participants rarely used the terms “Public Relations” or “PR” to describe their work. Instead, they described their PR-like activities by predominantly using the terms “communications”, “marketing” or “media relations”. This inconsistency in terminology also appeared during the process of recruiting participants to this research. I contacted several organisations, often via email followed up by a phone call (see Chapter Three, “Recruitment: Organisations and Participants”). During these phone conversations I noticed resistance towards the term “PR” and therefore changed the wording to “communication”, and made sure to stress that it was not a participant criteria to have a Communications Officer or do media relations regularly. Despite this information, one CEO responded that there was not one person designated to do that role, although she would likely be the most appropriate point of contact, as she was responsible for oversight of the organisation’s communication.

Early in the process of collecting data, as per the conversation above, I noticed a discrepancy between theory and practice when participants reflected on what PR means to them. Melissa, a Communications Consultant of an advocacy organisation, addressed this discrepancy based on her experiences from working within ACCOs:

I think a lot of the jobs that you find they don’t say PR, they will say communication, which encompasses more than you know ‘cos its community engagement, it’s all of the elements that sit underneath that (...) Public relations seems to be a bit of an old-fashioned term even though that’s what it is. And I guess, yeah, what people’s understanding of what they think it is, and what it actually is, is different.

Thomas, a Promotions and Marketing Manager of a media organisation, also touched on the scarce use of PR as a term: “there are so many terms that you can come up with but I don’t worry particularly so much about the terms because that’s more pigeonholing you”. In essence, PR was not well defined and came across as an out-dated academic and professional term used to describe an organisation’s formal communications. Thus, from an early stage, I adopted the term “PR-like activities” as a way to describe the kinds of
tactics and strategies that would be identified as “PR” within scholarly research, so as to capture how participants engaged with and perceived PR-like activities.

In order to explore their perceptions of PR further, participants were asked about their opinions of, and how they would describe the concept of PR. These responses will be the focal point in the two next sections.

**PR as Marketing, Media Relations and Relationship-building**

Participants’ perceptions of PR differed and depended on the organisational structure and their general knowledge of PR. As this section shows, participants had a better understanding of marketing than PR. Also, it appeared that PR was absent from the organisational structure, position descriptions and job titles. For example, the majority of the ACCOs lacked staff with an educational background in PR, or experiences of PR as a profession. Melissa was the only participant familiar with the term because she had studied PR as part of her university degree. For her, working in PR comprised multiple skills: “It's having the knowledge of all the different facets. It’s not just being a specialist in one area, because you understand the reach, you know how to market a message, but before you even get to the marketing you have to create that message and that's where it starts”. In contrast, those participants who did not have an educational background in PR were prone to identify PR as a sub-field of marketing:

NWP: Why do you think that most organisations seem to have a marketing role rather than a PR role?

Maya: You know what I think. The marketing person is taking on the responsibilities of PR like with me. Yeah, that's what I think it is. But it can be a job all in itself depending on how big the show is, but if we had the money to have a PR person full time, oh my God, I'm sure we would be everywhere. Always in the media, but because we don’t, I'm more focused on advertising, or social media, or have someone to support me within marketing.

As this quote shows, Maya, Marketing Manager of an arts organisation, acknowledges PR as an important factor particular to create media coverage and sees PR as being the responsibility of the marketing person.

Perceiving PR as media relations is the other dominant perception. In this view, PR is a channel to publish information, at low cost, and often free of charge, as Maya observed:
“I don’t have my own publicist to handle all the PR...sometimes PR can get, you know, almost like a last minute thought, but it's so important and it’s free, you know, and it doesn’t really take up too much time...it's very important”. Maya’s statement shows that PR is downplayed as less in need of resources and time commitment than marketing. This issue of limited resources will be discussed in further depth under the topic “Lack of Resources” in *Chapter Five*, which acknowledges the relationship between the ACCOs’ PR-like activities and broader economic and political constraints, such as government funding policies.

The perception of PR as media relations is also intertwined with marketing metrics, such as “selling” and “pitching” stories to the media, as Maya added: “We’re trying to sell a story and an emotion. And that’s how you try to wheel them in”. Theorists Kruckeberg and Starck (1988) contest Maya’s perception of PR’s role in persuading a target market, as they criticise self-serving PR approaches (see for example Bernays 1928) that seek to persuade and advocate in order to reach organisational goals. Instead, they argue that principles of social involvement and participation must be integral to any good communication strategy (Kruckeberg and Starck 1988: 62-63). In addition, a key differentiator between the two approaches of marketing and PR is that marketing often positions stakeholders and employees as customers or consumers, whereas PR is focused on building relationships. Participants interchanged the two disciplines of PR and marketing by mixing PR principles of encouraging social involvement with marketing goals of “selling” to a target market. In addition, these mixed perceptions of PR indicate that participants did not have nor share one clear-cut understanding of PR. This leads to another perception emerging from the participant accounts comprising those PR-like perceptions that fall out of the scope of PR as marketing or media relations. The next section explores this relational aspect of participants’ PR perceptions.

“PR as relationship-building” was an evident key issue emerging from the data, and it resonates with much PR theory but also Aboriginal culture. During the interviews participants connected relationship-building with Aboriginal culture and kinship. For example, Melissa explained communicating for an Aboriginal organisation: “It does come down to relationships and that's kind of... I guess that's just the fundamental thing in Aboriginal culture (...) it's how you connect as people”. Relationship-building as a PR-like
activity was distinct from the two other perceptions of PR as marketing and media relations. Additionally, communicating through marketing principles does not factor in participants’ feelings of wanting to make a difference and preserve stories, as Maya observed:

You’re trying to convince people to buy or consume things that they don’t necessarily need, do you now what I mean? It’s just: consume, consume, consume, spend, spend, spend! .... In the arts you’re not paid as much as them [people working in marketing], but I do feel good at the end of the day. I feel like I’m making a difference. We're not destroying the earth; we're trying to preserve our stories.

This statement aligns with the views of Kruckeberg and Starck (1988), who argue that the main aims of PR are restoring and maintaining a sense of community (Kruckeberg and Starck 1988: 21). Following Kruckeberg’s and Starck’s theory, in the context of ACCOs, PR can be deployed as a means of preserving Indigenous narratives which relates to the political context around colonisation and loss of identity experienced by many ATSI peoples, due to policies such as those that were implemented during the Stolen Generations. The Stolen Generations describes an era from 1900-1970 where mixed race children (“half-castes”) were taken away from their families to be assimilated into society (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997).

Ella, Director and Founder of a community and social development organisation, specifically draws attention to the importance of relationship-building: “I would use the word ‘relationship building’ and then those three things ‘marketing’, ‘public relations’, and ‘communication’ are just tools for the outcome”. Grace, Manager of a social services organisation, further builds on this perception of PR:

PR has just been open communication, transparent, well, it’s public...you do relationships, and relationships are so crucial to what we do. We have to have different relationships with different stakeholders that might be involved with us and our stakeholders are our community, and if they aren’t comfortable then what are we here for?

Building personal and community-driven relationships through open communication and transparency underlie these participants’ general perceptions of PR. McKie and Willis (2012) foreground the concept of “marketing imperialism”, which highlights how marketing can dominate core PR activities, such as campaigning, branding, reputation, and customer relationship management (McKie and Willis 2012: 847). In contrast, they argue, “public relations has strategic assets vital for the successful management of contemporary
challenges. Such virtues as connectedness, engagement, and relationship-building link an organisation to a wider stakeholder universe beyond the customer and a commercially driven value-chain” (McKie and Willis 2012: 849). This theoretical view resonates with participant observations that communicating for ACCOs is closely connected to fostering community through building personal relationships.

As demonstrated in this section, PR can be seen as valuable to the ACCOs given its many-faceted roles in promoting the ACCOs’ services, establishing networks of communication with key stakeholders, creating opportunities for media coverage, and building a strong brand with respect to Aboriginal culture and kinship.

The fourth PR perception is reactive PR, which differs from marketing, media relations and relationship-building in that it addresses participants’ experiences of engaging in PR-like activities in ways that were reactionary and ‘ad hoc’. The next section will further scrutinise the nature of PR in ACCOs by exploring this notion of reactive PR.

**Reactive PR**

The key issue of “reactive PR” developed from analysing participants’ descriptions of how they managed their ACCO’s PR-like activities. From this analysis, the following codes developed: “no concerted plan”, “as things happen”, “reactionary” (Grace) or “reactive kind of approach” (Melissa), “ad hoc promotion”; “wishing to plan in advance”; “communicating sporadically”; “getting around things ad hoc”; and “going with what we can”. Expanding on these codes, a reactive pattern of communicating was particularly identified within those ACCOs with limited resources and staff responsible for the PR-like activities, such as the social service organisation:

NWP: Do you have a communications plan you kind of view or is it more an oral one or...?

Grace: It’s very reactionary; there is no plan. There is no system or there is no concerted plan. Or there is a plan, the plan emerges as we react because obviously the things that we [do], the bulk mail-out, for instance, or whatever it is really prior to NAIDOC week or prior to the AGM. They are the planned ones. Well, semi-planned. They are planned generally around the dot, but otherwise it’s, yeah, as things happen because we don’t have a dedicated person to look after that.
The majority of participants described the lack of organisation in the ACCOs’ methods of managing their communications. For example, most participants recalled an urge to clean up their ACCO’s communications when starting in their roles, by updating social media accounts, rebranding, organising and setting up folders and photo archives, and introducing communication plans and website strategies. Melissa specifically recalled this reactionary and ad hoc process of communicating:

A lot of their work seems to have been a bit sporadic and when I say that it didn’t seem to be...like when I asked if they had a communications strategy, for example, for the organisation, nobody could say that they had one, or was aware of one, or what was one, and that type of thing. So I think a lot of the tasks that they do in terms of promotion and communications and that sort of thing, I think they do things to get done as opposed to actually planning and kind of going ‘these are our key messages, these are our strategies of how we want to engage as an organisation in general’.

As Melissa indicated, the communication processes would benefit from planning ahead, although certain tasks like planning community events or preparing business cards and flyers to hand out during NAIDOC Week were “semi-planned”. Furthermore, the ACCOs did not plan how to enhance levels of engagement or come up with a strategy for their promotions, as the process would emerge as participants responded to immediate needs.

A reason for this reactive pattern of communicating may be that participants had to multitask on low budgets and solve many different tasks each day, as urgency dictated. As Grace commented, “some things I don't get to because I'm doing too many things and we just go with what we can. That's all because we don't have that budget to do it, you know”. Given the reactive nature of PR within ACCOs, participants had to adapt to the ACCOs’ environment, and solved their PR-like tasks creatively. For example, Maya commented: “instead of flying people in to do a photo shoot this is how we're getting around it, we're illustrating everything; everything has been illustrated opposed to imagery, so it's not gonna be photographic image on our posters next year”. Interestingly, Maya adapted to the situation by creating a solution compatible with the ACCOs’ organisational environment and branding. This ability to quickly adapt to the organisational environment was key when managing the ACCOs’ reactive PR-like activities.

Melissa advocated “being proactive”, which in her opinion involved risk-managing the organisation’s communication, a matter of positioning the organisation in as much control as possible of the messages it dispersed. Melissa stated:
Organisations need to be on the front foot and they actually need to be proactive with the way that they are sending out messages because then they are controlling the way that the message gets out and it's not in response to something, you know. They are actually taking control of how it gets out there, and who it gets out to, and they are seen to be doing something.

In essence, being proactive depended on the organisation’s ability to control its PR-like activity and clearly define its purpose and whom it should target.

In addition, participants indicated that the sharing of responsibility for communications within the organisation was limited, and often deemed a one-person job. For example, Melissa, who was employed to substitute the previous communications team that had been laid off, found it was hard to get a sense of the communicative infrastructure, such as finding logos, photos, and understanding the processes like what photos to display online. As she explained, “there is no real structure around those sorts of things. So, yes, I mean, I think they do what they do, but I think it’s at a really, really base level. It’s not kind of anything where it’s proactive, it’s more of a reactive kind of approach”.

