

# **Aboriginal Australian Communities bolster their culture and identity through Facebook.**

## **Abstract**

Aboriginal Australian have prominently adopted the Facebook platform which came out with new features to connect more users with their communities. This paper focuses on how Facebook functions as a defensive media mechanism against Aboriginal discrimination in Australia. It explores the shift of cultural practices from physical to online due to existing barriers, the tools that individuals in the Aboriginal communities are using to gain followers in both their social and political campaigns. It also examines how Aboriginal communities are using Facebook to voice out their issues which are often held in contempt by the mainstream media.

**Keywords:** #aboriginal, #aboriginalaustralians #aboriginalempowerment #aboriginalactivism #culturalconnection #empowerment #facebookcommunities #identity #indigenousempowerment #onlineidentity

## **Introduction**

In a world where technology and the internet are becoming more accessible, communities are starting to use social media to their advantage. Social media platforms like Facebook have defied the 'old' mainstream media as it disregards any social discriminations made by the society. The Aboriginal Australian communities have endured concerning social injustice over the past hundred years. These issues further highlight the importance of social media in their communities. Antonia (2013) describes the Australian Aboriginals as a community limited to technology due to financial difficulties. Besides, Watson (2015) states less than 50% of people living in remote communities have access to own technological devices. However, the social media usage amongst the Aboriginal Australians have been increasing. Carlson et al. (2015) demonstrate more than 50% of the remote communities being active users on online platforms. Although the community has been almost unnoticeable through the mainstream media, they have been forced to use Facebook to voice out their issues. Facebook helped the aboriginal community to cherish their culture and identity bypassing any existing obstacles occurred by nature or mainstream media. Bearing upon, the Aboriginal Australian

communities adopted Facebook as it helps 1) isolated individuals to connect with their community, 2) to regain their social public sphere, 3) blend-in politics to their community. The first part of the paper explores how the Aboriginal culture and identity are now being shaped on Facebook in relation to Kendall's theory on community and Lumby's Aboriginal interaction. The second part adheres on how the community are using Facebook to expose their identity, obeying Oliver and Nguyen's and Carlson et al.'s notion of online activity. The last part illustrates the manifestation of online activism in the Aboriginal community.

### **Cultural and Identity transmission through Facebook**

Facebook can be seen as a channel to connect culture and identity with its communities. Despite living as free citizens in a country, the Aboriginal Australians often find themselves isolated as most of them live in remote areas from each other or some of them left for a life abroad. Nowadays the community can easily create their own groups via Facebook, drawing near their culture and identity. Kendall (2011) states that the definition varies from community to community, but there exist some similarities between them. Amongst a group of people, feeling of support, empathy, history, norms and shared values are common between each other, and these can be found in Facebook Aboriginal groups (Kendall, 2011; Petray, 2015; Oliver & Nguyen, 2017). For instance, those groups can be various "aboriginal dating" pages, it helps the community find their match according to their belief and history, "the Tasmanian aboriginal" group, whom their ancestors come from the Tasmanian region can connect and bond as a family. Communities within Facebook are able to share their intimacy and feelings with individuals they feel close to, as most of them have a connection with each other. Anchoring to the statement that Aboriginal Australians are given the freedom of interaction with people they choose to connect (Lumby, 2010; Petray, 2011; Oliver & Nguyen, 2017). These features may underline circumstances that aboriginal people are still suffering from their past. With the offered Facebook features, a community can react, share or comment on posts. For instance, the Aboriginal Australians have adapted their culture to these features by practising their "sorry business" online. The "sorry business" practise occurs when there is death in a family. Other acquaintances may be informed through the platform and vice versa. Besides, the community engages by means of offering condolences and grieving support to the family online itself. Another example, the Aboriginal community could be re-creating their third space which they had before the colonisation era.

The third space could be defined as the metaphorical place created to learn specific belief or values (Potter & McDougall, 2017). Aboriginal communities have always supported equality in their small group during pre-colonisation (Avison & Meadows, 2000). In addition, Fraser (1993) mentioned that public spheres can be different from each other. Converging to the Aboriginal public sphere, individuals in the lower hierarchy, mainly young ones and women are given the chance to express themselves in their local groups. In contrast to Habermas (1974), who describes the public sphere as a place where individuals can raise their point of view on political structures. The Aboriginal Australian third space involves speaking in native language and receiving cultural education. Individuals are known to transmit the notion of Aboriginality through dialogues to each other. Through Facebook groups and messaging, an individual can be helped to form his/her native identity by simply interacting with other members, by raising discussions or consuming contents related to the subject. Having an identity online is seen as having the freedom, or choice over one's life. This depicts how Aboriginals have freed themselves from the mainstream media.

