

Communication

# Understanding Indigenous Knowledge in Contemporary Consumption: A Framework for Indigenous Market Research Knowledge, Philosophy, and Practice from Aotearoa

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**Abstract:** Despite increased attention being given to Indigenous rights, decolonization, and reconciliation in a broader business setting, the engagement of business, marketing, and consumer studies with Indigenous cultures and peoples is negligible. Although Indigenous and First Nations peoples have a significant position in the social sciences, there is no specific body of marketing or consumer knowledge that is dedicated to Indigenous knowledge and practices, even though there is a growing interest in more inclusive and transformative marketing. This paper reports on current research on Indigenous worldviews and marketing, with a continuum of Indigenous research being presented which is particularly informed by Māori experiences in Aotearoa New Zealand. Several appropriate research methods for advancing Indigenous knowledge are presented. The paper concludes by noting the potential contributions that Indigenous knowledge may provide and some of the challenges faced.

**Keywords:** indigenous knowledges; indigenous peoples; indigenous research; marketing research; consumer research; business research; Māori knowledges



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## 1. Introduction

In 2020, the New Zealand operations of the international digital services company, Vodafone (now, ‘One New Zealand’), committed to changing its network carrier banner from ‘Vodafone New Zealand’ to ‘Vodafone Aotearoa’. In 2022, Air New Zealand launched an air safety video that used Māori myths and storytelling to promote environmental conservation (The Tiaki Promise) in Aotearoa New Zealand and air safety. These moves are among several cultural initiatives created in recognition of Aotearoa New Zealand’s Indigenous people (Māori) and their language (te reo Māori). However, such overt use of Indigenous language, custom, and imagery is unusual in corporate marketing, where the use of Indigenous images and cultural property for branding and other commercial purposes are more often a focal point for debates of cultural appropriation and control than the support of Indigenous rights and ownership of intellectual property [1–4]. Moreover, the use of Indigenous stories and cultural property raises issues not only about *why* Indigenous knowledge is adopted and utilized, especially in a commercial context, but also *how* such knowledge is accessed [5–10]. These considerations do not usually sit easily with traditional private sector marketing research as they require different understandings of decision-making and value creation. Yet without such reflection, there is the potential that business further runs the risk of tokenizing and taxing Indigenous culture for its own commercial purposes, thereby creating profound questions about the conduct of market and consumer research with Indigenous peoples and the knowledge that is gained from such research.

Despite increased attention being given to Indigenous rights, decolonization, and reconciliation in a broader business setting, especially because of industry engagement in issues of corporate social responsibility and sustainability [11–15], the engagement of business, marketing, and consumer studies with Indigenous cultures and peoples is

negligible [16–21]. Internationally, Indigenous populations have long been recognized as being extremely marginalized and vulnerable, with disproportionately high rates of unemployment, poor health, and other socio-economic stressors [22], while also often being framed within a neo- or post-colonial gaze [23,24]. Indigenous peoples in colonized states have been subjected to plenty of research projects and assessments [25], most of which have been sanctioned or funded by government entities to understand how public institutions (education, health, justice), impact Indigenous peoples and their families. Nevertheless, increased levels of self-determination and legal recognition of Indigenous rights and the development of the Indigenous economy have meant non-Indigenous businesses, as well as non-Indigenous researchers, have had no choice but to become more engaged with Indigenous businesses and people [26–29]. Where research has been conducted, it has usually been focused on extractive industries active on First Nations and Indigenous territories, although the growth of Indigenous businesses and entrepreneurship has also begun to attract attention, given that such organizations usually have both socio-cultural and economic development goals [27,30–34].

Although not all Indigenous communities share the same socio-economic goals and values, corporations engage Indigenous knowledges, languages, and people for both commercial and non-commercial reasons, often connected to social licenses to operate and corporate social responsibility. These include building Indigenous connections and supporting the preservation and revitalization of local knowledges (a social element), and marketing their brands, products, and services to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples (a commercial element). Indigenous issues are therefore local, yet also global. Nevertheless, the increased visibility of Indigenous peoples as both a significant, although often marginalized, market and as an increasingly assertive cultural force, particularly in ‘post’-colonial countries, raises substantial questions with respect to marketing ethics, research, and practice in engaging with such populations [19], and especially as to how Indigenous people are included in market research which informs their decisions and the role(s) that market research plays in social and commercial decision-making.

