ABSTRACT

Culture is integral to Indigenous entrepreneurs, but how culture manifests in their entrepreneurial processes is understudied. This paper explores how Aboriginal entrepreneurs in Perth, Australia navigate cultural and commercial imperatives in their entrepreneurial practice. The study uses an interpretive lens and thematic analysis based on Altman's hybrid economy model (HEM) to explore how ten Aboriginal entrepreneurs managed commercially viable enterprises while meeting their cultural obligations and aspirations. The focus is on the convergence of the customary and market economies and entrepreneurs’ experiences of navigating the hybridity of that space. We find that Aboriginal entrepreneurs iteratively assess the complementarity of cultural and commercial imperatives to protect their Indigenous identity while meeting business objectives. Cultural and commercial imperatives are navigated using context-dependent strategies. Strategies fall within fluid classifications of ‘high cultural–low commercial bias’, ‘high commercial–low cultural bias’, and an even consideration of both. We propose a contingency model to help explain Indigenous entrepreneurs’ approaches to navigating customary and commercial imperatives. This study contributes to knowledge of culture in Indigenous entrepreneurship by uncovering strategies Indigenous entrepreneurs can, and do, use to conduct business in ways culturally attuned to their indigeneity and situations.
INTRODUCTION

Research into how Indigenous people deal with non-Indigenous values and expectations in business is rare, especially among Australia’s First Nations peoples, that is, entrepreneurs who identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Foley 2008). In this paper, we address the research question ‘how do Aboriginal entrepreneurs navigate cultural and commercial imperatives?’ We contribute to knowledge of culture in entrepreneurship by highlighting strategies Indigenous entrepreneurs can, and do, use to conduct business in ways culturally attuned to their indigeneity and situations.

Our focus is on Aboriginal entrepreneurs in the Perth area because none of the participants identify as Torres Strait Islander. We define cultural imperatives as adherence to Indigenous values, which exhibit high-level commonalities across Indigenous peoples (Gladstone 2018; Harris & Wasilewski 2004) and unique variations at the Indigenous nation and subnation levels (Mika et al. 2022). For instance, cultural practices, encompassing familial relationships and connections to ancestral lands, are integral to Indigenous well-being (Awaterere & Harcourt 2021; Dockery 2010, 2012; Gorman et al. 2020). We define commercial imperatives as values, concepts, and expectations of business, such as profitability, productivity, value, and growth, applicable to market-based enterprise (Behrman 1988; Deakins & Scott 2020).

Indigenous Australians have a rich history on the Australian continent, estimated to be between 51,000 and 71,000 years old (Charles 2020). Concerted efforts from 1788 to colonise, annihilate, assimilate, and integrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities resulted in the prevailing discourse of a single Australian community with Western values and perspectives (Lino 2017). Against a backdrop of institutional racism, some consider ancient Indigenous wisdom and practices to be incongruent with contemporary assumptions that Australian society is homogenous and progressive (Barnett 2018). Thus, assimilation resulted in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives being ‘othered’ – marginalised, delegitimised, and excluded from the mainstream (Dornan 2020; Porter 2018).

Indigenous peoples actively resist assimilation (Kukutai & Webber 2017), employing various methods such as code-switching. Code-switching, or ‘situational switching’, is where minority ethnic groups ‘feel compelled to adopt a double set of behaviours, dialects, and rhetorical styles—one to maintain cultural belonging within the Black [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander] community and one to gain acceptance into the White dominant group’ (Myers 2020: 113). Similarly, Indigenous peoples have been described as ‘true cosmopolitans who may adopt an Indigenous cultural frame… when interacting with family or tribal members, and switch to a mainstream cultural frame when interacting with the state or with mainstream businesses’ (Tretiakov et al. 2020: 195). In business contexts, Indigenous entrepreneurs form Indigenous business networks, more attuned to their indigeneity than mainstream networks (Henry et al. 2020). Indigenous business networks are representative member bodies for Indigenous entrepreneurs, linked to each other through various formal and informal links (Donkels & Lambrecht 1997). Members benefit from results beyond individual businesses’ capability, such as information sharing and access to networking opportunities (Hudson 2017).