This reactive attitude towards PR-like activity was also reflected in participants’ approach to organising brochures and graphic designs, as Melissa observed: “if they need to get a poster done, they’ll do a poster, but it’s not like ‘okay, we’re gonna plan for this’”. Melissa’s opinions aligned with Grace’s experience of designing term programs, which were mailed out to members every quarter. This design process was done in-house and was a concerted effort between Grace and the project coordinator. Grace explained, “[project coordinator] would think of a theme, so she had umbrellas for winter, and I said: ‘what are we gonna do for the look for spring and summer?’ I said: ‘put flowers on there’. I don’t know what will happen next year, we’ll have to put beaches or seaside [laughter]”. Both Melissa and Grace raised their concerns around the lack of strategic communications. They were aware of the importance of putting thought into consistent branding whether it concerned a flyer, a social media post, or designing a term program or poster, however, the on-going issue seemed to be the lack of planning across all the communication processes within the organisations, because of limited funding and the lack of recruiting communication staff with the required expertise.

This reactionary approach to their PR-like activities appeared to limit the ACCOs’ opportunities to leverage their communicative efforts. That is, if ACCOs were more proactive in planning PR-like activities, they may be able to better drive successful
communicative outcomes through opportunities like NAIDOC Week. However, “getting things done” seemed to shadow participants’ ability to strategically defining messages and crafting a purpose or plan for their PR-like activities. The next section will look further into the communicative efforts and PR-like strategies as described by participants.

**PR-like Tactics and Strategies**

This section explores the key issue of tactics and strategies that was identified by participants, and coded in the analysis as inclusive of activities such as “communicating with members”, “mailing regularly”, “organising community event” and “strategic communication” (see the table in “Analytical Process” on page 45 to view a list of codes, key issues and themes). As will be shown, these PR-like activities weave between offline and online spaces, and comprise a mixture of traditional and modern PR tactics. Moreover, participants carried out their PR-like activity through mailing, meeting face-to-face with stakeholders like politicians, government representatives or potential partner organisations, and participating in events for networking opportunities such as community festivals. Other PR-like tasks include writing up program content, newsletters and annual reports; updating websites and managing social media accounts; coordinating content from different stakeholders both internal and external to the organisation; informing members or donors; liaising with web and graphic designers when ordering promotional material like flyers and posters. However, brochures, flyers and term programs were often designed in-house. Claire, Media Officer of an advocacy and legal services organisation, summed up her use of various strategies and tactics:

> We employ a range of strategies to ensure that our voice is heard including: quarterly newsletters, our own produced and presented fortnightly national radio program [name of program], [name of organisation]’s media releases, press conferences, pamphlets, extensive email networks, compilation of promotional materials, involvement in community events/stalls, along with in-house and external workshops, public talks and liaison with key community and organisational stakeholders.

It is evident in this quote that Claire deliberately employs a range of PR-like tactics in order to disperse the ACCO’s key messages. Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Ruler, Vercic and Sriramesh (2007) refer to such efforts as strategic communications, which is defined as “the
purposeful use of communication by an organisation to fulfil its mission” (Hallahan et al. 2007: 3). Furthermore, strategic communications focuses on the intentional activities that organisations employ to promote themselves (Hallahan et al. 2007: 7). Thus, strategic communications is not about influencing public opinion directly but a matter of strengthening organisations’ “purpose for being” (Hallahan et al. 2007: 11).

Although participants were fully aware of their ACCO’s purpose for being, their use of PR-like tactics were less strategic given various constraints, such as lack of funding and awareness of the benefits of communications, that will be outline in Chapter Five, “Lack of Resources”. Nevertheless, the ACCOs’ PR-like activities were used for different purposes and employed and prioritised differently in each ACCO depending on participants’ access to communicative resources and the type of service industry the ACCOs worked within. For example, providing stories to the media was a strategy highly prioritised by the arts organisation, which operated within the culture and arts industry; whereas the social services organisation predominantly applied mainstream tactics in organising community events, establishing partnerships, and using Facebook as its primary means of communicating. The advocacy organisation and social services organisation primarily focused their PR-like activities on community relations, whereas the community and social development organisation primarily utilised conferences, journal articles, papers, and meetings. Overall, the ACCOs used a mix of tactics, which Maya summed up as: “We get our messages out there through Facebook advertising, print and online advertising, feel good stories in the media and through videos on our YouTube channel”.

The more traditional forms of communicating involved the daily correspondence with members and volunteers, or physical mail out, which was a popular tactic that was used regularly by all participants. Melissa specifically questioned the ACCOs’ use of “snail mail” compared with other tactics:

In terms of the primary method it’s Facebook because they know that the majority of our mob use Facebook. But then in addition to that they will have the website, which has always been there. But then they also do direct mail-outs to their members...it’s quite a costly exercise... I don’t know for sure but at least it’s over 5,000 members, so it’s quite a lot in terms of what it cost to, you know, mail out stuff as well, and then they have their email network, so that’s probably the primary methods that they use to kind of get their stuff out to community as well as face-to-face when they go out and do their regional stuff and then actually visit communities.
As this quote demonstrates, the advocacy organisation uses various types of tactics. However, the use of “snail mail” is identified by Melissa as an old-fashioned and costly way of communicating with members. Other technologies are also available, such as social media that may be more cost-effective as opposed to the traditional means of communicating, or seeking free editorial through media relations. The participants’ use of media relations will be the focal point next.

**Media Relations**

Media relations describes participants’ engagement with, and views of, broadcast media. Drawing on participant accounts, media relations was predominantly perceived as time consuming, a costly affair, and rarely used by those ACCOs that did not have a designated Media Officer.

Although, it seemed that Indigenous media was supportive of the ACCOs’ efforts. For example, Maya thought it was easy to pitch stories to Indigenous media outlets, such as the *Koori Mail* and *National Indigenous Times*: “Every time I send them any info they will always put it out there”. Furthermore, the two organisations (the arts organisation and advocacy and legal services organisation) deliberately engaged with the media, whereas the advocacy organisation liaised with the media sporadically depending on the nature of its activities. Maya also found it difficult to carry out media relations when the events took place away from the metropolitan areas of Perth. She would mainly pitch stories to the media when doing Perth-based shows, or bigger events internationally or inter-state, which indicates that the geographic position matters in terms of Maya’s efforts in getting media coverage.

The general portrayal of Aboriginal people in the media was also mentioned. Grace stressed the media’s negative portrayal of Aboriginal people and explained how she resisted such negative coverage through organising community events as a means of “positive reconciliation”:

> So it [the organisation’s community events] means anyone and everyone can come together and it’s about showcasing that Aboriginal people are very competent, we’re very, you know, it’s not the negative stereotypes that the media purveys, so that it’s sort of a positive reconciliation that happens, so that people sort of get a chance to see
another side of Aboriginal life and that we're all very diverse, in colour, where we come from.

Grace prompts the idea that it is possible to resist the media’s negative coverage of Aboriginal people from a grassroots level through community events like NAIDOC Week. Dutta (2011) observes that marginalised social groups do not have access to platforms through which they can be heard, and are less privileged resource-wise. In addition, he believes that dialogue is the means of driving social transformation as “inequalities in distribution of resources play out communicatively” (Dutta 2011: 169). Moreover, it is through dialogue that a discursive space can be created, and as Dutta argues, through communication it is possible to “out” social inequalities. Drawing on Dutta (2011), NAIDOC Week becomes a discursive space through which ACCOs and community members can voice their interests as well as resist negative stereotyping by focusing on reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. This resistance is locally based and mediated through the facilitation of community events.

The advocacy and legal services organisation was the only organisation which had a Media Officer. Claire described her role as follows:

My [name of organisation] media work involves working with our Senior Management team, community members, and media representatives to ensure that important information is reaching our community members and the wider community and that our voice is heard on key social justice issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in WA.

As this quote shows, relationships with the media created opportunities for the organisation to reach the community with crucial information, but also voice their political concerns in the public space. However, it was the general impression that those organisations with established marketing or media relations strategies had more advanced relationships with the media and therefore a greater chance to influence public discourse.

**Social Media**

The ACCOs’ extent of technology uptake, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube, varied. It was further found that an individual staff member’s knowledge of social media and the amount of resources allocated to communications influenced the ACCOs’ social media engagement. In addition, using social media for e-marketing was
sector-specific as it was used by those ACCOs working in the Arts and Culture industry, such as the arts organisation and the media organisation, as they depended on selling shows or airtime, whereas the other ACCOs did not seem to use social media to do e-marketing, but used it for online networking purposes and promoting events via Facebook.

In addition, all organisations but the social services organisation had a website. Instead, the social services organisation regularly updated its Facebook page through which it had established a network of more than a thousand “friends”. This high number of Facebook friends may be due to the transfer from a “closed group” to a “fan” Facebook page, which indicates the importance of knowing how to utilise the specific features of each social media stream to reach their communities and communicate effectively. In addition, the community and social development organisation had a website, Facebook page (inactive), and a Twitter account (inactive), but used emails, mail-outs, and professional and personal networks, as the primary means of dispersing messages.

All ACCOs, except for the community and social development organisation, used Facebook regularly. With Facebook being the most popular, other social media streams like Twitter were down-prioritised: “I discovered that there weren’t really many doing tweets... and I shouldn’t think that Twitter is a huge thing in radio. I think it’s more Facebook and Instagram” (Thomas, media organisation). Melissa made similar comments: “they don’t use Twitter and they don’t really use Instagram and, you know, other things, yeah, they don’t really use any of those. Partly some of the staff in there they don’t use those other forms of social media, so Facebook is the primary one and people are familiar with that”.

In essence, the participants preferred tactics they were familiar with. Yet although Grace acknowledged the demand for social media, she maintained the effectiveness of interpersonal communication: “Email obviously is crucial and smsing... people are using the technology now, so we use what we can; Facebook, but yes, word of mouth, so you pass things around; hand out stuff, and say 'Oh, when you see such and such', you know, drop all those things off to them when you’re on your way around”. Thus, Facebook was employed as a means of adapting to their members’ use of and familiarity with particular social media platforms, and also partially determined by the social media literacies of the ACCO staff.
The social services organisation and the community and social development organisation had limited communicative resources and their non-use of other social media channels such as Twitter and LinkedIn was often due to personal preferences. Ella observed, “I don’t know much about Facebook this and Twitter that. I know it’s all out there but you need someone, who is on the go to be able to promote those messages out there”. This sense of unfamiliarity among ACCO staff with social media platforms was not explored in further depth, as it was beyond the scope of this thesis. However, it was apparent that participants’ use of Facebook was a significant aspect of their communication strategy, and partially due to Facebook’s popularity among Aboriginal peoples. For example, findings suggest that six in ten adult ATSI peoples use Facebook on a daily basis, particularly those residing in the metropolitan areas, with 68 per cent being active Facebook users (McNair Ingenuity Research Institute 2014).

Thomas supported the use of social media: “So we have a Twitter account ‘cos obviously that’s the way that things are going and I’m a huge believer of social media, so we have Twitter, which isn’t used as much, but during my first week the first thing that I did was I asked to get an Instagram set up”. This positive attitude towards social media may be due to Thomas’s own experiences working in marketing through which he acquired knowledge and skills. Similarly, Melissa, who had an educational background in PR, also had a positive view and embraced the use of social media. This observation indicates that individual experiences of working with communication software and technology impact on the ACCOs’ PR-like strategies and choice of tactics; hence it is a significant advantage recruiting people with knowledge or personal experience of social media.

In summary, all ACCOs but one used Facebook. As participants narrated, their organisations could benefit from using Facebook and other social media more effectively, by developing a social media strategy and allocating resources towards regularly updating and maintaining their presence on Facebook, given it is a popular means of communicating for most ATSI peoples. This section also revealed the generally limited uptake of other social media streams, which warrants further exploration to better understand the role of specific social media as platforms for connecting with and representing community members. The next section draws attention away from the online sphere onto the
importance of social capital in the form of establishing partnerships and networks, and shows how the ACCOs engage and connect with stakeholders and communities.

