

Digitized Indigenous Knowledge Collections Can Have Beneficial Impact on Cultural Identity and Social Ties

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Volume 17, numéro 3, 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1092541ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.18438/eblip30179>

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Éditeur(s)

University of Alberta Library

ISSN

1715-720X (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Bussell, H. (2022). Compte rendu de [Digitized Indigenous Knowledge Collections Can Have Beneficial Impact on Cultural Identity and Social Ties / Liew, C. L., Yeates, J., & Lilley, S. C. (2021). Digitized Indigenous knowledge collections: Impact on cultural knowledge transmission, social connections, and cultural identity. *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, 72(12), 1575–1592. <https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.24536>]. *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice*, 17(3), 147–149. <https://doi.org/10.18438/eblip30179>

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Evidence Summary

Digitized Indigenous Knowledge Collections Can Have Beneficial Impact on Cultural Identity and Social Ties

A Review of:

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Received: 27 May 2022

Accepted: 20 July 2022

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DOI: [10.18438/ebliip30179](https://doi.org/10.18438/ebliip30179)

Abstract

Objective – To explore the impact and significance of digitized and digital Indigenous knowledge collections (D-IKC) on knowledge transmission, social connections, and cultural identity.

Design – Phenomenological explorative study.

Setting – New Zealand.

Subjects – Eight D-IKC users, including three academics, four undergraduate students, and one postgraduate student. Six participants were women and two were men. All participants were of Māori descent.

Methods – Eight semi-structured interviews ranging from 40 to 75 minutes were conducted in a face-to-face setting between June 2019 and August 2020. Participants were recruited through the

researchers' personal and professional networks using a purposeful sampling technique. Potential participants were provided with a copy of the interview guide during recruitment.

Main Results – The article reports on seven areas of results: use of collections, accessibility and discoverability, collection features and functionality, sharing of knowledge resources, reuse and repurposing of resources, perceived benefits of cultural and social connections, and development and provision of D-IKC. Participants use D-IKC for academic work including coursework, teaching, and research as well as for personal interest and development, such as researching *whakapapa* (genealogy) and *whenua* (land) information, language revitalization projects, and creative works. All participants expressed preference for online access to the collections. Participants discussed barriers to access not only for themselves but also for other members of their community, including difficulty using the platforms on mobile devices, lack of awareness about the collections, inadequate digital access, and lack of digital competence for searching and navigation. Some participants noted inaccuracies in transcriptions that could lead to alteration of the meaning of words and deter engagement with D-IKC. All participants reported having shared knowledge resources they encountered in digitized collections. Primary reasons for sharing information included helping classmates get access to educational materials and sharing resources with *whānau* (extended family) for genealogical research and land claims. Common reasons for reusing or repurposing materials included language and dialect revitalization and creative work and performance. Participants said they were more likely to share materials related to their tribal affiliation. Participants also discussed information that would not be appropriate to share, such as information that is considered *tapu* (sacred), particularly if the material is outside of their tribal roots. Notably, all participants said they had come across resources and information in D-IKC that should not be openly accessible at all. Participants reported having gained linguistic and cultural knowledge as well as information about their cultural identity through their use of D-IKC. Sharing this knowledge with their communities has helped strengthen social connections. Some participants noted that their *hapū* (subtribe) planned to set up their own digital archives.

Conclusion – Overall, D-IKC can have a beneficial impact on individual and collective social identity and social ties. Making these materials available online facilitates their wider access and use. However, memory institutions (MIs) need to take steps to ensure that cultural values and knowledge are embedded into the development and stewardship of the collections. MIs should employ more specialists from Indigenous communities with deep understanding of customary practices and principles, encourage other staff to develop their understanding of the language and customs of the Indigenous communities that their collections are rooted in, and develop partnerships with Indigenous authorities to help guide them on issues relating to sacred knowledge and genealogical materials. The authors also recommend that MIs develop outreach programs to raise awareness of the resources and to improve digital access and competencies.

Commentary

This article contributes to the body of research on the role that cultural heritage institutions can play in the development of cultural identity, knowledge transmission, and social connections. Specifically, the authors build on previous research into the development of knowledge sharing relationships through the use of digitized Māori language collections (Crookston et al., 2016) by exploring users' perspectives, experiences, and expectations in engaging with these collections. Based on this research, the researchers provide insights into how these collections can lead to knowledge sharing outside of an institutional context; they also articulate a number of considerations to guide MIs in the provision of Indigenous knowledge collections.

This study was evaluated using guidance from Kuper et al. (2008). The article is particularly strong in the level of detail it provides in its methodology section and supporting data. The authors include a paragraph that addresses reflexivity by describing their positionalities as researchers. Reflexivity is an

important concept within qualitative research that explores the influence a researcher brings to the research process by acknowledging how their “gender, ethnic background, profession, and social status influence the choices made within the study” (Liew, Yeates, & Lilley, 2021, p. 689). The authors describe how they brought a combination of “insider and outsider perspectives” to their collaboration in terms of their sociocultural identities, topical knowledge, and roles within the research study. Important to note is that at least one of the authors is of Māori descent while another is not; they note that the third author has expertise in *kaupapa Māori* (Māori principles and values), but they do not state whether he is of Māori descent. The methods for data collection and analysis are described thoroughly. In addition to drawing on concepts from their literature review and several value-impact frameworks for assessing digital cultural heritage collections, the authors analyzed their data using *kaupapa Māori* to make sure that specific cultural issues were not elided. The authors draw on these concepts throughout the article and provide a glossary of Māori terms in an appendix. Additional supporting data include participant profiles and summaries of key findings mapped to value-impact frameworks and traditional cultural values.

One area where additional details would have been welcome is in the discussion of sampling. The authors state that participants were recruited through personal and professional networks of the researchers, using a purposeful sampling technique. All of the participants were university students or academics, leading the reader to assume that university affiliation was one of the criteria; however, this is not stated outright, and what other inclusion criteria were used is unclear.

As the authors note, given the qualitative nature of this study, the findings are not meant to be generalizable to a larger population. Nevertheless, they provide a number of recommendations and insights that will be relevant to MIs that maintain Indigenous cultural knowledge collections. These considerations are particularly important in light of the fact that the principle of open access to information resources can be in conflict with Indigenous knowledge sharing paradigms (Underhill, 2006) and given the destructive role that archives, libraries, and other MIs have and continue to play through colonial collecting practices (Christen, 2015).

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