As a juxtaposition to Indigenous socioeconomic disadvantage, a strengths-based view, which sees entrepreneurship as a means toward Indigenous self-determination and economic sovereignty, has been applied in this research (Collins & Normon 2018; Croce 2017; Evans et al. 2009; Foley 2003; Lewis, 2018). A strengths-based view portrays Indigenous people in terms of their advantages instead of their adversities (Hamby 2022). For example, moving away from a neoliberal view of encapsulating Indigenous economic activity within the state and market economies (Buchanan 2014), Altman (2009) proposes an alternate hybrid economy model (HEM) which acknowledges the customary economy. The customary economy includes Indigenous economic activity that can be overlooked in mainstream economic assessments (Wesley & Litster 2015).

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we define Indigenous entrepreneurship and Aboriginal entrepreneurship, then identify Aboriginal entrepreneurs’ cultural practices and introduce the hybrid economy model as the framework for analysis. Second, we outline the qualitative methods used to recruit participants, collect and thematically analyse interview data. Third, the findings cover three themes – Aboriginal cultural identity in business, integrating Aboriginal culture in entrepreneurship, and the challenges of doing so. Fourth, we discuss findings on how Aboriginal entrepreneurs navigate cultural and commercial imperatives and propose a framework which categories the strategies entrepreneurs employ for this purpose. Finally, we conclude with comments on implications for research and practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

INDIGENOUS ENTREPRENEURSHIP

At the centre of definitions of the term Indigenous person or people is an original connection to the land (Foley 2003); self-identification criteria (Hindie & Lansdowne 2005); and
precocolonial ownership and control of ancestral lands (Dana 2006; Paradies 2005). In the Australian context, these characteristics of indigeneity are particularly poignant given the declaration of the newfound land as terra nullius to justify British colonisation, which rendered Indigenous Australians ‘invisible’ in their own lands (Banner 2005). Approximately a third of Australian land remains under Indigenous management (Sloane et al. 2019). The violent separation of these first peoples from their lands through colonisation fractured Indigenous Australians’ connections to ‘country’ (Barta 1987; Porter 2017), which is closely tied to their conceptualisations of status, power, identity, and belonging (Archibald 2006; Kingston 2015).


Success in Indigenous entrepreneurship combines commercial and cultural measures (Manganda et al. 2022). For instance, Indigenous entrepreneurship considers factors such as the collective benefit of resource ownership, where consensus decision-making is preferred (Anderson & Peredo 2006; Lindsay 2005). Since culture shapes Indigenous entrepreneurs’ attitudes, values and behaviours (Lindsay 2005), Indigenous entrepreneurship is thus a complex phenomenon consisting of social, cultural, and economic dimensions (Collins et al. 2017). We acknowledge that Indigenous peoples are diverse within national and regional borders, with important nuances regarding cultural beliefs and practices (Skille 2021), for whom the effects of socioeconomic disadvantage manifest differently.

**ABORIGINAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander entrepreneurship is a localised expression of Indigenous entrepreneurship in Australia that has its roots in pre-European inter-tribal trade (Bodle et al. 2018; Foley 2004). Although international trade in boomerang, sea cucumber, shell ornaments and ochre between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander entrepreneurs and the Makassan, Malay and Javanese took place in the mid-1700s (Akbar & Hallak 2019; Fleming 2015), systematic and institutional repression through colonisation hindered this Indigenous entrepreneurial activity (Shirodkar & Hunter 2019; Shirodkar et al. 2018). Unsurprisingly, racism and discrimination feature prominently in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander entrepreneurship (Denny-Smith & Loosemore 2017), manifesting, for example, in difficulties in obtaining finance due to inflexible criteria (Altman 2006), with the chances of loan approval increasing if the applicant has a non-Indigenous spouse (Foley 2000).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander entrepreneurship occurs in many legal forms, including partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous corporations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-owned commercial, social, and cooperative enterprises (Collins et al. 2017). As Table 1 shows, the growth rate of Indigenous Australian enterprises between 2011 and 2016 was 30% (PwC Consulting 2018; Shirodkar et al. 2018).