**Partnerships and Networks**

Partnering with other organisations enhances the connections with the community and local businesses and similar community organisations. Put in a word, it builds the ACCOs’ social capital, which they can utilise and build on in the future. Here, social capital signifies “the type of connections that the organizations have with competitors, politicians, journalists, bureaucrats, researchers, and other relevant groups” (Ihlen 2007: 273). Ihlen (2007) applies the concept of social capital to PR to reveal how PR assists organisations with obtaining powerful positions and reaching goals effectively through their social networks.

When applied to the participant accounts, the methods of acquiring social capital varied and the main purposes of partnering with other organisations were primarily to capitalise on branding, or to provide joint services. For example, the advocacy organisation primarily liaised with politicians, whereas the social services organisation partnered with similar organisations in the service sector to deliver social services to their community. Compared with the media organisation, who deliberately joined forces with organisations that shared similar values or political focus, the community and social development organisation build their social capital from networking with potential funding partners or political influencers. This is reflected in Ella’s statement: “We don’t do the writing bit but I’ll have a cup of coffee with the big bosses now and again. I do things like that. I don’t bring out work it’s just chitchatting and relationship building and when something comes up I might get a phone call ‘oh, this is happening’.”

Partnerships can also be seen as a form of indirect representation of community and living up to the community members’ expectations: “I think it’s great for us to align ourselves with issues that are very important to the Noongar community and I think it’s very important for us to do so because the community would expect that of us” (Thomas, media organisation). In this quote, Thomas refers to community expectations and how his organisation abides by representing values and discussing social issues pertinent to the
Noongar people: “We are their voice (...) In a way they own us. I see it, as the community really is my boss”. Stakeholder relations was the method where the ACCOs applied Kruckeberg and Starck’s (1988) principles of social involvement and participation that is required of effective community building. This was fostered through face-to-face interactions and aligning with other organisations’ values and key messages. Finally, participants were aware of their diverse stakeholder groups, but the establishment of strategic relationships did not come across as an area of investment within the ACCOs.

Event Management

Event management was also a popular means of communicating, and events such as NAIDOC Week were important. Preparations for NAIDOC Week included organising merchandise, hand-outs and stalls, promoting and networking. Through these activities the ACCOs engaged with other community organisations and knitted together a professional network. For example, the suburb Ashfield, which is based in Perth, organises an annual community event as part of NAIDOC Week, which encourages Aboriginal organisations as stallholders to network and connect with the broader community. Maya describes how she took part in the event: “I visited every organisation and got their business card and I pitched to them, and I said ‘I’m gonna send you information’, which I did, and they shared it. So I’ve still got all their details”. Based on Maya’s experience, events such as NAIDOC Week facilitate opportunities for reaching the Aboriginal community and sharing Aboriginal culture with other Australians, but it is also a great chance to promote the organisation. As Ella observed:

So it’s me going there or anyone else from our board, they wear their uniform and we have our business cards. I run out very quick ‘cos I’m always going to events like that. Always. I don’t target anyone. People come and chat to me and I might chat to certain people and I give out my card. It’s all this face-to-face. It takes a lot of time and it’s really I’m pretty knackered at the end of that Aboriginal week ’cos I go to a lot of community events.

Moreover, the ACCOs celebrate NAIDOC Week in different ways and some of them organise their own community events or in partnership with stakeholders. For example, the social services organisation partners with their local government in preparation of the
local NAIDOC flag raising ceremony where the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags and the national Australian flag are raised. The social services organisation usually provides kangaroo stew and damper, and on top of this, they arrange their own community breakfast “where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people come together to celebrate” (Grace, social services organisation). These NAIDOC events were core activities and the only events to most of the ACCOs that they prepared for in terms of pre-planning their PR-like activities. This observation indicates that there is room for the ACCOs to improve their promotion of their NAIDOC community events in order to maximise the outcome of such activity. Moreover, the strategies of partnering, networking and attending events overlap and can all be seen as a form of community engagement, which will be outlined in the next section.

Community Engagement

The ACCOs’ efforts during NAIDOC Week can be seen as a form of community engagement, which is carried out both locally and externally to the ACCOs. Besides participating in NAIDOC Week, the social services organisation also engages with the community locally and through provision of social services at the actual location of the organisation. Here, members register for programs, sign up for memberships and seek information. In contrast, the advocacy organisation both visits and consults communities external to the organisation’s base in Perth, or conducts information workshops locally at the organisation. The media organisation primarily engages with its community members through volunteering, by having them do radio programs and broadcast live from events in their community. Lastly, the arts organisation organises community nights and BBQs as a way to involve their members.

Obviously, community engagement is practiced differently depending on the ACCOs’ goals and purposes. Nevertheless, a shared pattern arises of community engagement as geographically determined, which creates two distinct ways of engaging the community, either locally at the organisation and in surrounding suburbs, as outlined in the beginning of this section, or externally to the organisation through regional community visits. The
latter form is reflected in the advocacy organisation’s liaison with regional communities regarding implementing new governance structures:

So part of that is going out to these regions to make them understand that this is how it works, these are the governance structures behind these organisations, for example, and getting people to think about it. So these particular workshops that they are doing now are kind of preliminary to the official ones where they actually endorse, you know, the government structure and who might be on their board, the inaugural board of each organisation, for example. (Melissa, advocacy organisation)

Furthermore, the advocacy organisation engaged the community by running consultations to inform their community representatives, and receiving information from them before conducting the official workshops. This form of community engagement also involves other Aboriginal organisations: “through the community it might go through some of the Aboriginal community-controlled organisations; through the, you know, Aboriginal medical services even universities. They might have contacts through the Aboriginal centres, so they use, you know, different organisations to kind of obviously still get the messages out” (Melissa, advocacy organisation).

There were clearly well-established networks among the ACCOs that although out of the scope of this thesis, warrant further exploration, so that we can better understand how such organisations’ social capital is fostered and maintained.

As shown in the previous sections, participants engaged in various PR-like activities including media relations, social media, the establishment of partnerships and networks, event management, and community engagement. It was shown that participants’ tactical preferences depended on their experiences and knowledge of communications, as well as the type of service sector that their ACCO worked within. In addition to understanding participants’ tactical PR work is the underlying cultural values driving participants’ ways of communicating with members and communities. Participants referred to this form of communicating as the Aboriginal way, which will be outlined in the following section.

**The Aboriginal Way**

The Aboriginal way of communicating comprises participants’ focus on personal engagement and employing communicative processes that are centred on cultural values,
protocols, and fostering personal relationships. As outlined in the previous sections, building relationships and informing the community are important to all participants. However, community engagement or media relations do not fully capture the ACCOs’ unique way of communicating with their community members and stakeholders. A distinct form of communicating appeared in the participant accounts and was summed up by Grace:

The most successful is probably “Aboriginal way”, the Aboriginal grapevine, word of mouth. That’s a really good and really quick way to get it [information] around, so the Aboriginal grapevine is really important.

Other participants described personal relationships as being “the Aboriginal way of communicating” (Ella, community and social development organisation) or, as Rebecca observed, an old-fashioned more “straight forward” way of communicating. This personal transfer of information is pivotal and often practiced within the ACCOs: “anybody who comes to the office, we ask them: ‘just spread the word, tell them that this is happening’” (Rebecca, arts organisation). Moreover, the Aboriginal way of communicating is steered by personal relationships, rather than financial gain, and is particularly related to Aboriginal culture and attitudes about community and kinship. Also, the importance of Aboriginal culture distinguishes the Aboriginal way of communicating from more conventional, formalised and institutionalised modes of organisational communication. Moreover, the Aboriginal way of communicating inhabits the personal sphere, is grounded in the oral transmission of information and draws on internal networks such as board members, families and friends. Thus, it deserves further exploration and interpretation, as it involves deeply embedded and significant pathways of communication that sit beside, augment and sometimes challenge existing and more conventional channels.

The Aboriginal way is more than a PR-like strategy. It is a mode of knowing and doing that informs many of the tactics described in the previous sections. Moreover, the Aboriginal way encompasses a philosophy, which elevates the importance of kinship and community underlying participants’ ways of communicating. It ties people together and gives meaning, as Ella described:

It’s not based on a written word. It’s based on relationships and people taking time out. Like [name of colleague] took time out to come and see you. That’s the way we work…I had an incidence yesterday. It was a horrible one. Someone rang me up and asked me a question out of the blue while he was driving: ‘Can I list all the Aboriginal family groups
that live in [suburb]?’ And he is getting paid as a consultant to a firm who wants to know all this, so...And I was a bit upset about that he didn’t have the time to come and see me, you know.

As shown in this excerpt, Ella deliberately distinguishes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ways of communicating in saying “all the traditional stuff that non-Aboriginal people would do, we don’t do that”. The “traditional stuff” included writing media releases and “blowing one’s own horn”.

Research on communication between Indigenous publics and non-Indigenous organisations theorise around these culturally distinct ways of communicating (Motion, Haar and Leitch 2012; Love and Tilley 2014). Motion, Haar and Leitch (2012) apply the Māori perspective of the Indigenous peoples of Aotearoa to understanding Indigenous engagement. They employ the Maori term Whanaungatanga, which translates to engagement and “encompass[es] communication that is oriented towards creating shared outcomes and constructing shared understandings” (Motion, Haar and Leitch 2012: 54). By introducing whanaungatanga to PR, Motion, Haar and Leitch present an alternative way of conceptualising PR by drawing on valuable Indigenous knowledge. Similar to the Australian Aboriginal way of communicating, mutually beneficial relationships are a focal point and made possible through the involvement of the Indigenous publics in, for example, agenda setting, decision-making and policy formation (Motion, Haar and Leitch 2012: 54). This proximity fostered between the organisation and publics was also evident in the interviews in that all the participants emphasised the importance of community and involving everyone. Therefore, communicating the Aboriginal way is fundamental to Aboriginal cultural protocols of connecting with people face-to-face. This challenges dominant models of PR that predominantly focus on employing PR in organisational settings as a means of reaching organisational goals and fostering relationships between the organisation and its publics. Such PR framework can completely ignore cultural context and differences that are equally important to factor in when understanding PR-like activity within ACCOs.
Conclusion

This chapter fleshed out the participants’ perceptions of PR in ACCOs by mapping out their general PR perceptions, tactical use of PR-like activities and strategies, and the Aboriginal way of communicating when working within ACCOs. Through analysis of participant responses, four dominant views appeared of PR as marketing, media relations, relationship-building and reactive. Following this, a discussion on marketing imperialism was made highlighting the issue of marketing principles taking over PR-like activities. Furthermore, the notion of “reactive PR” demonstrated that working in a non-profit organisation is often turbulent and chaotic. This meant that participants were often reactive as opposed to planning their PR-like activities ahead.

The chapter also outlined participants’ tactical and strategic use of PR-like activities, such as updating websites and managing social media accounts, organising promotional material and events, emailing and informing members and stakeholders about services or products, and building relationships with the media. Comparing participants’ responses also revealed that educational backgrounds, type of service sector, individual skills and knowledge of technology influenced the ACCOs’ social media engagement.

A significant finding is the Aboriginal way, which encapsulates participants’ values and principles behind communicating for ACCOs. It is argued that the prevalence of the Aboriginal way of communicating was a significant finding that challenges dominant PR theory because of its neglect of the importance of culture, as reviewed in Chapter Two.

Drawing on this chapter’s findings, this thesis contends that dominant PR theory is reflective of the tactics and strategies employed by participants.

Summing up, this chapter provided an overview of the participants’ main perceptions of their PR-like activities and outlined the ACCOs’ communicative infrastructures. Instead of focusing on participants’ use of tactics and strategies, the next chapter will expand on the context of participants’ working environment, focusing on participants’ perceptions of their roles and the factors impacting their PR-like work.
This chapter sets out to examine how participants perceive their work environment and roles as key communicators. By placing attention on participant roles within their organisational contexts, the following factors will be discussed such as working environments, participants’ relationships with colleagues, management and board members, political constraints like government funding policies, and the cultural differences between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal cultural protocols of kinship. These observations of the working environment, organisational culture and broader context, and management’s approach to PR-activity are also well-researched in PR scholarship (Sison 2006: 58), particularly the two factors of working environment and cultural context that will be addressed in this chapter.

