

From the United States to Western Australia: How Black Lives Matter inspired a local social movement

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When in May 2020 live footage surfaced of an African American man gasping for air whilst being knelt on by a police officer, the world erupted with anger, demanding black voices to be heard. Black Lives Matter (BLM) is a decentralised social and political movement, dedicated to fighting racism, anti-black violence and police brutality. Created in 2013 as #BlackLivesMatter, it was arguably George Floyd's death in police custody that thrust the movement and its messages into the international spotlight, resulting in large demonstrations across the globe, sweeping beyond its North American origin.

The events of mid-2020 inspired communities around the world to adopt the core messages of BLM, whilst contextualising and adapting the movement itself to reflect local contexts and challenges. Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have traditionally lacked a voice and visibility of culturally specific concerns and challenges in mainstream Australian society. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are one of the most incarcerated populations in the world and Indigenous Australian children represent 65% of the incarcerated children population. BLM provided a platform to have previously silenced voices heard and issues amplified.

In Perth, Western Australia, the momentum of BLM led to a series of demonstrations being held in the city's central business district, with activists standing in solidarity with the global social movement, while also emphasising the experiences of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. On 12 June 2020, over 8,000 people mobilised and took to the streets, which was one of the largest mass demonstrations in Perth's history, whilst largely maintaining distancing requirements imposed by the global pandemic.

Despite its impact in other countries, there is a lack of scholarly insight into BLM beyond the US and this social movement from an Australian perspective remains entirely absent from public relations (PR) literature. This study addresses the current gap in PR activist communication literature through a single in-depth case study (Yin 2009) of the BLM social movement in Perth, focusing on insights gained by activists and supported by semi-structured interviews and media analysis, with a particular emphasis on attendance at the 2020 protests.

Drawing on Bourdieu's (1997) notion of social capital, as well as Putnam's (2002) conception of bonding and bridging social capital, this study emphasises that while weak (bridging) ties are useful for raising awareness of an issue in a social movement, strong (bonding) relationships are necessary for retaining sources and thus, sustaining the movement over time. This study explores the use of collective action frames to increase bridging social capital, which mobilised a large number of people in support of BLM in 2020.

The author argues that public relations scholarship should incorporate social movement theory in order to explore activism beyond the corporate-centric paradigm and empower voices that are rarely heard. Despite its relevance to activist communication, surprisingly few public relations scholars have integrated social movement literature in their studies (see, for example, Karagianni and Cornelissen 2006; Wolf 2013; Hon 2016).

While several public relations scholars (see, for example, Sommerfeldt and Yang 2017, 2019; Xiong, Cho, and Boatwright 2019) have examined social movement organisations (SMOs), these arguably reflect the structure of for-profit organisations, as they have regular funding and a core leadership team. Meanwhile, social movement communities (SMCs) broadly encompass SMOs, individual actors, formal and informal groups and established organisations, hence reflecting the fluidity of social movements and highlighting that no single group can claim to represent a movement in its entirety. Therefore, the author seeks to encourage public relations scholarship to look beyond the organisational structures that it is familiar with and instead, explore social movement (communities) to understand the practice's role in power struggles and social change, thereby 'speaking up and speaking out' for the voices that are rarely heard in our society.