Previously low numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander entrepreneurs has been attributed to a lack of capital and an economic tradition that struggles with capitalist tenets (Frederick & Foley 2006); however, recent research reports a significant increase in the number of Aboriginal enterprises, possibly due to wider census coverage and better response rates (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2018a) along with more people identifying as Indigenous (Galperin et al. 2021). For example, the number of Indigenous Australians in the census increased by 19% between 2011 and 2016 (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2018b). Difficulties accounting for ownership, culture, and social factors mean accurately quantifying Indigenous enterprises is problematic (Shirodkar et al. 2018). A recent study, however, based on official data from 3,619 Indigenous businesses clearly shows their growing contribution to the Australian economy with $4.88 billion in combined earnings and employing 45,434 people (Evans et al. 2021).

Australian governments have attempted to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for their social contributions, respect for culture, and the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATA SOURCE</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>GROWTH RATE %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shirodkar et al. (2018)</td>
<td>13,700</td>
<td>17,900</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PwC Consulting (2018)</td>
<td>8,891</td>
<td>11,538</td>
<td>29.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1** Estimates of Aboriginal enterprises in Australia.
impact of inequalities (Paradies & Cunningham 2009; Wyn & Harris 2004). Table 2 highlights interventions that may aid Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander entrepreneurs. Despite this, entrepreneurial success is still impeded by access to finance, discrimination, and exclusion from networks (Wood & Davidson 2011).

Nonetheless, Indigenous entrepreneurship emboldens Indigenous people as economic actors and has the potential to reduce economic disadvantage (Collins et al. 2017; Hunter 2015) through acquiring wealth without treading upon Indigenous knowledge, practices, and representations (Bodle et al. 2018; Hindle & Moroz 2010).

**CULTURAL PRACTICE**

Culture, defined broadly as ‘a system of collectively held values’ (Hofstede 1980: 24), can be an enabler of Indigenous entrepreneurship by exploiting social capital (Foley & O’Connor 2013), but can also be a constraint where cultural values may affect entrepreneurial strategy (Collins et al. 2017; Tretiakov et al. 2020). Culture, however, is not static; it adapts to societal change, including technological and economic innovations (Foley 2006; Mead 2016; Mika 2014). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander entrepreneurs merge Western values with their cultural values and add to the complexity of their identity through, for example, multicultural family lineages while remaining grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems (Collins et al. 2017; Foley 2006).

The world view that underpins Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems is generally known as the Dreaming, which is expressed through art, custom, music, and oral tradition (Rigney 2001). Though used widely in mainstream Australian discourse, other scholars see the Dreaming as a Western construct that falls short in describing the richness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture (Dean 1996; Foley 2018). The Dreaming ranges from complex spiritual belief systems, such as the period before creation when time did not exist, to the transmission of hunting skills and knowledge through stories of nature and origin (Barber 2001; Irwin et al. 1997).

In the context of entrepreneurship, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander entrepreneurs may be embedded in the Dreaming view of the world (Cecil 2014) and, therefore, operate in a convergence of cultural and commercial practice. This convergence is both implicit in behaviour and attitude (Lindsay 2005) and explicit in, for example, logos and branding (Coleman 2017). As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander entrepreneurship grows (Shirodkar et al. 2018; Shirodkar et al. 2020), it is important to explore how Indigenous entrepreneurs can thrive in culturally challenging environments (Galperin et al. 2021).