More specifically, the three themes that will be presented are: “Working Environment”, “Communicating Aboriginal Culture” and “Communicating Social Change”. The theme of “Working Environment” developed from the key issues of “integrating PR” and “lack of resources”, whereas the three issues of “communicating cultural differences”, relational working environment“ and “kinship practices” are grouped under the second theme of “Communicating Aboriginal Culture”. The third theme, “Communicating Social Change”, addresses the key issues of “PR-like roles” and “Aboriginal culture and invasion” (see Chapter Three, “Analytical Process” on page 45 to view the table displaying the themes, key issues and codes).

First, this chapter outlines the integration, or lack thereof, of PR-like activities into the participants’ working environments, which was determined by staffing of people with expertise in communication, liaison with management and board members, and external political constraints in terms of funding and resources. Particular focus is put on the relationship between ACCOs and government authorities that are essential because ACCOs receive most of their funding from government stakeholders.
The next section of the chapter focuses on participants’ relationships with their colleagues as they encompass an important factor surrounding the participants’ working environment and strong connection to Aboriginal culture and kinship, making them feel like they belong to a close community. Hereunder, a section on kinship practices describing some of the challenges facing participants, such as implementing organisational structures in accordance with Aboriginal cultural protocols of kinship and modern Aboriginal social norms.

This leads into a discussion on the broader historical, political and cultural contexts of colonisation and invasion that must be acknowledged to fully grasp participants’ working environment and roles, and their PR perceptions. Participants’ connections to their ACCOs social purpose are outlined, describing participants’ aspirations of “wanting to make a difference” for ATSI peoples. This is analysed by applying three theoretical concepts of PR practitioners as cultural intermediaries, change agents and discourse technologists that derive from sociocultural PR theory. In doing so, participants’ perceptions of their various roles are further fleshed out, enabling an interpretation of how their work with PR-like activities can be seen in relation to communicating social change.

**Working Environment**

This section addresses the key issue of “integrating PR” to discuss the different factors influencing the ACCOs’ integration of PR-like processes and participants’ ability to carry out their PR-like work. One of these factors influencing participants’ PR-like work was the internal division of labour in terms of having designated staff to carry out PR-like activity.

As described in *Chapter Four*, the ACCOs were at different levels in terms of building their communicative infrastructures. For example, the three ACCOs, arts, media and the advocacy and legal services organisations, were the most established in regards to using a range of PR-like tactics and strategies. Moreover, they had leveraged from these efforts, such as getting media coverage, establishing good rapport with journalists, and implementing communications plans and media strategies.
As mentioned, participants’ ability to carry out PR-like activities was also influenced by the support of management and the ACCOs’ board members that differed between the organisations. For instance, half of the participants (Maya, Thomas, Rebecca) did not report to the board but communicated directly with their General Manager, whereas Melissa communicated with the CEO’s assistant. In contrast, Claire had a unique set-up, communicating directly with management: “I am supported in my role by [name of the organisation]’s Senior Management Team and our eight members Executive Committee, and work in consultation with our Senior Management Team who provide [name of the organisation]’s public voice to media”. Overall, participants felt supported in their role by colleagues and board members, but when asked about support involving their daily tasks, it seemed less straightforward. For example, Maya had a managing role, worked in a well-established organisation, and liaised with the General Manager. She rarely reported to the board other than writing up her part of the marketing strategy, which was tabled by the General Manager. Melissa explained that she barely saw the board members or CEO, but nevertheless felt supported:

I probably haven’t had any direct contact with them [the board members]. Although, I do know some of the Board members personally, anyway, just in general, so they know that I’m doing the work. I’ve probably had a little bit to do with the CEO, but I normally deal with his kind of Executive Assistant. Let’s say, for example, in the newsletter we’ll get a message from the CEO’s Office, so she’ll help facilitate that, so I don’t have to go to him directly.

In addition, Melissa had the impression that the board members underestimated their influence on communicative outcomes, “I think they know that it’s important but they probably underestimate their role in communication”. This resembles Rebecca’s previous comments about getting board members more involved with promoting the organisation.

The interdependency between board members and communications staff was evident, and was further underpinned when participants explained how they depended on being “fed information” from their colleagues in order to do their tasks:

NWP: In terms of your job what are the challenges? What would the dream scenario be?

Rebecca: Challenges for me? Right now our website needs to be updated, right? And it could be lovely if I had all of the shows, which we’re going to do next year. They are coming up, but the problem is, because we don’t have the contracts signed with actors, who are going to be there? When is the season going to be? Not even a short synopsis. Then what do you put on your website? So that’s when I feel incompetent ... You need
to have more, not staff meetings, but project meetings where people talk. See? It's always a lack of communication, and also deadlines, you know. It's tricky.

As this quote shows, Rebecca relied on her colleagues in order to solve her communicative tasks, but more importantly, this dependence affected the way she perceived herself, which at times made her feel “incompetent” and frustrated. Approval from all the board members was another issue she raised, as it would take too long to get approval before the information would be out of date. However, participants recognised that the ACCOs could further integrate PR-like activities into the organisational structure if their board members got more involved in promoting the organisation, following activities on social media, and attending board meetings more often (Rebecca, arts organisation).

More than half of the ACCOs had more or less implemented processes involving PR-like activities, such as drafting marketing plans and media strategies, whereas the social services organisation and community and social development organisation deliberately down-prioritised PR due to limited resources. It was perceived by participants that PR-like activities were down prioritised because the ACCOs were struggling with limited resources. Therefore, the following section scrutinises this barrier of limited resources, particularly government funding that affects the participants’ ability to carry out their work with PR-like activities.

Lack of Resources

As outlined in the previous section, PR-like activity is both valuable to the organisation, as well as demanding of resources. Working on strict budgets is an on-going issue in non-profit organisations, and emerged as a key issue in the analysis. This section specifically addresses the key issue of “lack of resources” and draws attention to the political funding scheme in Western Australia to acknowledge the political constraints that must be factored in when understanding participants’ ability to carry out their PR-like activities.

It was evident in the interviews that participants managed their PR-like activities on low budgets and solved PR-like tasks in close competition with other forms of organisational activity. As Grace explained, she had to compromise external relationships because of the high workload it required:
The work I've got to do is basically here and the other stuff [PR-like activities] is nice, but it is not necessary, I don't think, at this point in time, until we get some other things in place and some more funding. And I think those things have to sort of fall off, it's just a priority of how to manage the day-to-day operations of the organisation.

Given the lack of resources, most participants found that working within ACCOs involved committing long hours, and receiving relatively little pay in return. This was apparent when Grace compared the non-profit work environment with bigger organisations, “coming from a big organisation we focus on just what we need to do with all the processes and systems and supports and places and resources to access, whereas here you’re multitasking all the time and things happen and you’ve got to stop and, you know, visitors, people coming and going”. This experience of non-profit organisations being particularly demanding also occurred in Maya’s account, who recalled, “Especially when we’re in production week, so we tend to work well into nine/ten o’clock at night, others work a lot longer in that period, so in some way, maybe I have volunteered [laughs]”.

Most participants referred to the dilemma of choosing to budget for communications over delivering social services to the community. For example, Thomas asked, “Where do we get the money from? Would I take it out of Aboriginal training? Would I take it out of Aboriginal employment?”. This issue was reiterated through a personal conversation with Noongar Elder and community leader, Angela Ryder, who explained the scenario that she encountered when she used to chair the board of a Perth-based ACCO. If an ACCO decides to hire a PR person, that position competes with the organisation’s need for an Administration role or Program Coordinator. Basically, ACCOs do not have the resources to recruit all the staff they really need (Personal Conversation, Angela Ryder, November 2015).

Angela’s comments draw attention to government grants procedures and reporting requirements that are specific to Aboriginal non-profit organisations registered under the Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act 2006 (CATSI Act). While these external factors are not the focus of this paper, they are part of the ACCOs’ dilemma of wanting to budget for and embed a PR process into their organisational operations. Ella, Director and Founder of a community and social development organisation, further explained that funding legislation does not always cater for ACCOs’ needs and their specific communicative requirements. She specifically challenged how some government
departments reject funding for communications or marketing. This is at odds with required brand exposure as part of the funding “deal”, such as getting logos on promotional material as a way for the ACCO to acknowledge government support: “we have to get their permission every time we use their logo. There is nothing uniform about it, everybody's got their own rules, so it makes it difficult for a small organisation to manoeuvre around all these stupid, idiotic rules that are not uniform in any way”. In general, Ella felt that governments did not “think outside the box” and neither did they acknowledge the importance of communications; as she stated: “communication/talking is extremely important for an organisation that deals with people, I mean, how else are you gonna do it? Smoke signals? How do they expect you to do it on these tiny budgets?”.  

Besides the lack of funding and heavily regulated processes of funding applications, cultural differences between ACCOs and government seemed to be the key issue affecting the ACCOs’ ability to implement PR, as Ella pointed out: “If we go for any grants or anything the grants will be written by non-Aboriginal people mostly for non-Aboriginal people”. Ella felt that government bodies were unaware of the ACCO’s core business and explained, “we have to be flexible to the needs of the community, and when you set a grant out for a particular research project or community they [the government] expect you to do exactly what you've written in that grant. They are not flexible, they don't understand”.  

Ella’s experiences indicate that grant application processes constrain an ACCO’s ability to impact community in accordance with Aboriginal cultural protocols. For example, the community and social development organisation had recently established a group of community representatives to facilitate change in their community. The ACCO was seen as a vehicle to empower its community members by organising meetings and providing resources for whatever solutions the group came up with (Ella, community and social development organisation). Despite this bottom-up approach and cultural relevance, Ella believes this model makes it difficult to apply for grants because the ACCO would be unable to determine in advance what the money would be spent on, as the decision-making was dynamic, contextual and community-driven.  

This tension between the Australian government’s grant requirements, and the ACCOs’ role in empowering the community to take part in processes of decision-making,
contradicts the newly introduced policy in Western Australia, 2011, *Delivering Community Services on Partnership* (Government of Western Australia 2011). This policy aims to increase collaboration between government departments and the community sector in defining social outcomes of social services. In the foreword of the report, Premier of Western Australia, Colin Barnett, supports “grants tied to a clearly defined purpose” (Government of Western Australia 2011: 8), which is problematic in itself, as it wants to empower and engage the community in the decision-making process but at the same time demands pre-defined purposes and outcomes. Despite the intention by governments to “facilitate and assist, rather than detract from, the good work they [the community sector] do” (Government of Western Australia 2011: 2) the cultural differences between the ACCOs and government funding procedures have negatively resulted in culturally ignorant policies that can be seen as having a detrimental effect on the ACCOs governance structures and communicative infrastructures.

Theorists, Motion, Haar and Leitch (2012) work from what they term a cultural PR framework through which they wish to facilitate power sharing defined as “a breaking down of the organisational discourses in order to make respectful space for Indigenous principles, protocols and practices and to advocate for a more influential role for Indigenous peoples in society” (Motion, Haar and Leitch 2012: 56). Applying the theory of Motion, Haar and Leitch, the Australian government should revisit their grant procedures and encourage bottom-up approaches by, for instance, making it easier for ACCOs to hire communication personnel, or accepting more flexibility within funding applications.

This thesis acknowledges that factors such as underlying cultural tensions between governments and community organisations must be taken into account in researching PR-like activities within ACCOs. Furthermore, the findings of this thesis indicate that the relationship between government and ACCOs is complicated, and that ACCOs often feel disempowered through the funding application process and limited in their ability to provide services and keep the community informed through Aboriginal communication methods and practices.

