ABSTRACT

Apprehension of modern business in Indigenous communities has led to the lack of development of concepts like Indigenous marketing. Indigenous marketing is theoretical and practical. This piece will explore the operational definition of Indigenous marketing.

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What is Indigenous marketing? As scholars have explored, there is apprehension around Western capitalism and the business discipline among Indigenous communities (Frantz 1999; Garsombke and Garsombke 2000; Gladstone 2013, 2018). Subsequently, Indigenous marketing has yet to be sufficiently defined or even explored (Love & Hall 2022). In 2020, Hunt attempted to create an Indigenous marketing theory, stating that:

Marketing’s intellectual health requires indigenous theory development. However, marketing is a discipline that, almost exclusively, imports its concepts and theories from other disciplines and applies them to marketing issues. Articles that either develop indigenous marketing theory or use such theory as a foundation for empirical research are notably absent from marketing journals (8).

Just as theory and practice can often be mismatched, much of the business world conflicts with the traditions and beliefs of Indigenous cultures. The modern business world prioritizes the individual over the community, while Indigenous people prioritize their community. Within the etymology of the words ‘Indigenous’ and ‘marketing,’ there are inherent struggles. Indigenous culture is protected and sacred. Marketing is born from sales and capitalistic transactions. Before the colonization of our people and the land, we did have trade and transactions (Gladstone 2018). It is probably this time when marketing was pure, another vital form of communication.

In this piece, I hope to explore an operational definition of Indigenous Marketing. I am an Eastern Cherokee cisgender woman who has spent most of her career working in marketing in some form; from being a marketing assistant for Nike’s Native American initiative, N7, to working on brands like Old Spice and Procter & Gamble for the legendary advertising agency, Wieden+Kennedy. I am now a professor who teaches marketing in Seattle, Washington. My educational background was in sport management and through my MBA and marketing experience I have become one of the only Native American women Sport Marketing professors (if you know another, please let me know!). I’m originally from the Qualla Boundary in Cherokee, North Carolina, and my tribe, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, has generously supported my education financially. My career pursuits have taken me across the country, constantly chasing success. By returning to higher education, I have found fulfillment through giving back to students. Giving back was exactly what I found to be inherent for Native American athletes as a part of my doctoral dissertation. Throughout my journey, I also developed a passion for documentary storytelling, and I have also made film a part of my creative and educational outputs. I am passionate about my work at this intersection of education, marketing, film, and advocating for Native American athletes.

Thinking about this question of Indigenous marketing, I have seen firsthand the lack of integration of Indigenous ways of thinking and living in marketing. From the top of the corporate ladder to the local small business level. I have also seen the exploitation of Native American culture by businesses of all sizes. However, there are many ways in which marketing and Indigenous beliefs systems can enhance business and marketing, perhaps the most significant being the importance of storytelling. These overlaps between modern business, marketing, and Indigenous beliefs are worth exploring for potential synergies and to avoid further harm to all consumers.

Understanding the consumer is a bedrock of marketing and I see a lot of overlap in the beliefs of consumer behavior and Native American ways of knowing. But as consumer behavior and marketing psychology tend to overgeneralize, Indigenous knowledge prioritizes deep and meaningful connections. Understanding oneself and our own motives must come first (including our own connection to the land in which we reside) before understanding the consumer can begin to be achieved.

It took me several years to realize my passion for sport and marketing aligned with my ancestral connection to storytelling. You might say it was an obvious epiphany. My love of sport was driven by story. Wins, losses, underdog triumphs, and heartbreaking defeats (which I can tell you as a Tennessee Volunteer has come more often than not). Our Indigenous cultures relied on oral storytelling to preserve our most precious histories. Stories were how we adapted, or you may even say, survived and thrived. Outsiders have compared our storytelling to performance art, like music (Kroeber 2008). In our modern societies, storytelling has been used to promote health and wellness in Indigenous communities (Hodge et al. 2002).

Flip to the business world and storytelling has become an overused buzzword in marketing. Just as ‘authenticity,’ ‘sustainability,’ and ‘viral’ have. Storytelling has become shorthand for making advertising less about sales and more about authentic connection. Unfortunately, it is the discounting of storytelling that is in complete contrast to what it means to be an Indigenous storyteller. Too many shortcuts are taken in today’s business storytelling, reliance on empty mission statements and brand ethos. For storytelling to be truly authentic, as it would be to Indigenous peoples, there must be more heart, more follow-through, and less flash.

Storytelling is sacred. Storytelling is the glue keeping our communities together. We don’t want it to be co-opted to
sell toothbrushes or toilet paper. It draws on traditional knowledge and oral traditions, customs, and beliefs. I believe for Indigenous marketing to be authentic, it must truly invest in these traditions and not promote storytelling as just another tactic to sell. Unfortunately, for today’s rapid fire media storm, this means taking more time, being more careful and listening to more voices. It still baffles me to see an ad with an inappropriate or outright offensive message make it into the public eye, knowing that dozens, hundreds even, of executives have seen and signed off on it.