There is growing awareness of the need for new directions in market and consumer research [35–37], to assist professional researchers hoping to “leverage insights about what people want, experience, and believe” [37] (p. 403). Importantly, this direction is increasingly driven by a desire for a more inclusive and transformative marketing that better responds to the contemporary human and planetary condition [38–40]. In part, such calls have come at a time when new priorities are being crafted to account for the distrust and societal harm caused by big technology firms (X, Google, Facebook), as well as the growing drivers on business, consumer, and marketing research, practice, and education with respect to sustainability, especially the Sustainable Development Goals, and climate change [41,42]. Significantly, such initiatives are also associated with the purpose of building a more inclusive business, marketing, and consumer studies research platform [36,43]. However, despite calls for greater inclusivity, Indigenous peoples are rarely included [19]. This is important as there are contemporary marginalized and vulnerable Indigenous populations which have been caused immense social-economic harm because of the loss of language, culture, land, and resources and, perhaps just as important, the overarching loss of appreciation of Indigenous knowledges and practices. To ensure self-determination, inclusivity, and relevance, the engagement of marketers and consumer researchers with Indigenous peoples requires a radical assessment of the adequacy of existing marketing research methods which are based on the primacy of the rationally satisficing individual and are often grounded in ontological and epistemological assumptions that are totally unsuited to Indigenous contexts. As a result, marketing, consumer, and business researchers need to better understand Indigenous worldviews and their implications for adopting different methodologies more suited to Indigenous peoples and communities.

Therefore, this paper presents perspectives on Indigenous marketing, consumer, and business research within the lived context of Aotearoa New Zealand and Indigenous Māori peoples. However, reference will also be made to Indigenous peoples in their respective

contexts. The paper will first briefly note the nature of Indigenous worldviews before discussing the nature and operationalization of research methods.

## 2. Indigenous Worldviews and Marketing

As Love and Hall point out, although Indigenous peoples have a significant position in the social sciences, there is “no sub-field or specific body of marketing knowledge that is dedicated to the contribution of marketing to the wellbeing of Aboriginal, First Nations, and Indigenous peoples and, perhaps even more importantly, the contribution of Indigenous knowledge and practices to marketing” [19] (p. 1). In order to do this, students of marketing and consumer studies should be aware that various dimensions of racism have not only been imbedded into the rhetoric and structuring of Indigenous disadvantage [44], “but also that the very constructions of a pan-Indigenous identity (simply Indigenous or not) within research has been formulated largely from the foundations of biased Eurocentric epistemologies” [45] (p. 785).

Indigenous research philosophy and methods are challenging to non-Indigenous researchers’ axiologies—that is, notions of value and worth [46]. The reality is that for much of the colonial/‘post’-colonial period, they have been regarded by the vast majority of Western researchers as worthless or irrelevant. To better understand the limitations of most contemporary business research and marketing epistemologies and methods in relation to non-Western and Indigenous knowledges, there is a need for researchers to “embrace both the complexity, uniqueness, and validity of valuable insider knowledge and research that has been traditionally discarded due to its alleged lack of methodological rigor” [45] (p. 786), but the value of which is increasingly recognized in health, education, and ecological studies, for example [47–49].

Indigenous epistemologies are often described as the epistemologies of the oppressed, or marginalized and silenced epistemologies [50,51], given that their relevance and value have been ignored through much of the colonial/‘post’-colonial period. As Foley put it, Western “Science has constructed a version of Indigenous reality embedded in a scientific discourse that has no Indigenous input, in a language that is non-Indigenous by and for a non-Indigenous audience” [52] (p. 44). However, given the relative socio-economic, health, education, and incarceration figures for Indigenous populations in ‘post’-colonial societies, there has been a growing interest among both Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers to improve outcomes by approaching and engaging Indigenous communities in their own terms.