The previous sections described how funding issues and support from management and board members were part of participants’ experiences of working within ACCOs. It was particularly brought to attention how the lack of resources and funding policies affected

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the ACCOs’ governing structures and operations including PR-like activity. The next section analyses and interprets the participants’ accounts of the importance of Aboriginal culture and kinship, as these factors were also found as key to understanding participants’ work environment and roles.

**Communicating Aboriginal Culture**

This section discusses the key issues of “communicating cultural differences”, “relational working environment”, and “kinship practices” identified from coding participants’ experiences of working within ACCOs, establishing the importance of factoring in Aboriginal culture and kinship protocols.

Participants demonstrated an acute awareness of the differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ways of communicating, positioning Aboriginal culture often in opposition to non-Aboriginal culture. For example, Ella connected the past with the present when explaining her Aboriginal worldview: “We are relational, so the past, the present, the future, are interconnected relationships. People are related, the environment is related, the history, you know, the good and bad history, it’s all part. That’s why we’re circular ’cos everything comes back around and bites you in the bum”. This connection to Aboriginal culture also acted as an important framework in terms of developing relationships with colleagues and community members. Thus, close relationships both within the organisations and with the community were at the heart of the ACCOs.

A family-oriented organisational culture existed between colleagues, as Claire observed: “Working in an Aboriginal organisation ensures shared values and goals and provides a sense of ‘family’ for staff members”, and Maya stated, “this feels like family”. In fact, connecting with Aboriginal culture and her cultural heritage was one of the reasons Maya chose to get involved with her organisation. Rebecca, E-marketing and Accounts Officer of an arts organisation, who migrated to Australia from Eastern Europe added, “I feel at home because we have the same big family, massive, loud, you know, it's as I see life, chaotic, but I'm loving it that way”. Feeling close personal connections is clearly important, as shown in the above comments by Claire, Maya and Rebecca, underpinning the importance of family that participants expressed as necessary to working in Aboriginal
organisations. Notably, this connectedness plays an essential role and is inclusive of all ACCO staff despite their different cultural backgrounds (Rebecca and Thomas were non-Aboriginal).

Furthermore, this family-oriented organisational culture connected people within the organisation, and expanded to include external relationships with community members. Grace specifically explained the importance of greeting members and figuring out their kinship:

> They could be family for what I know, so you've gotta try and find out who they are, place them. Yeah, relationships are meant to be respectful, and so you sort of go and have a yarn, a quick yarn, and it is very hard to do that a few times a day. It is a lot of time, but you need to do that to build relationships, so they say: ‘Oh, she’s not bad, oh, we'll come back here again’, that sort of thing, so it is to maintain that reputation, so that we can be seen to be with the people and that we are professional in the work that we do.

Being professional and respectful, as Grace observes, is key to building relationships and connecting with community members. This relational working environment was evident in participant accounts and seen by participants as one of the reasons that they felt strongly connected to their ACCO.

Furthermore, Ella explained that Aboriginal culture was the foundation of her organisation. In essence, her organisation is based on the support of extended kinship groups, but Ella highlighted that, “They (the government) don’t like it when you work with your family unit” and, “the issue is that we had an organisation set up prior to this, and we had everyone from the community involved. We never went anywhere. It’s too many”.

Ella’s narrative touched on how the government infringed on Aboriginal governance, but the organisation continues to work in accordance with Aboriginal protocols, as the ACCO views it as important for people to remain authentic to their cultural practices. Ella shared information about how the community and social development organisation was founded.

> We still have our kinship groups, and we still work in that way, and we all help each other out but the outside world don’t see that, you see. So what we did was we thought ‘well, bugger that. We’re gonna do our own corporation with our kinship group just one’. And from that time that we started till now we've moved mountains.

As Ella observed, the Australian government’s perception of organisational governance often conflicted with Aboriginal cultural protocols of kinship.
Aboriginal kinship systems are complex given the existence of more than 500 Aboriginal Nations across Australia, each having their own specific cultural protocols of kinship linked to geographic locations including nations, clans and family groups. Birdsal (1988) specifically writes about Noongar kinship systems and describes how “Nyungar social life is bound by an institution of reciprocal obligation” (Birdsall 1988: 143). The kinship system can be seen as a social organisation of relationships, determined by obligations to one another, as a way of ensuring harmony within the community. However, government policies often apply a one-size-fits-all approach that does not acknowledge these kinship systems and in turn can require people to work together outside of these cultural protocols (Riley 2014). In Aboriginal kinship systems individual’s actions have consequences for the whole group, cousins are looked upon as siblings, and aunts are often positioned as equally important as biological mothers. In that way, the kinship system can be seen as a “vehicle of Indigenous cultural reproduction” (Fisher 2009: 295) but more importantly the maintenance of kinship systems reconnects Aboriginal peoples with their social identities that have been disrupted or even lost due to British invasion followed by assimilation policies (Birdsall 1988: 137). Having said that, kinship systems are diverse and Aboriginal cultural practices across language groups are divergent, and differ between geographic locations, and from family to family.

This thesis acknowledges that the effects of invasion and colonialism continue to be present in the everyday lives of ATSI peoples. In contemporary Australia this can be seen in current public debates and policies in relation to Indigenous disadvantage. For example, it is commonly known that there is a 10 year gap in life expectancy for ATSI peoples compared with non-Indigenous Australians (Commonwealth of Australia 2015: 7), just to mention one of the indicators, and the current debate around constitutional recognition of ATSI peoples is a recurring theme in media reportage. Some scholars (Sullivan 2011) hold that in the aftermath of colonisation, Indigenous disadvantage became a significant issue and one of the main reasons that the Indigenous sector exists, as these organisations are acknowledged as being the best providers of social services to ATSI peoples.

In essence, an understanding of the importance of kinship and Aboriginal cultures must be integral to the design of culturally sensitive PR-like activity within ACCOs. An example of applying a culturally sensitive PR strategy is put forward by Tilley and Love (2010), who
argue that organisational goals come second when crafting respectful engagement strategies (Tilley and Love 2010: 5). They draw on protocols called “Kaupapa Maori” that are developed by Maori academic scholars as parameters for interaction between pakeha (European New Zealanders) and Maori (Indigenous New Zealanders). These principles rely on reciprocal relationships between the organisation and its community members and other stakeholders. In this view, stakeholders are positioned as equals and sovereign entities, which includes involving them in deciding the processes of engagement. Tilley and Love suggest how PR tactics are useful in this context, such as establishing “autonomous organisation-public working groups”, and allocating funding to create “independent spaces for engagement rather than containing discussion within the organisational domain” (Tilley and Love 2010: 10). This awareness of including and equally engaging stakeholders, as suggested by Tilley and Love, relates to the Aboriginal way of communicating and participants’ perception of working within family-oriented working environments.

Understanding the importance of culture when working within ACCOs has been established in this section and enables further scrutiny of participants’ various roles on the backdrop of the history of invasion and colonisation. These are both key issues grouped under the theme “Communicating Social Change” that will be accounted for next.

**Communicating Social Change**

This final section presents the analysis of participants’ unique roles in serving as the ACCOs’ key communicators. As will be shown, the participants identified as serving in different roles, but most importantly, they were driven by a personal commitment to their ACCO’s social purpose of driving social change for ATSI peoples. This observation supports Motion and Leitch (1996), who argue that practitioners draw on certain worldviews in their PR practice, and these worldviews are implicit in their PR work (Motion and Leitch 1996: 298). Similarly, Hodges (2006) also stresses the importance of practitioners’ worldviews, which she defines as, “the totality of practitioner’s thoughts, concepts, values, and assumptions about their occupation…and their occupational experiences and identities that guide their behaviour” (Hodges 2006: 85). In addition to the importance of the PR practitioner’s individual traits, much PR theory claim that PR activity is shaped by historical
and cultural contexts, as well as the values and assumptions held by the PR practitioner. Thus, it is no surprise that the relationship between the historical context of invasion and colonisation, Aboriginal culture, and participants’ PR-like practices, were integral to participants’ perceptions of PR and their roles. This will be a focal point in this section in order to better explore the key issues of “PR-like roles” and “Aboriginal culture and invasion”. The latter issue comprises codes such as “educating about Aboriginal culture”, “resisting the past”, and “educating about key community issues”, and the former is informed by codes such as “working into the setting”, “adapting to change”, “educating about Aboriginal culture”, “idealists”, “social change agents” (see the table in “Analytical Process” on page 45 to view a list of codes, key issues and themes). As will be discussed, communicating for ACCOs involves more than technical skills. Rather, it is a culturally sensitive and politically active role that reaches beyond crafting information for the organisation and dispersing it into the community, to implementing social change.

Participants transferred in between roles and “worked into the setting” (Maya, arts organisation) through employing their specialist communication skills, such as developing strategies and managing the ACCOs’ communication (as outlined in Chapter Four, “PR-like Tactics and Strategies”). In general, participants used different descriptions of their roles. For example, Rebecca explained how she depended on being given information from colleagues or external stakeholders, which, at times, made it a tedious job gathering all the information, ensuring that people were informed in case they might be involved with promoting a show or social program, writing newsletters, or arranging photo shoots for promotional material. Ella described this role as “social marketer” and “media officer”, as she declared her ACCO’s need for a “communications specialist” to handle social media: “I’ve put in a grant for a position; I’ve called it a Media Officer/Social Marketer, and what I mean by ‘social marketer’ that’s my term for someone to do all that social stuff”. On the contrary, Thomas enacted a more managerial role predominantly making strategic decisions, and Claire similarly maintained a managing role, as she was responsible for the ACCO’s media coverage, liaising between the media and management. Melissa held a different perception of her role, as being a facilitator:

They needed someone to basically facilitate some of their communication tasks that they no longer had staff to fulfil, so some of those things are like managing their Facebook page, managing their website, writing a newsletter, so tasks that I can do
from home but also I try to get into the office at least ones a week even for a couple of hours just to have the face-to-face contact.

Ella added a unique description of her role by using the term “silent communicative achiever” suggesting that a set figure of the “PR practitioner” in ACCOs does not exist, or rather, she appears in various roles wearing different hats: One day as the logistics officer, another day as the manager, CEO, and so forth. But the cultural context also affects the PR role within ACCOs, as Ella explained:

Traditionally Aboriginal people don’t blow their own horns. I find it really hard talking about the great stuff that we do; I find it hard talking about what I do as a person. I don’t like when people go on a bit, you know. Do you know what I mean? Like we’re just quiet, silent achievers, but that’s our failing too. That’s our cultural ways just to get on with the job and do the right thing for the community, but see outside the community that wants to know more and we don’t have the funding. It comes down to funding, to employ someone to do this.

Ella presents a different perception of those aspects of PR that involves community consultation and creating brand exposure, identifying herself as a quiet, silent, achiever due to her Aboriginal background. In contrast, Rebecca held the perception of the PR practitioner as someone actively connecting stakeholders and seeing “outside the community”:

It’s [PR] your connection or our connection to the world. It’s a person who connects us to the rest of the world and actually creates an image of us. It’s very important...because we are non-profit and there is not many of us, so I would say in a way every single one of us is doing PR for the company, but it’s actually [colleague’s name]’s job, so she is not only marketing, she is PR. And for this team, yes, it would be lovely if you can afford to have a person, who just deals with PR.

Rebecca’s statements idealise PR as creating momentum for the ACCO by reaching the community “out there”, and is applied as a method to publicise the organisation by “making it seen by everyone”.

Rebecca’s description of PR as a person “connecting the organisation with the external world” aligns with conceptualisations of the PR practitioner as a cultural intermediary (Curtin and Gaither 2005; Hodges 2011); that is, a transmitter of culture who engages with processes of communication through which she crafts and disperses information that in turn negotiates peoples’ meanings, attitudes, and beliefs, in order “to help structure how publics think, feel, and act within a particular regulatory context” (Curtin and Gaither 2005:
In this view, participants mediate Aboriginal worldviews and connect the ACCOs’ services and community members with one another.