One of the goals of neoliberalism is to reduce welfare dependence and assimilate Indigenous people into mainstream economies with minimal state interference by linking personal responsibility to opportunity and thus create wealth and jobs (Dornan 2020). Neoliberal economic policies rose to prominence in the 1970s as a critique of state intervention (Di Giminiani 2018). Presently, neoliberal thinking still influences Indigenous development and promotes notions of personal autonomy, individualism and self-realisation in market economies, with little account of customary Indigenous activity (Altman 2018; Dawson et al. 2021). This approach to Indigenous development is criticised for its commodification of natural and cultural resources for self-interest (Horowitz 2021); overemphasis on trickle down-economics (Boluk et al. 2019); and for the exacerbation of power imbalances and social inequalities (Scheyvens et al. 2016). Boluk et al. (2019) call for a critical examination of development with more informed Indigenous needs-based analyses (Altman 2018).

**HYBRID ECONOMY MODEL**

Altman (2001) proposed the hybrid economy model (HEM) as an alternative to neoliberal approaches to Indigenous economic development with an emphasis on customary economic activity (Curchin 2013) as an integral part of the hybrid economy. The HEM is a framework to understand the linkages between the customary, market and state...
components of Indigenous economies (see Figure 1). The HEM highlights the convergence of traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practices with capitalist practices in the neoliberal economy (Altman 2009) and shows that Aboriginal entrepreneurs are engaged in productive activity at the convergence of the customary, market or state economies (Russell 2011).

The HEM shows that the customary economy (see 2, in Figure 1) encompasses productive activities of cultural progression with non-financial benefits, such as Aboriginal smoking ceremonies and hunting (Altman 2001; Gilbey 2020). The market economy (see 3, in Figure 1) consists of the productive and consumptive sectors, including the roles of entrepreneurs, buyers, sellers, and industry (Altman 2001). The state (see 1, Figure 1) acts in many capacities in relation to citizens and has the mandate to function as a legislative entity with regulative, enforcement and economic functions. Altman (2007) posits that these conceptual sectors are invariably interdependent (see 4, 5, 6, and 7, in Figure 1).

The HEM’s acknowledgement of the customary sector as a credible location of Indigenous economic activity has not only encouraged its use in Indigenous regional economic development research (Buchanan 2014; Kwan et al. 2006; Muecke & Dibley 2016; Wesley & Litster 2015) but it also offers an alternative to the two-sector mixed economy of state and market that forms the backbone of neoliberal ideology (Rodgers 2018). For this research, the inclusion of the customary dimension makes the HEM suitable as a framework to analyse how Aboriginal entrepreneurs navigate cultural and commercial imperatives in the hybrid economy. An example of the mutually supportive relationship between the market and customary economies is the monetisation of cultural dance (customary) in the tourism sector (market), where the government intervenes through regulation and funding (state) to address market failures (Altman 2004; Curchin 2013; Mika et al. 2020).

Curchin (2013) is critical of the HEM, stating that the cost of understated competitive tensions between the customary and market economies is unexplored. For example, the opportunity cost of labour time in customary activities instead of market activities (customary-market linkage), the impact of state regulation on customary activities such as fishing (state-customary linkage) and increasing tax obligations (state-market linkage) are not easily accounted for in the HEM (Curchin 2013). Meanwhile, for Gregory (2016), the hybrid economy is less original than Altman (2001, 2009) might claim. Works which may have inspired Altman’s HEM include Yang’s (2000) theory of economic hybridity, which in turn was built on earlier thinking such as Gramsci’s articulation theory (DeLuca 1999), and the tribal economy and political economy (Gregory 2016). Additionally, Gregory (2016) points to a missing analysis of a category in the bounded white space outside the venn diagram (see Figure 1). The HEM has sectors numbered from 1 to 7, while Gregory (2016) argues that there are 8 sectors, where the latter represents those who do not receive income from any of the sectors, such as young children, the homeless, and the destitute. While this critique identifies limitations in the HEM, they are non-

![Figure 1: Altman’s Hybrid Economy Model (Altman, 2009, p. 322).](image-url)
fatal logical errors that do not diminish the model’s utility in this instance (Gregory 2016). This is because we were focusing on those Aboriginal individuals already invested in the entrepreneurial process and we do not claim the HEM to be the founder of this approach to analysis. Instead, the HEM is a useful framework for analysis in this context.

