

The world's 'happiest' animal or voiceless stakeholder? A critical analysis of the #quokkaselfie Tourism Western Australia campaign

In recent years, the importance of user generated content, including 'selfies', for the promotion of destinations and organisations has been noted in tourism, communication and public relations literature and the popular press (see, for example, Allegui & Breslow, 2016; Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2015; Haddouche & Salomone, 2015; Kirkpatrick, 2014).

The 'quokka selfie' has become synonymous with Rottnest, a tourism destination and A class reserve, 19 kilometres off the coast of Western Australia (WA). Enticing international celebrities to the island to consequently share an Instagram selfie next to a quokka, frequently referred to as the 'world's happiest animal', has been a key tourism communication strategy of the WA State Government. However, even though the quokka may be a 'cute' and photogenic Australian icon, it is also a native marsupial that has been listed as vulnerable in accordance with the IUCN criteria (Corvo, 2021).

At its core, public relations seeks to identify and manage the different – often competing - needs, interests, perspectives and values of various stakeholders. However, despite the dominant role of stakeholder theory in public relations scholarship to date, the definition of 'stakeholder' has largely remained limited to *human* stakeholders. In the context of an increased focus on sustainability and business ethics, some theorists have argued that stakeholder theory should be extended to the environment, including animals (see Driscoll & Starick, 2004; Lischinsky, 2015; Gauthier, 2018). This case study seeks to explore the limitations of the traditional application of stakeholder theory in public relations scholarship within the context of a commercial campaign, focussed on a voiceless animal that has been co-opted as 'unique selling proposition'.

The study uses a case study approach (Yin, 2009; Gummesson 2017) drawing on interviews with key stakeholders - including volunteers, small business operators and government representatives- field notes, media coverage, social media posts and digital analytics to explore what has been labelled the 'quokka craze'. Using a qualitative research methodology, data was analysed using an iterative approach, seeking to provide a rich account of the network of relationships between events and factors (Gummesson, 2017).

Capitalising on the #quokkaselfie craze has resulted in extensive social and consequent traditional media coverage for the destination and Tourism WA and, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and arguably contributed to increased international visitor numbers to the island (see 'Another new record for Rottnest, visitors to WA reach all time high', 2019). Relevant to the conference's theme, the authors question the ethics of the use and possible exploitation of the 'voiceless' (in this case quokkas) to fulfil promotional public relations goals, without consideration of long-term environmental and societal impacts. The authors argue that for a holistic approach to public relations, when setting objectives and measurement metrics, practitioners need to consider and reflect societal and conservation issues, rather than take a purely economic approach.

In exploring the evolution of the #quokkaselfie phenomenon, driven by concerted efforts of the West Australian government, this paper considers the role of non-human stakeholders, such as animals and the environment. In doing so the authors seek to initiate a discussion about the role of public relations in society, challenging the prioritisation of short-term commercial interests to the potential detriment of voiceless 'stakeholders' as the centre of communication campaigns.

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