Informing the community about the ACCOs’ services is important as the Aboriginal community makes up a fragile group within the Australian population, and has an overrepresentation in the criminal justice system with 27 percent being ATSI peoples (ABSb). Thomas explained that he addressed the disadvantage experienced by the majority of their membership, such as the high incarceration rates, by creating radio content in alignment with community interests. He referred to a previous radio program, which transmitted directly from prisons to mediate messages to imprisoned relatives:

We've got about 4,000 listeners across the state because she [Thomas’s colleague] goes to many different prisons. I've taken requests myself at the desk where we see them [members] writing down to their relatives. It's very hard to see that without having tears in your eyes. It's a very powerful show. It's an extremely good service there. She is actually invited into the prisons. We actually get requests for her to get in. She is like our Johnny Cash...Johnny Cash is a good example because he transcends country. He is not just a country singer.

Working in culturally and socially sensitive areas, such as in the legal system like the advocacy and legal services organisations, and in general liaising with people who experience hardship on a daily basis, was common to all participants. In this view, participants can all be seen as working towards the common good on behalf of their community members and the organisations they represent. It also suggests that participants enter into the more political role of representing, supporting and protecting their community.

Dealing with injustices came across in all participant accounts as an underlying force shaping participants’ work with their PR-like activities, as Claire explained:

Through our public relations work we are not only informing and educating the wider community about our role, the over-representation of our people within the criminal justice system and the complex issues facing many of our people, but we are also continuing to shape and maintain our own image as we strive for justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Western Australia.

Moreover, Claire entered her role because she cared about social justice issues and wanted to “contribute towards effecting change” and “create better future pathways for ATSI peoples within the justice system in WA”.

107-108).
On the backdrop of the history of British Invasion (Foley 2003: 44) and colonisation, the participants can be seen as holding a unique purpose to assist closing the gap of disadvantage that ATSI peoples suffer. In fact, invasion impacted Aboriginal cultures across Australia and language groups experienced devastating upheaval due to Anglo-Saxon colonisation (Hornung 2013). The impacts were widespread and separated families, introduced genocidal policies, and broke down the Aboriginal way of organising themselves (Hornung 2013: 134). This historical and political context influences participants’ PR-like activity, which is apparent on the ACCOs’ websites and social media pages where they highlight their role in protecting Aboriginal culture, promoting reconciliation, and shaping a more just and equal Australian society.

ACCOs operating in such sensitive areas transcend their role as service providers and become an important support network or resource that aligns with their community’s specific needs and interests. Similar can be argued around the participants’ perceptions of their work with PR-like activities that they associated with “making a difference”. Maya shared an instance where she had used the symbolism of the Aboriginal flag as part of a photo shoot for the media:

I did a photo-shoot with them [main actors] and it looked fabulous. I got some of it edited. It looked quite good, but at the same time, [name of one of the actors] had a shirt with the Indigenous flag on it, the Aboriginal flag, so it still had that element to it, so it was modern and ancient at the same time. And yeah, the media loved it. It’s all about the photos at the end of the day.

Maya’s narrative of the Aboriginal flag reflects her connection to Aboriginal culture, which was shared by all the participants, together with a more general resistance to Australia’s colonial past through empowering and giving a voice to the ATSI community.

PR scholars like Holtzhausen (2000) specifically addresses such notions of the PR practitioner as the organisation’s conscience and change agent that can be applied to the participants’ contexts of ATSI disadvantage. Following Holtzhausen, “It should be the responsibility of the public relations function to create opportunities for dissent, for opening up debate without forcing consensus, to create possibilities for change” (Holtzhausen 2000: 105). According to Holtzhausen’s PR ethos, change agents should speak out when they experience injustices within the organisation as well as outside of the organisation (Holtzhausen 2012: 65), which was Claire’s perception of her role as “informing and educating the community” and “striving for justice for ATSI peoples”.

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However, representing community can be difficult and participants make decisions that at times challenge the ACCOs’ brands of representing community, such as undertaking partnerships that may conflict with the community’s interests; as Rebecca noted, “a huge percentage of the community ... is so against mining companies and we have mining companies as partners, so that's tricky” (Rebecca, arts organisation). It was evident in the interview accounts that participants’ personal values and political views influenced their PR-like activities, which stress their roles as change agents driven by resistance towards powerful actors and organisations (Holtzhausen 2012: 228). Dutta (2011; 2014) presents a similar perception of the practitioner’s ability to communicate change given “the capacity of cultural members to enact their choices and participate actively in negotiating the structure that constrain their access to resources” (Dutta 2014: 72). Both Dutta and Holtzhausen believe that communication can be used as a tool to resist powerful bodies, such as governments, to the advantage of empowering marginalised communities.

An example of participants reflecting the role as change agents can be found in the way Thomas integrated his personal interests and political views into his PR-like activities, revealing his sense of responsibility to discuss issues pertinent to the ATSI community. He had initiated a show on the “black diggers” that was aired running up to ANZAC Day. The Black Diggers are the ATSI peoples who undertook military service to fight for Australia during wars. Another example of Thomas in the role as change agent is that he actively worked to uphold Noongar languages to “keep language alive”:

NWP: It seems that it was important for you to rename them [sponsorship packages] Noongar names?
Thomas: Exactly. Yeah.
NWP: Why is that?
Thomas: Because that's our brand. That's who we are...It has been estimated that there are around 350 fluent Noongar speakers, so I thought that it's a bit of responsibility that I have as well, and, you know, keeping that alive.

In Thomas’ examples, he can be seen as actively working to manifest ATSI people’s voice in the public space. Dutta (2011) theorises that listening to subaltern voices (Dutta 2011: 10) “opens up dominant discursive spaces to the voices of the marginalised other” (Dutta 2014: 69). The radio program is Thomas’ means of communicating social change in that he takes part in creating a discursive space for ATSI peoples through his organisation’s radio
shows, and takes part in mediating on behalf of members, connecting them, and building relationships with other organisations.

More importantly, participants found that they were driven “by passion not wages”, as Rebecca commented: “I mean we are not well paid, but it is that you know you’re actually doing something that you believe in, and, you know, I know I’m an idealist. I believe that I’m going to make the world a better place. And promoting Aboriginal culture, I’m definitely for it, and putting it out there. So yeah, I have that passion”. This view is in accordance with theorists Motion and Leitch (1996), who propose that PR practitioners are active agents, who engage in communicative action to effect real change, or as Motion and Leitch would argue, PR practitioners transform discourse through their activities in order to change sociocultural practices (Motion and Leitch 1996: 308).

In expanding on participants as cultural intermediaries and change agents, a discursive framework similarly frames participants as powerful agents with the ability to change views and values outside of the organisation. Motion and Leitch (1996: 298) characterise the PR practitioner as a discourse technologist given that…

public relations practitioners can be seen to strategically deploy texts in discursive struggles over sociocultural practices. The aim of such discursive struggles is to maintain or to transform these sociocultural practices and the values and attitudes which support them and which they embody.

Likewise, participants can be seen as discourse technologists because they strategically draw on discourses of “Aboriginal sovereignty” and “Aboriginal versus non-Aboriginal culture” to promote the ACCOs’ values and visions, as well as construct ideas around what Aboriginal culture means through their promotion of the ACCOs’ social services. In drawing on particular discourses participants generate and disperse specific ideas and values to community members, stakeholders, and the wider society, and in doing so, affect other people’s opinions and actions.

Discursive work involves the “use of language in the form of spoken and written word and use of symbols and artefacts” (Holtzhausen 2012: 65), which in this thesis includes various tactics and strategies, as outlined in Chapter Four, “Communicative Infrastructures”, such as stakeholder management, and liaising with the media, as well as consulting the community. In her narrative explaining how she promoted Aboriginal sovereignty via a photo shoot, Maya recognised and used the symbolism of the Aboriginal
flag, and took part in representing Aboriginal peoples in terms of their sovereignty. Likewise, Claire employed a range of strategies to promote the organisation, including informing and educating the wider community on social justice issues that affect ATSI peoples.

Furthermore, the main aim of the PR practitioner is to gain consent from the public (Motion and Weaver 2005: 52). In this thesis, participants gained consent from the Aboriginal community by ensuring community input to organisational decision-making and organisational governance structures in recruiting board members representing different families, clans, and the community they served. Claire stated that in order to give a voice to the community it is pivotal to listen and learn from local contexts, which aligns with Dutta (2011), who argues that listening and learning is key in order to communicate social change (Dutta 2011; 2012; 2015). Following this train of thought, it can be argued that participants sought consensus from the community through interpersonal communication via workshops (the advocacy organisation) or informal consultations (the community and social development organisation).

As outlined in this section, participants took on different roles in their engagement with PR-like activities and manoeuvred culturally sensitive environments due to their main stakeholders being ATSI peoples, who are a disadvantaged social group in the Australian context. By drawing on the three theoretical frameworks of participants as cultural intermediaries, change agents and discourse technologists, it was possible to flesh out participants’ personal interests and passion for communicating social change within the communities they serve. These interests and incentives to drive change were key to participants’ PR-like work and must therefore be factored in when understanding their PR perceptions and roles.

**Conclusion**

This chapter specifically explored how participants perceived their working environment by discussing management support of participants’ communicative efforts, the allocation of resources, and levels of integrating PR-like activities into the overall organisational structure. In this regard, participants found that there was a lack of support
from management and board members because they were not aware of the strengths of communications and their crucial role in it. At the same time, participants valued the freedom to develop their own roles and felt that they were part of a community.

As argued in Chapter Four, it also became apparent throughout this chapter that dominant PR theory does not account for the cultural and social contexts that are essential to understand how PR and communication processes work within ACCOs. This was further emphasised in the section on “Communicating Aboriginal Culture”, describing participants’ deeply held beliefs about the importance and role of kinship in communication that must be taken into account when understanding PR perceptions and PR-like activities in ACCOs.

It was also demonstrated how participants were regularly challenged by government policies that continued to negatively affect the ACCOs’ self-governance. Concurrently, it was established that PR could be seen as a vehicle to negotiate these cultural differences and help the ACCOs overcome some of the challenges they face when liaising with government authorities.

The final section scrutinised participants’ perceptions of their roles. It was established that participants were driven towards creating social change through informing and educating the broader community through the promotion of their ACCO’s services, but also providing a voice for members’ needs and political concerns. It was further discussed how PR as a theoretical framework could be used to understand participants’ perceptions of their roles. This was done by applying three theoretical frameworks of cultural intermediary, change agents and discourse technologist that fleshed out participants’ individual roles as their ACCO’s key communicator facilitating and mediating social change.
Chapter Six: Conclusion

This thesis explored ACCO staff’s perceptions of PR, their PR-like activities and roles in the organisation to better understand PR within the realm of Australian Aboriginal organisations. More specifically this thesis considered how ACCO staff communicate with members, key stakeholders, funding bodies and the media, build strategic relationships, represent community interest, and promote the ACCOs’ provision of social services.

The research sample was comprised of six ACCOs located in Perth, Western Australia, from which seven participants were recruited. Participants identified as responsible for their ACCO’s communications and a total of six semi-structured interviews were conducted, and one email correspondence was carried out. The analytical framework drew on qualitative research methods and Indigenous methodologies in order to employ a culturally sensitive research strategy with respect for participants and Aboriginal culture and knowledge.

In the early stages of this thesis, PR was defined as PR-like activities given the majority of participants did not explicitly refer to the term “PR” nor have PR in their position titles. Therefore, the term “PR-like activities” was used to align with participant accounts. Moreover, a range of issues were identified throughout the analysis: PR as marketing, media relations, relationship-building and reactive, tactics and strategies, communicating the Aboriginal way, integrating PR into the organisational structure, lack of resources specifically earmarked for communicative activities, communicating cultural differences, relational working environment, and kinship practices, PR-like roles, and Aboriginal culture and invasion. 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.

In terms of contributions made to existing research, this thesis found that dominant PR literature (e.g. Grunig and Hunt 1984) generally lacks theoretical frameworks that are culturally sensitive and sector-specific to Australian Aboriginal non-profit organisations. In identifying this gap in PR scholarship, this thesis contends that great contributions can be made to the PR literature by paying more attention to PR-like activities within ACCOs given
their important function in providing essential social services to Australia’s most disadvantaged social groups. In the following section, I will elaborate further on these key findings by providing an overview of the chapters.