METHODS

RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY AND APPROACH
As a non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research team, we understand that research positionality needs to be acknowledged, as power imbalances can impact research outcomes (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller 2014; Manganda 2021). Being non-Aboriginal (Zimbabwean-born, New Zealand Māori, and New Zealand Colombian co-authors) and based outside Australia, we acknowledge our limited knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander world views and research practice. At critical times in the research, we sought the advice of Aboriginal business scholars, undertook our institution’s human ethics approval process, which includes consideration of ethical issues when researching Indigenous peoples, and were mindful to be respectful of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

We adopt pragmatism as a research philosophy, which emphasises research practice over theoretical deliberation and using methods that work in the circumstances (Creswell 2009; Kaushik & Walsh 2019; Ormerod 2006). Pragmatism assumes the realities of the researched are constructed from context – social, political, economic, historical, and cultural (Denzin 2010). A pragmatic approach ensures that participant perspectives are understood in their unique contexts and that the research benefits the communities involved. We aim to contribute to knowledge of practical and real-world experiences useful in understanding the complex and contextual relationship between Aboriginal entrepreneurs and their environments. To that end, we utilised Altman’s (2009) HEM as a framework to analyse participant responses when navigating these worlds, as it is an ‘analytical construct for the assessment of the particularities of any one situation and the linkages between the market, the state and the customary components of the economy’ (Altman 2004: 4). The HEM, therefore, provides a structure to order and analyse participant responses in relation to the hybridity of Indigenous economies. From the participants’ views, we seek to understand lived experiences with rich descriptions over specific observations (Neubauer et al. 2019; Thomas 2006). We use an inductive approach to the analysis, which allows findings to emerge from themes (Liu 2016; Thomas 2006), links between research objectives and findings to be established, and typologies to be developed (Gilgun 2011; Thomas 2006).

RESEARCH PROCESS
The first co-author had family connections in Perth, and following initial contact with an Aboriginal entrepreneur via social media, participants from the Noongar (made up of the Goreng, Minang, Ballardong and Whadjuk peoples), the Wangkathatha and the Gumbaynggir nations, were recruited using the snowball method (Handcock & Gile 2011). In this method, access to participants is facilitated through relationship building which aligns with the use of relationality in Indigenous research approaches (Bishop 1996; Gillies 2006). Following initial contact, we were introduced to networks of Aboriginal entrepreneurs in the Perth area of Western Australia where Indigenous Australians account for 1.6% of the Greater Perth population (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2016). Table 3 lists

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PARTICIPANT</th>
<th>INDUSTRY TYPE</th>
<th>STAFFING LEVELS</th>
<th>SIZE</th>
<th>GENDER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Textiles</td>
<td>1–10</td>
<td>small</td>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Facilities Service</td>
<td>51–199</td>
<td>medium</td>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Staffing &amp; Recruitment</td>
<td>11–50</td>
<td>medium</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Business Consultancy</td>
<td>1–10</td>
<td>small</td>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>1–10</td>
<td>small</td>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Information Technology</td>
<td>1–10</td>
<td>small</td>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>Environmental Services</td>
<td>1–10</td>
<td>small</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>Tourism</td>
<td>1–10</td>
<td>small</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>1–10</td>
<td>small</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>Textiles</td>
<td>1–10</td>
<td>small</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 Summary characteristics of the Aboriginal enterprises.
ABORIGINAL CULTURAL IDENTITY IN BUSINESS

All participants identified as Aboriginal people and shared with us the values underpinning their business ethos. Participants used adjectives like ‘innate’ and ‘intrinsic’ to explain how culture was built into their business practice. The innateness of culture is apparent in, for example, logos and branding. Aboriginal branding was a way of signalling an enterprise’s connection to Aboriginal culture and identity. Eight of the ten businesses utilised Aboriginal art, logos, and murals to brand their business cards and premises. Participant D, for example, purposefully branded the business Aboriginal to align with their community and generate positive social outcomes:

