"One last climb": examining the language surrounding the closure of Uluru to climbers and implications for sustainable tourism (iCCCC & APPRREN)

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Located in the centre of the Australian continent, Uluru is a large, UNESCO Wold Heritage listed sandstone rock formation. It is a major drawcard for domestic and international tourists, attracting more than 300,000 visitors per year (Kwan, 2019). A substantial number of visitors choose to climb the giant monolith. Hence, the decision to permanently close the site to climbers from 26th October 2019 onwards has been met with mixed responses. The local Anangu people, the traditional owners of Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, have historically requested visitors to abstain from climbing the 348m rock formation, citing cultural reasons, as well as welfare concerns for visitors to their land (Since the 1950s at least 36 people have died while climbing Uluru). Uluru is a deeply spiritual and sacred place for the Anangu people. For them, every cave, feature and crevice of the formation has its own meaning (Parks Australia, n.d.). Australia proudly refers to itself as a multicultural society (Department of Home Affairs 2016), however, some cultures are more celebrated than others. Whilst overseas the notion of Aboriginal dreamtime is commonly romanticised; locally a disparity between the health, education, employment and life expectancy outcomes of indigenous and non-Indigenou Australians remains (Austalians Together, n.d.). Australia's First Nations people continue to face structural barriers to political participation. Hence, the closure of the Uluru Climb has been widely hailed a triumph for the traditional owners and sustainable tourism, especially given that the climb was originally set up without consultation of the traditional owners.

However, the closure has also been met with fierce criticism, citing restricted access to a cultural treasure. In the short term, the imminent closure of the climb has resulted in a rush of visitors, as thousands scramble to embrace their last chance to scale the monolith. However, critics predict a negative impact on Central Australian tourism numbers in the long

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terms, following the closure of the climb.

Tourism is one of the world's fastest growing industries and a major income source for many countries (UNESCO, 2019). Australia's western neoliberal agenda commonly favours economic prosperity over sustainability – especially in terms of economic sustainability. This stance is well documented in political decision-making and contemporary media commentary. Tourism is a $143 billion industry that directly employed more than 646,000 people in 2017-18. It accounts for approximately 10% of Australia's exports and is a key driver of Australia's economy, contributing $57.3 billion to Australia's total GDP (Tourism Research Australia, 2019). Within this context, the closure of the Uluru climb has been likened to preventing access to other Australian icons, like Bondi beach, and criticised for its (potential) impact on tourism related income. Through this lens, all Australians should have the right to enjoy their national treasures.

Globally there is a move towards sustainable tourism "that respects both local people and the traveller, cultural heritage and the environment" (UNESCO, 2019). Within the context of Uluru the argument is that the closure to climbers empowers indigenous people to teach visitors about their culture on their own terms, encouraging deep engagement with the sacred site beyond its current commodification. At its core the move to close Uluru is a behaviour change campaign. Laws can make actions illegal – i.e. the climbing of the rock. However it may not change the fundamental belief that the rock can be climbed, - at least not immediately. The controversial nature of the decision brings the issue to the forefront – on both social media, as well as in traditional media. Behaviour change is a long process – and often the process starts with a community narrative, even if that narrative is controversial.

Drawing on positioning theory, this paper critically examines the two opposing perspectives on the decision to close Uluru to climbers; best described as economic vs a sustainability framework. The aim is provide a detailed insight into key arguments and the language used to support core positions in traditional as well as digital media commentary to inform future communication and counteract / pre-empt misinformation. This mixed-method study uses a case study approach. The study will draw on critical analysis, in addition to qualitative social media analysis from Social Studio to collect the data. This inductive study develops a clear understanding of the public narrative surrounding sustainable tourism changes. Using the

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recent case study of Uluru and the climbing ban, the study will analyse voices of various stakeholder groups involved in the climbing ban debate. The analysis will use media and social media articles from June 2019 through to October 2019. The aim is to inform future inform future communication efforts around sustainable tourism and how to use language when there is a shift from an economic to a sustainable tourism model, promoting the United Nation's goal (16) to "promote a peaceful and inclusive society" (United Nations, n.d.).This study aims to explore the role communication practitioners have to play in ensuring first nation people are heard and we ask the question what role does communication have to play in shaping behaviour change in sustainable tourism, and ultimately assisting in the future development of Australia's national identity?

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