Thesis Summary

This thesis was introduced with a discussion on the Indigenous sector’s role in providing social services to ATSI peoples, which was followed by a discussion on PR and its crucial role in supporting ACCOs’ social purposes. In doing so, Chapter One foregrounded the issues of situating PR within the context of ACCOs, suggesting that limited research existed on PR within the postcolonial contexts of Australia, which was further elaborated upon in Chapter Two.

Chapter Two established that much theory considers PR as managing communication and fostering relationships between publics and organisations, as opposed to scholarship drawing on sociocultural contexts of PR practice, in which flows of communication are perceived as constructions and products of historical, economic, social and cultural processes. The literature review further established that PR in ACCOs remains a largely unexplored area. For example, little of the academic PR literature comments directly on the interdependency between PR, social change, and Indigenous organisations but often on the connection between organisations and their publics (e.g. Grunig and Hunt 1984; Grunig, Grunig and Dozier 2002; Sriramesh and Vercic 2009). In more recent PR literature, attention is given to the impact PR has on society (Edwards and Hodges 2011), and the ways it actively takes part in shaping public opinion through language use deriving from people’s values, beliefs and norms (Weaver, Motion and Roper 2006). This literature indicates that PR is more than just a practical tool. It can move beyond organisational interests, and potentially facilitate inclusion of those groups in society that are less privileged. On the basis of a lack of researching Indigenous contexts, this thesis aimed to explore how PR is perceived and deployed within Aboriginal organisations. Therefore, this research took on an explorative character, which was further explained in the methodology chapter.
Chapter Three outlined the research design and methodology, and established that combining qualitative research methods and Indigenous methodology provided rich and meaningful insights of participants’ perceptions of PR-like activities within ACCOs. By employing semi-structured interviews it was possible to draw on the perspectives of ACCO staff, who were primarily responsible for communication. Additionally, the qualitative research design was further supplemented with the establishment of an Indigenous Advisory Group, which was formed by people working in the Indigenous sector and Aboriginal cultural contexts.

Chapter Four and Chapter Five presented the analysis and interpretation of participant accounts. These chapters established that ACCO staff employ a variety of PR-like activities through which they connect and engage with members, communities and other stakeholders. In addition, a connection between PR-like activities within ACCOs and social change was found, based on participants’ perceptions of their PR-like activities and roles as driven by their passion and interest in implementing and communicating social change on behalf of the Aboriginal communities that they served.

More specifically, Chapter Four, “Communicative Infrastructures”, mapped out the ACCO staff’s general perceptions of PR as marketing, media relations, relationship-building, and reactive. The reactionary approach to PR-like activities was more evident in those ACCOs with fewer resources allocated to communication. In addition, it was argued that dominant PR theory is less adaptable to the ACCO working environment because PR-like activities within ACCOs tend to be less formalised, with tasks being dealt with by different people and in an extemporary manner due to budget constraints, and in accordance with the demands and norms of Aboriginal culture. Following this, participants’ use of PR strategies and PR-like tactics was outlined that altogether comprise the ACCOs’ communicative infrastructures. In doing so, it was shown that participants employed various tactics including, but not limited to, managing social media accounts like Facebook and Twitter, updating information on the website, writing newsletters and media releases, and making sure that the communication aligned with the ACCOs’ brands and social purposes.

One of the key findings was the Aboriginal way, identifying that relationship-building and respecting Aboriginal cultural protocols are key to the ACCOs’ ways of engaging
stakeholders. The Aboriginal way offers a unique perspective on PR within ACCOs by highlighting the importance of Aboriginal kinship systems embedded in processes of fostering personal relationships, and being responsible for one another; looking out for “one’s mob” was found as key to the participants. Overall, Chapter Four established that ACCO staff employ various tactics and strategies, but are carrying out PR-like activities in less structured and under-resourced environments.

Chapter Five, “Working within ACCOs”, outlined participants’ working environment including integration of PR, relationships between colleagues and organisational culture, and external constraints, such as the limited access to communicative resources. The chapter found that ACCOs navigate structural constraints, particularly those induced by government. For instance, the majority of participants were required to go through time-consuming approval processes to receive funding. Another constraint was that management and board members did not place communication on equal footing with other areas of the ACCOs’ operations, showing that PR is yet to be identified as a strategic area to be allocated more resources.

Expanding on elements of the Aboriginal way, as outlined in Chapter Four, Chapter Five further analysed the relationship among colleagues and community members, concluding that there was a family-oriented organisational culture. This experience of being part of a closely-knit community was not only important in terms of creating a sense of belonging, but appeared as essential to working within ACCOs.

The chapter concluded with a section around participants’ perception of their roles as the ACCOs’ key communicators. It was shown how participants mediated organisational, community, and personal interests, as well as negotiated views of Aboriginal culture and ATSI peoples through liaison with the media and government representatives. More importantly, participants were passionate about the organisations and the communities they served, revealed by their drive to communicate social change. Therefore, it was concluded that participants’ PR-like activity could be seen as a means of giving voice to ATSI peoples.
**Implications for Further Research**

Traditionally, PR has been researched, theorised and practised from an organisational perspective, foregrounding the perception of PR as predominantly being an instrument of governments and corporations. In contrast to this tendency within research of overlooking Indigenous organisations in particular, a number of findings of this research could be examined further to develop a more in-depth understanding of the connection between PR, ATSI communities, and the broader Australian society, by scrutinising the ways Aboriginal non-profit organisations solve their day-to-day tasks of communication.

As this thesis suggests, PR-like activities harness great opportunities for ACCOs to better communicate with stakeholders, funding bodies, and reach organisational goals. Therefore, a closer examination of ATSI organisations’ stakeholder relations and processes of employing strategic communications is needed. In terms of researching the role of PR-like practitioners specifically in postcolonial contexts it is also beneficial to further situate the profession of PR within the Indigenous sector, as well as to recognise the social contributions made by individual PR(-like) practitioners. Also, research in regional-based ACCOs would further contribute to establishing diverse perceptions of PR practice, as well as supplement this research sample of ACCOs based in the metropolitan areas of Perth.

There is significant value in studying PR-like activities in Australian ACCOs given the Indigenous sector’s essential role in the provision of social services for ATSI peoples that governments and other institutions are unable to do. However, as this thesis maintains, ACCOs need communicative resources to do so. For example, the participants of this thesis believed they could do much more if they had the resources available to develop their communicative infrastructures, which was a view repeated throughout the interviews. Therefore, further research identifying how to overcome this lack of resources may help bring the issue to the attention of governments both at state and federal levels. In addition, researching PR’s benefits in terms of raising funds for the organisation through campaigning, using social media, or establishing strategic partnerships would contribute to a conversation on how ACCOs can maintain financial sustainability.

A replication of this research into other sectors and organisations engaging with ATSI publics, such as Indigenous Affairs, CentreLink, and other essential social service providers would be valuable in terms of improving community consultations carried out within the
social sector. Likewise, an international comparative study of practitioners working within the Indigenous sectors in various postcolonial societies could be a means of mobilising a network of scholars working in these unique realms of PR.

Furthermore, acknowledging the importance of the diverse Aboriginal cultures and knowledges can enlighten the dominant Western approaches to PR theory and practice, by providing a deeper understanding of the importance of personal relationships and meaningful communicative activities that are key to Aboriginal cultural protocols. This knowledge has the potential to improve current consultation processes that are continuously being carried out by Australian governments as part of engaging the Aboriginal community. However, these processes at their core draw on the more traditional and symmetrical ways of communicating lacking the acceptance of unequal relationships that must be addressed in order to create meaningful dialogue with ATSI communities. Lastly, research employing Indigenous methodologies can be further explored to develop more culturally sensitive research within the discipline of PR.

An Indigenous Perspective on PR

Drawing on Indigenous methodologies, this research accepted its positioning within a broader social context of invasion and colonisation. Therefore, in viewing PR as an occupation, and a profession, but also as a cultural practice (Sriramesh and Verčič 2012: 1), this thesis provided a unique contribution to the existing body of PR knowledge both in practice as well as in theory, informing new understandings of PR that is important in order to align PR scholarship with a contemporary ever-changing world. Today, PR practice emerges in multiple, fluid, ways, and within diverse cultural contexts. Therefore, and as this thesis contends, a one-size-fits-all PR theory is neither possible nor desirable in the context of ACCOs. Rather, a unique Aboriginal perspective on PR can contribute to the current push in PR scholarship towards an emerging radical PR literature (Edwards and Hodges 2011); Realigning PR’s focus is necessary if PR scholars wish to promote meaningful social change and making real differences in our communities. This thesis prompts PR
scholars to enter the political landscape and encourage social inclusion of Indigenous minorities.

In conclusion, this thesis sought to voice what is lacking: an Australian Aboriginal perspective on PR. In alignment with Dutta and Pal (2011), this thesis contends that research must “decolonise the mind at political, economic and cultural levels to achieve a fair and just world” (Dutta and Pal 2011: 198). Following this view, scholars and practitioners must develop and apply diverse perspectives to understanding and practising PR in order to challenge dominant homogenising approaches to PR practice. As this thesis testifies, much value is to be found in exploring the relationship between PR, social change and ACCOs. However, more research on this topic is warranted in order to continue this conversation on communicating social change, for the betterment of ATSI peoples of Australia and Indigenous peoples worldwide.
Appendices

A: Interview Guide
B: Participant Backgrounds
C: Organisation Recruitment Criteria
D: List of organisations
E: Phone Script
F: Indigenous Advisory Group
G: Information Letter
H: Participant Consent Form
I: Mini Survey
J: Mini Survey Consent Form
Appendix A: Interview Guide

Question 1 - Background

1. To start with, could you share something about yourself and how you got involved with [organisation’s name]?
2. What was your previous work experience before you had this job?

Question 2 – Organisational structure (the role of communications)

3. When you came to work here, how would describe the role of communications? What about resources for communications?
4. Does the board/committee support you in your role?

Question 3 – Communicating with stakeholders and community members

5. What is [organisation’s name] philosophy?
6. Do you have a mission statement? Are you committed to that when communicating?
7. How do you get the messages ‘out there’?
8. Who are your main target audiences/stakeholders?
9. What are your key messages?
10. What do you think are the main challenges when communicating with your community members/stakeholders/partners?

Question 4 – Working non-profit

11. Why do you work for a non-profit organisation?
12. In what ways do you communicate to reflect that on a daily basis?
13. What differences have you found when working for an Aboriginal organisation compared to a non-Aboriginal organisation?
14. Do you consider cultural sensitivities when communicating? And how?

Question 5

15. How would you describe the value of communications to [organisation’s name]?
16. Ideally, how would [name of organisation] manage its communications? And what would the ideal outcomes be of such communications activities?
17. How would you describe public relations?
### Appendix B: Participant Backgrounds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants pseudonyms</th>
<th>Job title</th>
<th>Educational background</th>
<th>Experience working in current organisation (years)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Claire</td>
<td>Media Officer</td>
<td>Diploma in Journalism and Associate Diploma in Media Studies and Aboriginal and Intercultural Studies</td>
<td>+5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ella</td>
<td>Founder and Director</td>
<td>Associate Diploma in Applied Science, BAppSc, MSc, PhD</td>
<td>+5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>Master of Arts (Social Sciences) Master of Arts (Communication and Cultural Studies)</td>
<td>Under 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maya</td>
<td>Marketing Manager</td>
<td>Bachelor of Marketing and the Media Advanced Diploma in Film and Television Certificate IV in Broadcast Presentation</td>
<td>+5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>E-marketing and Accounts Officer</td>
<td>Bachelor of Communications and Politics</td>
<td>3-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melissa</td>
<td>Communications Consultant</td>
<td>Diploma of Public Relations, Business and Management Certificate II in Indigenous Leadership 12 years experience in Indigenous Affairs</td>
<td>Under 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C: Organisation Recruitment Criteria

This thesis seeks to recruit participants that represent as many perspectives as possible of people currently working in Aboriginal not-for-profit organisations in Western Australia. Therefore, a list of criteria was developed to find suitable organisations that could help recruit interview participants. The sample was narrowed down to include not-for-profit organisations that had incorporated with the Corporation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Act (CATSI Act) and those registered as charities according to the Australian Charities and Non-profit Commission (ACNC). Below are excerpts from the CATSI Act and ACNC to provide an overview of the kinds of organisations involved with this research.