Our logo is Aboriginal colours... We show our association with being an Indigenous business and our association... culturally. In some instances, cultural practices have a place in strategic planning. (D: 1)

Similarly, cultural considerations impacted business decisions. Participants relayed a desire to ensure the preservation of culturally significant sites:

I had to drop my budget down even further... it probably wasn’t the best thing to do, but culturally it was important, and observance of cultural protocol. (G: 1)

Participants communicated a strong connection to their identity, manifesting a desire to generate positive outcomes for their communities, respect cultural practices, and develop strategic plans underpinned by cultural values. A strong connection to culture was evident, as with Participant B, whose cultural values took precedence over the venture’s growth strategy. The participant realised the risk of going corporate could lead to a compromise of culture:

We wanted to be corporate at one stage... but we also want that values to be strong... because those

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Emerging themes were linked to the research question of how Aboriginal entrepreneurs navigate cultural and commercial imperatives, with the entrepreneur being the unit of analysis (Tetnowski 2015). After defining and clarifying the themes (Braun & Clarke 2006) through an inductive approach (Alhojailan 2012; Kiger & Varpio 2020), the co-authors conducted a debriefing process to assess the credibility of the findings (Barber & Walczak 2009; Scharp & Sanders 2019). The first co-author analysed the transcripts, two co-authors reviewed a selection of transcripts, and a consensus was reached through triangulation and analysis of emerging themes. Verbatim excerpts are presented in the findings to authentically share Indigenous participants’ experiences and world views (Nielsen & Wilson 2012).

FINDINGS

This section presents the main findings of our interviews with participants. We have used codes to present participant quotes; for example, ‘Participant A quote 1’ will appear as ‘A: 1’in subsequent mentions. Three main themes are presented: (1) the value of Aboriginal cultural identity in business; (2) the benefits of integrating Aboriginal culture in Aboriginal entrepreneurship; and (3) the challenges of doing so.

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Similarly, cultural considerations impacted business decisions. Participants relayed a desire to ensure the preservation of culturally significant sites:

I had to drop my budget down even further... it probably wasn’t the best thing to do, but culturally it was important, and observance of cultural protocol. (G: 1)

Males in our community...said, ‘No, this location is not a location for women’...So...I made allowances... (G: 2)

Participants communicated a strong connection to their identity, manifesting a desire to generate positive outcomes for their communities, respect cultural practices, and develop strategic plans underpinned by cultural values. A strong connection to culture was evident, as with Participant B, whose cultural values took precedence over the venture’s growth strategy. The participant realised the risk of going corporate could lead to a compromise of culture:

We wanted to be corporate at one stage... but we also want that values to be strong... because those
small little foundations get lost... and people get lost within lots of policies... but we just want people to be who they are... without having to code switch because ‘I’ve got to go to work.’ (B: 1)

Participant B considered their Aboriginal identity fundamental to their business ethos and sharing their culture an advantage:

‘[In] most contracts...we have an upper hand... [having] processes and employees that are Aboriginal’ (B: 4).

ABORIGINAL CULTURE IN ABORIGINAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

We found that incorporating cultural practices in Aboriginal entrepreneurship realised benefits beyond the enterprise. Aboriginal entrepreneurship was the catalyst for positive social outcomes in both economic and non-economic spheres. In the economic sphere, we found that Aboriginal entrepreneurs applied cultural precepts of collective well-being by actively employing Aboriginal community members: ‘We [employ] Aboriginal people only through our business’ (J: 1). In this way, the entrepreneur is addressing issues of economic inequality and satisfying a need in the community for employment. According to Participant B, growing mainstream interest and desire for understanding offer an opportunity to build relationships:

People are now looking at that culture as the longest-living culture in the world... That’s a key... [to] building relationships with our non-Aboriginal partners, and really sharing that culture because that’s everyone’s culture. (B: 6)

Participants exhibit an awareness of the potential to build bridges with mainstream Australia. For example, Participant C communicates the need to show that Aboriginal entrepreneurs are professional and capable of delivering:

There’s got to be a balance where they can subtly see that we’re an Aboriginal business, but at the same time we must show that we’re professional to deliver the service. (C: 1)

Participants conveyed the potential to educate the mainstream on Aboriginal culture through their entrepreneurial practice. In one example, Participant F found that cultural competency fosters compassion and empathy within their organisation:

... integrating, intertwining culture within the organisation...is critical to educate the organisation... and [to] understand and create that empathy and compassion. (F: 1)

In another example, Participant J makes cultural awareness training a prerequisite to get employed in their business:

We [employ] Aboriginal people only through our business. For people to get employment with us they’ll need to do their certs in leadership, cover[ring] Aboriginal cultural awareness. (J: 1)

Participants recognise the benefits of implementing cultural practices in their businesses, the potential to share their culture, and dismantle negative stereotypes of Aboriginal enterprise.

CHALLENGES OF INTEGRATING ABORIGINAL CULTURE WITH ABORIGINAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

In mainstream circles, Aboriginal entrepreneurs face ongoing challenges due to racism and discrimination. We found evidence of these challenges in participants’ responses and the strategies they applied to overcome them. Participant responses suggest a perpetuation of negative stereotypes of Aboriginal people. According to participants, Aboriginal entrepreneurs are considered risky. Participant A suggests the mainstream doubts the ability of Aboriginal entrepreneurs to perform within standard business practice:

Looking at potential clients, there’s always an element of risk that they see in terms of how we do our business... is it in accordance with what’s standard and practice, in terms of business (A: 3)

Despite their level of success, Aboriginal entrepreneurs are still perceived as risky:

‘It doesn’t matter how successful we are, there’s still a lot of corporate companies, for various reasons, that find Indigenous businesses to be highly risky’ (C: 2).

Consequently, engaging with the mainstream may become daunting: ‘It can be very intimidating and overwhelming when you walk into a room where there are no Aboriginal people in business’ (A: 5). Participant C shared how they try to moderate the way in which cultural practice manifests in their business when interacting with corporate clients: ‘I try to balance it, because if you go too cultural...the corporate
client will think... we won’t know how to deal with them’ (C: 1). Participant C goes further, equating this behaviour moderation as a game that one should play to navigate the mainstream:

I know how that game plays, and one thing you can’t do is attack the mainstream world, because... then you’re seen...like a protestor, or a bit of a vigilante... If you can articulate what the issue is without attacking or blaming... There’s better buy-in. (C: 5)

Similarly, some participants referred to themselves as code switchers, able to adapt to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal business environments:

I often refer to myself as a cultural code switcher. I am firmly rooted in my Indigenous origins...but also adept in the European construct... It’s in that space that I flip the switch. I go into this world where I must think differently, speak differently, and navigate differently. (J: 3)

Aboriginal entrepreneurs must compromise in interactions with non-Aboriginal entities to fit in and meet mainstream expectations.

Implementing cultural practices in business can be a source of internal conflict for Aboriginal entrepreneurs. Participants relayed dilemmas in which their businesses had equally competing priorities with their cultural obligations. Significant cultural events such as ‘sorry business’ or ‘sorrow business’ (period of mourning following a funeral) were given as examples:

When it comes down to sorrow business, [it’s] probably the only time I get forced to decide about choosing one over the other... I’m very torn...but at the same time, I know my business must go on. (E: 2)

Due to the challenges, Participants G and C pondered if their businesses would have been more successful if they had not identified as Aboriginal-owned:

If I were a non-Aboriginal person, I probably would have been where I am today at the end of the third or fourth year... it takes twice as long to provide that confidence across the industry and the market... (G: 3)

Sometimes I’ve even said it would be more beneficial if I took off all the Aboriginal branding and didn’t have my name on Supply Nation. (C: 4)

Internal conflict, as previously discussed, is resolved with pragmatic approaches to problem-solving. For example, Participant A explained how they approached the dilemma of deciding whether to attend a funeral (cultural expectation) or meeting an urgent business matter: ‘I couldn’t attend a particular funeral one time... my dad and my sisters and adult children attended [and] represented the family... thank goodness that it didn’t cause any issues’ (A: 4). The mainstream posed challenges to implementing cultural practices in participant businesses. Participants were aware of the structural forces of racism and bias and navigated challenging situations in various ways. Depending on their circumstances, participants adopt various strategies to achieve desired outcomes.