### **Aboriginal public sphere on Facebook.**

Facebook has helped communities like the Aboriginal Australians to voice out their online presence, on a global level. Online communities are provided with various tools to connect and communicate to the general public. As per Oliver & Nguyen (2017) tools such as live broadcast, Hashtags, sharing contents and posting opinions are some features that are provided. Individuals in the Aboriginal communities have always been good at listening to each other and expressing their opinions. Through Facebook they are empowered to share their culture, as well as throwing debatable solutions and discussing their backgrounds with non-Aboriginal people. These enable the community to regain their voice that have been silenced in the past (Meadows & Avison, 2000; Carlson et al., 2015). Using Hashtags on Facebook, Indigenous communities have made successful online campaigns, stacking up thousand posts on the Facebook database. Some examples of the popular Hashtags could be #aboriginal, #aboriginaldad #torrestrait. On these posts, aboriginal people share contents linked with their pride, social issues, culture, lifestyle, and artworks. With the hashtags feature, the community may expose misinterpreted messages which the mainstream media has conveyed over the past years. Specifically showcasing their authentic standard of living on Facebook will educate other communities on aboriginal culture. In addition, this will build

a cluster against all attacks targeting the Aboriginal communities. When more and more non-Aboriginal communities are getting educated on the topic, they will be able to discern the right direction and support the victims with campaigns. Significantly opposing movements will become hesitant to attack the Aboriginal communities through shame or any sort of white domination behaviours. As per Carlson et al. (2015), Aboriginal communities are also attacked through the cyberspace, meaning Facebook could be used as a tool further eradicate the community. Several posts have been targeting the Aboriginal community. An example can be the Bill Leak cartoon, the image portrayed the Aboriginal fathers as not being compassionate for their relatives. This image was said to be stereotyped by the white domination incurring shame and trauma to the Aboriginal fathers. This image was quickly repressed by mostly fathers of the Aboriginal community, taking pictures with their sons, showing a contradictory reality. Many shared their concerns with quotations, Hashtags representing they stand with the Aboriginal community and against racism in the country. This is known as “shared recognition”, described as an act of solidarity, displaying anger and frustration amongst the Aboriginal community when they are targeted with traumatic colonial events in a public sphere (Carlson et al., 2017). The “shared recognition” is known to help eradicate racism, understanding the opposition will still come up with traumatic positions against the community. Having an account on social media is not only about having access to information but also being part to contribute to a community. With Facebook, Aboriginal Australians are not only empowered but can also educate non-Aboriginals about their community, the optimal way to fight against racism. Through their posts, they find a voice and expose sufferings to a wider community, but also fight for their rights in their country.

### **Aboriginal Activism on Facebook**

Aboriginal Australians have been encouraged to have in-community conversation and widen their speech to the public sphere through basic forms of activism via Facebook. The platform can be the vehicle that draws against Aboriginal politics; however, it can also bring possible changes in their favour if the Aboriginal community use it to their advantage. These can be done simply by supporting causes and promoting campaigns for political organisations, which lower the barriers into activism (Petray, 2015; Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2016). Sharing political issues and current events on Facebook generates a specific algorithm to reveal fresh news when users scroll the “news feed”. The aboriginal activist leader, Gary

Foley uses social media to notify the public about politics and the society (Petray, 2011; Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2016). On the mainstream media, non-Aboriginal and government perspectives have always been favoured in comparison to Aboriginal perspectives, known to be ignored or excluded. An example could be foggy information communicated on the aboriginal detainee's death fact (Bacon, 2005; Fforde et al., 2013). Aboriginal activism is now actively fighting for their rights and shedding light on injustice faced through Facebook and the social media. Dussart (2006), argues that platforms such as Facebook could be a challenge to the old mainstream media and the State which still favours "colonialism". In terms of the Aboriginal Death fact suppressed by the media, the structure can be altered through organised groups and movements formed on online platforms. When Facebook users follow groups like "Lidia Thorpe", an aboriginal senator in Victoria, Australia or "Stop Aboriginal Deaths in Custody" signifies inactive participation. Rice et al. (2016), suggests that through Facebook, Aboriginals Australians can have the opportunity to engage in civic activities and have the ambition to contribute to the country's politics without falling in any barrier whether racially, socially, geographically or economically. An example could be the movement "Justice for Walker", Walker aged 19-year-old of the Yuendumu community was murdered at his home by a police officer (Roberts, 2019). Right after the assassination, a public page was created on Facebook, generating nearly 10,000 followers on the platform. The page shared posters, videos and updates on crime case, obviously the page has encountered some racist comments and was hacked. Through the Facebook page, the movement raised more than \$350,000 in donation from an Aboriginal council in the centre of Australia (Roberts, 2019) and many Aboriginal Australian also contributed their support as allies or being advocates for the young man. With regards to Facebook, it has brought like-minded people which includes non-Aboriginal Australians collectively supporting the community and wiping off discrimination, injustice and racism in their society.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, having a limited access to Facebook due to location and economic issues, Aboriginal Australian have still persevered to raise their online presence. With the platform, they were able to connect with their community disregarding their location, mainly remote areas. Aboriginal Australians have adopted to practice their rituals and form their identity via Facebook while most of them are isolated. Not only were they participating in their own

aboriginal community, but they were also able to voice out in the public sphere, exposing their identity and culture to non-Aboriginal people. Known as a population under threat of eradication in Australia due to their ethnicity, they are currently fighting against white domination. With Facebook, the community can challenge the mainstream media and even participate in activism and politics. Facebook is seen as a tool that can change the power dynamics making every citizen equal in the Australian system. The Aboriginal Australian community is a promising example how Facebook is changing the society.

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