Indigenous understanding and ways of knowing are in some ways removed from dominant Western research philosophies and methodologies [53–55]. They are often grounded in oral traditions and are inseparable from notions of place and the wisdom of elders—what has ‘gone before’ [56]. Indigenous philosophy can be conceptualized as occurring at the intersection between the human, physical, and spiritual worlds [46,57]. The physical world is the land that provides identity and culture and to which Indigenous people belong. The human world includes family, community, social networks, behavior, including how one approaches people, decision-making, and ceremony. The sacred world is grounded in human and environmental physical and spiritual wellbeing, storytelling and oral tradition, care of country/place, and the maintenance and enactment of Indigenous law. For West, the inseparability of the physical, spiritual, and human constitutes Indigenous ontology in which the personal, the spiritual, the secular, the cultural, the intellectual, the public, the political, and the practical construct the metaphysical [53].

This is not to suggest that the situation is completely binary and there is no engagement with Indigenous philosophy by Western philosophy or that no Western knowledge is grounded in oral tradition and storytelling, place, and the wisdom of elders. Indeed, critical and feminist theory have been important foundations from which to build relationships between Indigenous and Western methodologies and understandings [25,52,58], particularly as they relate to the role of power and praxis. However, a key point with respect to Indigenous ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies is that they provide for different

ways of knowing, in which Indigenous actors are active agents in the production of their own knowledge [51,58–60]. The recognition of Indigenous research philosophies helps create the conditions by which Indigenous research, including with respect to marketing, is shifting from an historical perspective of ‘research on’, to ‘research by’ and ‘research with’. In doing so, Indigenous communities assert their “right to select their preferred method of data collection. Existing research practices have been modified to meet the expressed needs of communities. Processes of adapting methods to meet Indigenous community expectations have produced methods that better incorporate Indigenous values, beliefs, and ways of knowing, facilitating research that is respectful, collaborative, and relational” [61] (pp. 1–2). But this does not mean that there is necessarily a binary relationship between all aspects of Indigenous and non-Indigenous research and methodologies. This is for three main reasons. First, non-Indigenous methods may be used and adapted by Indigenous communities and researchers [61]. Second, depending on the context only some elements of Indigenous research philosophies may be adopted, or only ‘weak’ practices occur [19]. Third, there is the potential for new hybrid research practices to develop over time [19].

Indigenous marketing research methodologies incorporate Indigenous knowledge, or community or cultural values. However, while imperfect, Indigenous marketing research could be conceived as a continuum in relation to both the extent to which Indigenous worldviews are incorporated into market research methodologies and the nature of the organization for which such research is undertaken and the extent of Indigenous ownership or control of the research process [19]. The work of Indigenous researchers, Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Ngahuia Te Awekotuku, highlight researchers’ responsibilities and commitments “aimed at respect for and protection of the ‘rights, interests, and sensitivities’ of the people being studied” [62] (p. 136). Building on Love and Hall [19], Table 1 highlights some of the elements of a continuum of ‘weak’ to ‘strong’ indigeneity in marketing research.

The different elements and framings of Indigenous research highlight the potential contestation over what is, and is not, Indigenous research [61]. Nevertheless, as Love and Hall suggest regarding the research relationship with Indigenous communities, the application of genuinely co-creative practices would have substantial implications for marketing and business with respect to the understanding and incorporation of Indigenous knowledge and considerations of cultural control and appropriation, and method [19]. These issues are now highlighted.

**Table 1.** Continuum of Indigenous research <sup>1</sup>.

Element	Weak Indigeneity	Moderate	Strong Indigeneity
Research conduct	On	With	By
Indigenous participation	Low or none	Some	High (explicitly sought)
Framing	Indigenous groups and individuals primarily framed as a market to sell to	Research framed in terms of cocreation or coproduction with Indigenous groups and Individuals	Indigenous groups framed as a market to learn from
Decision-making unit	Individual	Primarily individual but some recognition of collective decision-making	Collective, e.g., extended family, tribal affiliations
Control and use of identity	Use of Indigenous identity without Indigenous control	Permission sought from Indigenous group	Careful management and control of identity and brand by Indigenous groups. Ownership remains with Indigenous group.
Control of market and consumer research relationship	With firm/institution/non-Indigenous institution		With Indigenous group

Table 1. Cont.

Element	Weak Indigeneity	Moderate	Strong Indigeneity
Notion of cost/price	Primarily determined with respect to economic exchange	Some recognition of the socio-cultural aspects of economic exchange	Regarded as both an economic and socio-cultural exchange. Socio-cultural dimensions extremely significant.
Notion of time	Short, e.g., financial year, quarterly results		Long, e.g., intergenerational
Place association/sense	Weak		Strong, place is inherent to identity
Relationship to nature	Anthropocentric		Ecocentric
Notion of natural capital	Regarded as substitutable in the production of goods and services	Recognized as significant for future generations but often secondary to economic considerations	Must be preserved for future generations. Natural capital is non-substitutable

<sup>1</sup> Expanded from Love and Hall [19].

