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**Submission date:** 13-Oct-2025 11:49PM (UTC+0700)

**Submission ID:** 2779992455

**File name:** THEPOT\_1.PDF (175.08K)

**Word count:** 1940

**Character count:** 10607

# 5 THE POTENTIAL ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN STRENGTHENING INDIGENOUS PUBLIC HEALTH, AND THE LIMITATIONS OF ALTERNATE CURRENT MEDIUMS – A CASE STUDY OF MODERN NEW ZEALAND

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## RESEARCH AIMS

This research will seek to explore how social media can be used in a modern context to benefit Indigenous communities by strengthening public health. This will be compared to other current mediums used at the government, organisation, and community levels to achieve the same goals, in hopes of determining the best strategy to assist these communities. Specifically, the study will aim to recognise the limitations of current mediums, the benefits of social media, how social media is working currently, and its potential future uses.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. To access health information, support networks, and wellbeing resources, how do Indigenous communities in New Zealand currently use social media?
2. When engaging with existing mediums to healthcare what barriers or risks do Indigenous people face?
3. In what ways do Indigenous youth and adults perceive social media as a tool for strengthening their cultural identity and promoting public health?
4. How could social media platforms be adapted or created to address the limitations of current public health communication strategies for Indigenous communities?

## INTRODUCTION

The current state of public health for Indigenous Māori communities in New Zealand is bleak, with a large number of inequalities creating disparities in living conditions. Nutrition has been shown to play a major role, with Māori having more prevalent iron and vitamin D deficiencies, greater burdens from certain diseases, higher rates of obesity, and newborns being smaller for gestational age [1]. These are just a few of the health issues that disproportionately affect the Indigenous population of New Zealand, showing the need for adequate mediums of health promotion. Current methods by the Ministry of Health NZ include community action such as building supportive environments, sector partnerships, advocating for health policies, and national media campaigns. Social media is being used, but on a comparatively small scale compared to the effect it could have, with around 80–95% of New Zealanders on some form of social media. By having this strategy backed by research, the Ministry of Health could invest more resources into a wider-reaching strategy. This research is important to find the best way to educate and help the health of New Zealand Indigenous communities with the issues they face. It also has the potential to show other countries the possibilities this medium has with their own Indigenous populations. There is currently little research specifically on social media in this area, which means it could have large implications.

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

### PRIOR RESEARCH ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND ALTERNATE CURRENT MEDIUMS

Past research shows that programmes often fail when they overlook issues of trust and self-determination in these communities. Studies highlight that successful health promotion requires Indigenous ownership and empowerment [2], particularly in relation to social media solutions. Similarly, it has been found that co-designing health promotion with Māori communities is advantageous, with collaboration and community voice being key facilitators [3], highlighting the potential for Māori to use social media for Māori. The He Pikinga Waiora (HPW) framework, which is grounded in Kaupapa Māori, provides culturally relevant guidelines for co-designing, though barriers such as limited case studies and sustainability are still apparent [3], showing the lack of research into proper alternatives in this sector.

Another study conducted on the use of Telehealth during COVID-19 to reduce health inequities for Māori showed that, despite the perceived burdens such as limited physical observation of patients, it was quite cost-effective among other benefits and was deemed "a viable long-term option that can support Māori whānau access to healthcare" [4]. This isn't the same as social media, but it does study the results of using an online service and shows potential parallels for promoting and delivering health.

There have also been studies<sup>13</sup> on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Australia, showing their use of social media. It has been shown that they use social media at a higher percentage than the general population, and this has been used to promote various avenues of health [5]. It was highlighted that health promotion strategies building on supportive online environments are more effective than most traditional mass media approaches, which underscores the potential of social media as a culturally responsive tool [5]. Another study concluded that social media can uniquely reach Indigenous Australians and other groups due to its wide and instant reach. However, evidence of effectiveness is still limited. Existing interventions are not evidence-based or widely adopted, and technologies and user engagement need a clearer understanding by health promoters to design successful projects [6].