The marketing of Indigenous people and culture has historically been problematic and often a form of cultural appropriation. Native Americans become characters and mascots. Our places and products are categorized as ‘other’ (Waitt 1999). Place and tourism destination marketing has been especially problematic for Indigenous communities around the world. As Love & Hall note, ‘this is an issue of appropriation that has been identified for many years with respect to Indigenous peoples and communities, but which has been insufficiently dealt with’ (2022: 205).

Within the Indigenous community, there have also been controversies around ‘selling out.’ I have seen it in my own community as our people tried to develop economically; they began co-opting our Native American imagery or playing dress up for tourist dollars. While that is not as common now, the dependence on casinos and the imagery associated with gaming could also be seen as a barrier to more accurate Indigenous marketing.

Love & Hall (2022), Indigenous Maori scholars, point out that the marketing discipline and its institutions must realize their embeddedness in social issues, including the colonialization and destruction of Indigenous cultures. This recognition must go beyond acknowledgement to actual atonement, and ‘explore and remove the ways in which universities, business schools and marketing education and research has perpetuated varying levels of marginalisation and resistance to indigenous identities and knowledges’ (Love & Hall 2022: 202).

One example I have experienced first-hand is the Native American mascot issue. This is an issue that has followed me ever since I left my home community. Beyond being asked if I lived in a teepee, I’m commonly asked how I feel about Native American mascots. At first, I gave the naïve answer, that we as Native peoples have bigger issues, like diabetes and drug abuse to deal with, than to be worried about sports mascots. It took me several years away from my community to realize the harm that these mascots cause. The dehumanization seeps so deeply into culture that it’s unrecognizable to the average consumer. It felt like erasure of the highest form. Where were the actual Native Americans on this issue? Mostly silenced, but they have been fighting, through protests and legal battles, for decades.

In the summer of 2020, after the murder of George Floyd (and Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery), amidst COVID lockdown, the country couldn’t hide from the racial and social reckoning. By July, Dan Snyder, the beleaguered owner of the Washington Professional Football team, announced the team would be changing its name, after decades of his own battles and declarations in ALL CAPS that the name would never be changed. Why? Well, the trickle-down effect of calls for removal of confederate statues and racial tropes, like Uncle Ben’s rice and Aunt Jemima, had made its way to the Washington Football Team. Nike removed the team’s merchandise from their online store. Corporate sponsors were starting to get calls from customers that they would no longer be in business with a company that supported the team in DC. All in all, it was reported that 87 investment firms and shareholders worth a combined $620 billion had asked FedEx, PepsiCo, and Nike to end business ties with the franchise unless the name was changed (O’Hara 2020).

It shouldn’t take a nationwide racial reckoning for brands and companies to consider the Native American perspective, and not just one Native individual or tribe, but a holistic Indigenous worldview.

In more positive spaces, Native American-owned businesses have thrived. I’m a proud supporter of Eighth Generation, an Indigenous-owned company that has promoted ‘Inspired Natives,’ not ‘Native-inspired.’ Nike N7 continues to disrupt the corporate world, recruiting and bringing in Native designers and leaders. There are more companies, local and national, that are changing the narrative of Native people and what it means to be an Indigenous entrepreneur, CEO, VP, and marketer. It’s time to put away your sage, Urban Outfitters, and stop wearing headdresses to Coachella. Halloween costumes must also go, I hope we see that day in our lifetime.

The future is bright for Indigenous marketing. Recently, Indigenous frameworks have been implemented to improve the effectiveness of interventions in health and research (George 2020; Kubacki & Szablewska 2019). There’s no reason why this cannot happen across the entire business field. Technology has also provided pivotal breakthroughs for Indigenous methods, including initiatives and efforts towards self-representation and revitalization, or what Wallace described as a ‘deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture’ (1956: 265). We are preserving our stories and our language in a new way, a way that will ultimately help us keep the traditions going.

The growth of the Native American community online is encouraging. Websites like NDNSports.com promote Native American athletes across the country, creating a virtual
cheering section. Native creators have thrived on Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. Sustainability marketing is another area in which Indigenous knowledge must be at the forefront. Indigenous people are the original climate protectors, and we have the innate ability to preserve and persevere.

Ultimately, Indigenous marketing, like the land, needs to go beyond acknowledgement and become a more integrated ideology across the field to ensure sustainability. Indigenous marketing should be understood as the development of a more holistic notion of marketing, in which marketing thought begins to accommodate non-Anglo-American thinking and engages with the epistemologies, worldviews and practices of the indigenous inhabitants of the lands in which marketing is actually practiced and debated (Love & Hall 2022: 206).

This transformation needs to be all-encompassing, including business schools and marketing research practices. Start by educating yourself about your local Indigenous community, reach out to see how you can help, be authentic, and assist in creating real long-lasting solutions. Also, commit to being an authentic storyteller. As I tell my students, it doesn’t have to be shameful, and it should ultimately be fun, to Indigenize your marketing.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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REFERENCES