### 3. Applications

An Indigenous research method is “one where the researcher understands the role of Indigenous history, culture, language, and self-determination in the lives of Indigenous Peoples” [63] (p. 858). Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) provides an umbrella term by which to describe best practice. It is a community-based collaborative/partnership approach that should set the terms by which research is undertaken and also the principles related to data ownership, control, access, and possession [61]. Importantly, such an approach allows for the embedding of other methods within it, including ‘traditional’ surveys, focus groups, and interviews as well as Indigenous-relevant methods such as those relating to storytelling, photo-voice, and auto-ethnography. However, the critical point is that they are undertaken in partnership and with the agreement of the community in which they are being applied.

In business research, conversational interviewing has been offered as an approach to data ‘gathering’ which has the power to reveal and create Indigenous wisdoms from within contexts which may or may not be driven by Indigenous business thought and processes [64–67]. Conversational storytelling, conversational method [68], and Indigenous storytelling [69] are interactive methods developed over time to prioritize dialogue [70,71]. The Pacific method of talanoa draws on values of respect and exchange in Tongan, Fijian, and Samoan research practices which embrace tala (relating) and noa (bringing about balance) [72,73]. The powerful ‘yarning about yarning’ (talking about talking) is another legitimate method of Indigenous research [74].

In Aotearoa, such an approach to research finds voice in the Kaupapa Māori approach, a framework that is “steeped in the principles, culture, and philosophy of being Māori” [75] (p. 363) and that centralizes Māori knowledges and worldviews in the research process. Kaupapa Māori sees commercial contexts and the conducting of market research and consumer behavior research as sites of struggle where intentions around the access and procurement of Indigenous social, community, and personal conduct confront the desire for self-determination. Indigenous peoples are open to conversation and debates, but the past places them in a continual state of skepticism and crisis which needs some working through [25,58,76]. Kaupapa Māori acknowledges that market research is also a site of struggle for women, for people of colour, for people with disabilities, and for many others [77]. Recognizing and articulating the struggles for people is essential.

Māori researchers, policy writers, and strategists have sought to locate their work within the broad confines of the Kaupapa Māori haven. Kaupapa Māori has been a place of security in which a number of Māori (and a few non-Māori) writers have built a sense of confidence in their work, thinking, researching, and in the way they engage with and

explain Māori lived realities. Kaupapa Māori as a social movement delivers for Māori and can deliver for Māori and non-Māori market researchers, but the demands about researching markets, preferences, behaviors, and intentions are clear. In Aotearoa, Kaupapa Māori research would open the opportunity to win space in marketing/consumer behavior research [25,58,62,76,78], to set priorities, particularly with respect to the scrutinization of the role of governments in setting agendas and to advance agendas on sustainability and nature [79], but also to engage with broader issues of consumption.

Kaupapa Māori is concerned, too, with re-articulating what constitutes an important outcome [80]. Outcomes are significant because they reveal what it is that market research hopes to achieve. The early development of Kaupapa Māori brought about a desire to accomplish the “best outcomes for Māori” [81] (p. 7), in a way which differs from traditional Western notions of what constitutes good results in the provision of market and consumer advice to corporations. Some proponents suggest it is imperative in the context of self-determination that we focus on ‘self-determining (processes)’ as opposed to simply striving for ‘self-determination (an outcome)’ [78]. These processes are important for the marketing academy since self-determining researching processes for Indigenous peoples are required.

Market and consumer research, as with most business research, has this ability to separate things out—Indigenous from non-Indigenous for one. Even we are guilty of this. But the issue is not the separation of identities, or groups, or knowledges but rather, as Hoskins and Jones have written about, the alienating foundation upon which they are maintained [82]. In theory and potentially in practice, Indigenous market research can provide a haven for Indigenous scholars to reside and from which to critique. But the way to address the alienating abilities of researching—of market segmentation, for example—is through a relational grounding whereby connections across functions can be nurtured (strong/moderate indigeneity in Indigenous research). Issues arise in current arrangements when, for instance, a research project is created by a group of researchers who set priorities, develop proposals, and then very late in the process decide to consult (dare we say ‘purchase’) an Indigenous, an Aboriginal, a First Nations, a Native researcher to participate to give greater credence to the research. This is a relational issue [19] that reflects the weak indigeneity position noted above (Table 1).