### GAPS IN PRIOR RESEARCH

This preliminary literature review shows large gaps in the current research that may be filled by my study. This includes how there are little to no studies that focus specifically on Māori and their response to health promotion through social media. There are examples of other Indigenous populations and their experiences, like in Australia, however we cannot presume that what happens in Australia translates perfectly to New Zealand because of different environments and stages of cultural integration. Some research has commented on social media, but it shows very low current exploration and therefore low utilisation. There is also little research into how Māori feel towards online interaction, with trust being highlighted as a key factor for health promotion methods.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH EXPLORATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA METHODS

The implications of this research would largely be that governments would have firmer backing that social media is a viable and effective way for Indigenous communities to receive health information. They would therefore be able to invest more resources and, depending on its efficiency, increase the quality of health outcomes for Indigenous communities, which is the end goal. More research in this area could also influence organisations worldwide to take a chance in this direction with health and other sectors in order to increase the standard of living for Indigenous peoples. Research shows that with Māori being rapidly urbanised, newer mediums of health promotion that can change with the population, rather than a "one size fits all" method, would be far more beneficial [7].

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## PROPOSED RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study will use a mixed-methods approach to examine the potential role of social media to benefit Indigenous public health, specifically in New Zealand.

### QUANTITATIVE PHASE

There will be a structured survey conducted with a representative sample of Indigenous people (N=400) across New Zealand, stratified by age to ensure diversity across demographics, considering social media use will most likely depend on this. This survey will assess social media usage patterns, engagement with health-related content, and how much they trust this information (a large issue in Indigenous communities). Through the survey, participants will respond to statements on a 7-point Likert scale, which will measure aspects such as perceived credibility, cultural relevance, how they find social media compared to other media, how current social media could be altered, and how health posts currently or could influence real-world behaviour. This way, there will be insights into both reach and trustworthiness, and the current state of health promotion.

### QUALITATIVE PHASE

The second approach is through semi-structured interviews conducted with a subsample of respondents (n=50) to focus on their experiences with social media as a health resource, their barriers to engagement, and the effectiveness of current mediums. The questions will explore the perspective of the participant on whether social media health promotion can strengthen Indigenous self-help and overall family wellbeing. Interviews will be analysed to identify recurring ideas and themes, such as specific features of mediums that are good or bad and how people perceive the interplay between online and offline health practices.

### PROJECT PRACTICALITIES

The collection of this data will occur over a 12-week period. The first phase will involve creating the survey and distributing it to the stratified sample, as well as writing the semi-structured interview script (weeks 1–3). The interviews will then be conducted over the weeks 4–6 period. Data will be gathered with some preliminary analysis in weeks 7–9 when everything comes together. The comprehensive analysis, interpretation, and preparation of a report will occur in weeks 10–12.

Issues of response bias in representative samples may occur due to the nature of people specifically being able to do things they've seen on social media, or how much they use it. However, with interviews, it will either strengthen or contradict the analysis we gain from the surveys and therefore help to make a conclusion on the research.

With the involvement of Indigenous peoples, ethics will be strictly adhered to throughout the study, ensuring data privacy and the secure handling of data. Information will be anonymised and participants will have the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

### CONCLUSION

In summary, this research aims to explore the role of current mediums for health promotion and the potential that social media holds to revolutionise this area. In an increasingly modern world where people are on their phones all the time, having research on the uses of media to do good and particularly tackle the health inequities that face Indigenous communities is crucial. This could be through education and the sharing of information between people to strengthen communities and their ability to help themselves. This research could provide a well-needed basis for governments to invest large resources into a medium that is potentially more efficient than their current strategies.

## THE POTENTIAL ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN STRENGTHENING INDIGENOUS PUBLIC HEALTH, AND THE LIMITATIONS OF ALTERNATE CURRENT MEDIUMS – A CASE STUDY OF MODERN NEW ZEALAND

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