Excerpt from Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC)

Definition of a not-for-profit organisation

Generally, a not-for-profit is an organisation that does not operate for the profit, personal gain or other benefit of particular people (for example, its members, the people who run it or their friends or relatives). The definition of not-for-profit applies both while the organisation is operating and if it ‘winds up’ (closes down).

(Information derived from acnc.gov.au 25th August 2.34pm)

Excerpt from CATSI Act

- Corporations registered under the CATSI Act are regulated by the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations. The Registrar is an independent office holder and is supported by the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations (ORIC).
- The CATSI Act is a Commonwealth law that is a special measure for the benefit of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Membership

- The members own the corporation.
- There must be at least five members (unless the Registrar approves a smaller number). There is no limit on the number of members.
- Depending on the corporation’s rule book, members: 1) must be at least 15 years of
age, 2) must be Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, 3) won’t be liable for the debts of the corporation.

● The corporation may have other rules on membership — for example, living in a particular Indigenous community.

**Directors**

● The minimum number of directors is three and the maximum number is 12. Corporations can apply to the Registrar for an exemption if they want more than 12 directors.

● Corporations can decide in their rule book to allow people who are not members to be directors. However, the majority of directors must: 1) be Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, 2) be members of the corporation, and 3) not be employees of the corporation.

Appendix D: List of Organisations

The participating ACCOs are listed first followed by eight other organisations that declined to participate in this research. The organisations were selected on the basis of the type of industry within which they operate, number of communications channels, size (employees) and location in Western Australia. The following sources were used to narrow down the selection criteria: case studies deriving from ‘Reconciliation Australia Indigenous Governance Tool Kit’, RUAH’s Aboriginal Resource Directory, and ORIC’s register. However, most of the organisations were not registered with ORIC. According to ORIC’s online register, there should be 949 incorporated Indigenous organisations in WA.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Web</th>
<th>FB (Likes)</th>
<th>Twitter (followers)</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Arts</td>
<td>Culture and Arts</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>6,054</td>
<td>1,117</td>
<td>LinkedIn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Social services</td>
<td>Social Service</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>1,037</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Community and social development</td>
<td>Health</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>522</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Advocacy</td>
<td>Native Title/Advocacy</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>2,401</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>LinkedIn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Media</td>
<td>Culture and Arts</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>10,079</td>
<td>372</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Advocacy and legal services</td>
<td>Social Service</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 A</td>
<td>Health</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>608</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 B</td>
<td>Employment/Training</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>LinkedIn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 C</td>
<td>Health</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Google+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 D</td>
<td>Social Service/Training</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>566</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 E</td>
<td>Community Service</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 F</td>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>1,100</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>LinkedIn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 G</td>
<td>Training, Employment Service</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>297</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>LinkedIn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 H</td>
<td>community/health</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix E: Phone Script

“Hi, I’m a research student at Murdoch University writing my masters thesis on public relations in Aboriginal not-for-profit organisations. Would you be able to assist me with finding someone from your organisation whom I can speak with about the opportunity of having your organisation involved with my research?”

If the answer is ‘yes’:

“I’m an international student from Denmark doing my Masters at Murdoch University. I completed a 1-year Diploma in public relations and progressed with doing a Masters in Research.

In my thesis I’ve set out to explore the role of public relations in Aboriginal not-for-profit organisations, because it is an area that there is little information about, and I think it is an important sector to understand better with special focus on public relations, for instance, I would like to know more about how public relations can benefit our community and lead social change.

To be successful I will need to involve a couple of organisations that are interested in participating. That’s why I’m contacting you.

I would like to do interviews with someone in your organisation, who is responsible for communicating with your community members.

If you think the research project sounds interesting, I would like to send a bit more background information about my research. We could then meet to further discuss how you would like to be involved.

Would that be okay?

If yes...

“I appreciate your support. Thank you and I’ll send you an email with more information.”
If the answer is ‘no’:

“Thank you for your time. Despite that you’re not able to participate I would still like to invite you to receive my report. Would you be interested?”

If yes...

“What email address do you prefer I use?”

“Thank you for taking time off. If you or your colleagues would like to know more please feel free to contact me. I will send my contact details to the email provided. Have a nice day.”
**Appendix F: Indigenous Advisory Group Profiles**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cassandra Ryder</td>
<td>Cassandra is the previous Manager of Langford Aboriginal Association with five years experience working in the non-profit sector.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick Abraham</td>
<td>Nick is the Regional Development Coordinator at the South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council (SWALSC) and sits on the board for the newly established Aboriginal non-profit organisation Noongar Institute Western Australia (NIWA).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verity Leach</td>
<td>Founder of Ethical Communications and experienced in delivering public relations programs for Aboriginal organisations and communities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix G: Information Letter

Dear,

I invite you to participate in a research study looking at how Aboriginal community-controlled not-for-profit organisations communicate with their members, and in particular how their use of public relations can benefit the broader community. This study is part of my Master Degree in Public Relations, supervised by Dr Ingrid Richardson and Dr Rhonda Marriott at Murdoch University.

If you consent to take part in the research, it is important that you understand the purpose of the study. Feel free to ask any questions you may have, and make sure that all your questions have been answered to your satisfaction before you agree to participate.

What the study involves
If you wish to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete the following tasks:
- Complete an online mini survey that asks about your work experiences.
- To volunteer for one interview, or possibly a follow-up interview if time allows, which will supplement the mini survey and allow for a more in-depth conversation.

It is estimated that the survey will take approximately 10 minutes and the interviews will have the duration between 30 to 60 minutes.

Benefits of the study
The knowledge gained from your participation may help others in the future especially those people working within non-profit organisations, in the field of public relations, or communications in general.

If you choose to participate, I will email you the following: a full transcript of the interview, summary of my findings, the final report, or meet with you in person to discuss the findings. You can expect to receive the report after my examination end of February 2016.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal from the Study
Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw without discrimination or prejudice. All information is treated as confidential and no names or other details that may have identified you will be used in any publication arising from the research. If you withdraw, all information you have provided will be destroyed. However, there will be a deadline for withdrawal and a written report will be submitted. The deadline for withdrawal will be Friday 20th November 2015.

There are no specific risks anticipated with participation in this study. If you have any questions about the study please feel free to contact either myself on mobile 0409 450 091, or my supervisors, Ingrid, l Richardson@murdoch.edu.au, or Rhonda, r.marriott@murdoch.edu.au. My supervisors and I are happy to discuss any concerns or interests you may have about this study.

Thank you for your assistance and support of this research project.

Sincerely,

Dr Ingrid Richardson, Dr Rhonda Marriott & Natasha Peterson

This study has been approved by the Murdoch University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval 2014/074). If you have any reservation or complaint about the ethical conduct of this research, and wish to talk with an independent person, you may contact Murdoch University’s Research Ethics Office (Tel. 08 6560 or email ethics@murdoch.edu.au). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.
Appendix H: Participant Consent

Participant Consent

I have read the Information Letter and Research Summary, which explain the nature of the research and the possible risks, as well as outline the scope of the research. The information has been explained to me and all my questions have been satisfactorily answered.

I am happy to be interviewed and for the interview to be audio recorded as part of this research.

I understand that I do not have to answer particular questions if I do not want to and that I can withdraw at any time without needing to give a reason and without consequences to myself.

I acknowledge that there will be a deadline for withdrawal from the study given a written report will be submitted. The deadline for withdrawal will be Wednesday 29th November 2015.

I agree that research data from the results of the study may be published provided my name or any identifying details are not used.

I understand that all information provided by me is treated as confidential and will not be released by the researcher to a third party unless required to do so by law.

Participant’s name: ____________________________

Signature of Participant: ____________________________ Date: ______/______/______

I confirm that I have provided the Information Letter concerning this study to the above participant; I have explained the study and have answered all questions asked of me.

Signature of researcher: ____________________________ Date: ______/______/______
Appendix I: Mini Survey

Online Mini Survey ‘9 Quick Questions’

Participant Consent

I have read the Information Letter and Research Summary outlining the scope of the research. Any questions I have about the research have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree that by submitting this mini survey I give my consent for the results to be used in the research.

I am aware that this survey is anonymous and no personal details will be disclosed. I know that I may change my mind, withdraw my consent, and stop participating at any time; and I acknowledge that there will be a deadline for withdrawal given a written report will be submitted. The deadline for withdrawal will be Thursday 1st October 2015.

I understand that all information provided is treated as confidential by the researcher and will not be released to a third party unless required to do so by law.

I understand that the findings of this research may be published and that no information, which can specifically identify me will be published.

Me (Contact Details)

- Organisation (optional)
- Job Title
- Education and Training

My experiences working in communications [tick box]

18. How many years have you worked in this organisation? (Please tick the boxes)

- Under a year (<1)
- 1-2 years
- 2-5 years
- 5+ years

19. What does your role involve? (Please tick the boxes)
• Event management
• Fundraising
• Developing organisational strategies
• Graphic design or liaison with graphic designers
• Internal communications (training, newsletters)
• Liaising with institutions and other organisations
• Media relations
• Press Conferences
• Community relations
• Campaign management
• Volunteer liaison
• Other

20. Have you worked in such role(s) previously?
(Please tick the boxes)
• Yes
• No

21. Please try to map out the different people or groups that you communicate with on a regular basis (e.g. the media, local journalists, community members etc.)

My experience with working for an Indigenous not-for-profit organisation [short answer]

22. Do you think working for an Indigenous not-for-profit organisation is different from other organisations that you have worked with previously?
• If yes, please try to explain how.

My job [tick box]

23. What channels do you find most useful when trying to reach your different community members/stakeholders?
(Please tick the boxes)

• Writing media releases/press releases
• Organising campaigns
• Organising events
• Phone calls
• Face-to-face communications
• Emailing
• Traditional Promotional material (posters, flyers etc.)
• Newsletters
24. How would you explain a ‘normal’ day at work? Feel free to explain chronologically how a usual day at work would be for you e.g. ‘8-9am: I update our Facebook page’ or ‘I organise event posters on average twice a month’ etc. (generally speaking try to explain what you might be doing in these times?)

- Morning
- Mid-morning
- Lunch
- Early afternoon

My colleagues and networks [short answer]

25. What people or other organisations do you work closely with as part of doing your daily tasks?

26. How do you promote your organisation’s services? (E.g. this could include your own friends when promoting events via social media)

Would you be willing to be contacted for an interview?

- Yes. I’m interested in setting up a time to be interviewed. Here are my contact details:
- Maybe. Please send me more information.
- Unfortunately, I will not be able to attend an interview, but would like to send through some information via email.
- No thank you.

Thank you for your participation.
Appendix J: Mini Survey Consent Form

Participant Consent

I have read the Information Letter and Research Summary about the scope of this research. Any questions I have about the research process have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree that by submitting the mini survey I give my consent for the results to be used in the research.

I am aware that this survey is anonymous and no personal details are being collected or used. I know that I may change my mind, withdraw my consent, and stop participating at any time, and I acknowledge that there will be a deadline for withdrawal given a written report will be submitted. The deadline for withdrawal will be Thursday 1st October 2016.

I understand that all information provided is treated as confidential by the researcher and will not be released to a third party unless required to do so by law.

I understand that the findings of this study may be published and that no information, which can specifically identify me will be published.

Participant's name: ________________________

Signature of Participant: ____________________ Date: ____________

I confirm that I have provided the Information Letter concerning this study to the above participant, I have explained the study and have answered all questions asked of me.

Signature of researcher: ____________________ Date: ____________
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