Further, being Indigenous doesn’t mean Indigenous peoples are not rational, quantitative, or scientific. There is potential for Indigenous peoples to participate in many spheres of corporate, government, and community marketing, including social marketing, and in value creation. Despite the struggles, Indigenous peoples see opportunities for positive and optimistic transformative action [83]. For example, Kaupapa Māori can be considered an ‘approach’ to understanding and researching [81], or as a way of ‘framing’ [25,58,76], how we think about market interactions. Such interactions must be practical and seek to change practices which fall short of Indigenous participation and framings of markets, aiming instead for collective decision-making, the controlling of research by Indigenous groups who are impacted by it, recognizing strong connections to land/place, and eco-centric connections with nature and natural capital as non-substitutable [19]. The importance of committing to enduring change processes with practical applications as part of Indigenous research in the consumer, marketing, and business spheres, cannot be overstated.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusions

Poynter’s perspective that the best research in future will be custom-made, non-prescriptive, and human-driven, requiring considerable resourcing in contexts “when the complexity and importance of the problem calls for it” [37] (p. 406), is extremely welcome in the context of Indigenous peoples and their vast and complex knowledges, as well as that of other vulnerable populations. However, it is very much a minority perspective within contemporary marketing and consumer studies, which remain driven by Big Data, digital marketing, the application of algorithms and Artificial Intelligence, and the capitalist imperative to consume more rather than better. Nevertheless, if this occurs, market and consumer research will specialize in offering something a focus on mass data cannot,

instead providing a broader, ecosystems view of people and preferences [37]. Such a future could potentially open opportunities to better understand Indigenous relations in a marketing and consumer context. However, substantial concerns remain.

As Banerjee and Arjaliés stated, we live in a world where people are managing its destruction, where any theory of the corporation has, at its core, making a profit as its norm [84]. From an Indigenous worldview, this world must be resisted with alternatives such as processes of decolonization, and the provision of ecological cases for business and Indigenous ontologies [84]. While Indigenous peoples are engaged in economic transaction, even to the extent that they are fully engaged in the prospect of raising taxes from that transaction on their own lands, they often question, if not actively resist, the process of the commodification of their identities and their knowledges for purposes other than their own. This commentary therefore leverages off these alternatives to provide a research perspective explicating the role market/knowledge research should play in building corporate–Indigenous market-based relationships.

As elsewhere around the world, the decolonization agenda of Indigenous marketing and consumer research in Aotearoa is more than just hiring Indigenous staff; it also involves engagement with Māori culture, language, and worldviews. Working with Indigenous peoples and knowledges requires different sets of research methods and research skills than those used when working with other peoples and knowledges [85]. This is essential because ‘Unfamiliarity with and failure to prioritize cultural conceptualizations by the research community has resulted in detrimental practices associated with the acquisition, use, and interpretation of knowledge provided by Indigenous communities’ [61] (p. 1). Such a perspective is extremely important because, as research in Indigenous health and welfare has recognized, Indigenous research needs to be understood as research *with* rather than research *on*.

While such approaches are ideal, they do not sit easily with traditional private sector marketing research as they require different understandings of decision-making, time, and ownership. Such challenges have been identified in other Indigenous business research to be extremely difficult, if not futile [86]. Nevertheless, commonalities exist between some aspects of contemporary Western and Indigenous marketing methodologies, especially in areas such as corporate and community social marketing as well as the importance of relationality in value creation. In some situations, and especially for those economies with substantial Indigenous populations, such as Aotearoa New Zealand, greater interest in, if not embrace of, Indigenous marketing research methods may potentially generate new, hybrid marketing knowledges that may better enable businesses to serve their customers through the development of stronger relationships over time. Significantly, such approaches may not only provide for more resilient businesses in an economic sense but the improved connection with Indigenous groups may also allow for the incorporation and sourcing of new knowledge to better respond to a volatile and existentially threatening business environment.

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