**DISCUSSION**

**THE ROLES OF CULTURE AND CONTEXT IN ABORIGINAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP**

Culture is integral to Indigenous entrepreneurship (Awatere & Harcourt 2021; Dockery 2010, 2012; Gorman et al. 2020), which is evident in entrepreneurs’ attitudes, values and behaviours (Lindsay 2005). Yet, little is known about how Indigenous culture influences entrepreneurial practice – what Indigenous entrepreneurs do because of their culture in different contexts. This gap in knowledge led us to enquire into why and how Aboriginal entrepreneurs navigate cultural and commercial imperatives in business. In this research, we found that Aboriginal entrepreneurs iteratively assess the complementarity of cultural and commercial imperatives to protect their Indigenous identity while meeting business objectives. We found that Aboriginal entrepreneurs use various strategies in the navigation process (see Table 4), consistent with the idea that Indigenous entrepreneurship is highly contextual (Croce 2017), and is a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon (Collins et al. 2017).

Depending on the context, culture can be an enabler (Foley & O’Connor 2013) and a constraint to Indigenous entrepreneurship (Collins et al. 2017; Tretiakov et al. 2020). Our findings suggest, however, that for Aboriginal entrepreneurs, the constraining effect of culture was more apparent when dealing with non-Aboriginal people outside their enterprises. Charles (2017) suggests that as social pressure for Aboriginal engagement increases, Aboriginal businesses risk being tokenised. This is because mainstream organisations try to adopt Aboriginal cultural facades to portray a favourable corporate image. Simultaneously, commercial imperatives can also constrain cultural imperatives. For example, Participant B opted not to grow to preserve the cultural ethos of their business. Consequently, Aboriginal entrepreneurs are faced with navigating a
cultural-commercial continuum in a business environment influenced by mainstream expectations and norms.

**NAVIGATING HYBRIDITY IN ABORIGINAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP**

Applying Altman’s (2009) HEM to participants’ responses shows the hybridity of the sectors in which participants are engaged in four main ways. First, the customary-market linkage describes where customary and market activities, such as customary wildlife harvesting for market sale, are concurrently occurring (Altman 2007). Participant G shared a situation where a market activity (contract work on a culturally significant site) had to adhere to a cultural protocol, which was that only men could work on the site. Second, the state-customary linkage, where the state is linked to and supports customary activity (Altman 2007). Two examples of this linkage are state intervention in the cultural economy for economic betterment and welfare dependence reduction and state support in monetising cultural tourism (Altman 2004). Third, state-market linkages involve the state intervening in the market through regulation, subsidies, and taxation to address market failure and anticompetitive firm behaviour (Aikins 2009). Fourth, the market-state-customary linkage is where the three economies (state, market, customary) are intertwined. This is exemplified by a single economic activity occurring in all three (Russell 2011).

Although Altman’s (2009) HEM was helpful in analysing participant responses the need for a more nuanced understanding of how Indigenous entrepreneurs navigate cultural and commercial imperatives remains. While the HEM gives us an understanding of how participants operate in the three overlapping economies, critiques include an incompleteness in development (Gregory 2016) and understated competitive tensions between economic sectors (Curchin 2013). Additionally, we were not able to understand how or why Indigenous entrepreneurs navigated the intersection of cultural and commercial imperatives in the overlapping economies and sectors. Participant E for instance, explained this complexity when saying that ‘when it comes to family [sorrow business] I’m very torn, but at the same time I know my business has to go on.’

Peredo et al. (2004) propose a contingency theory of entrepreneurial situations where Indigenous entrepreneurship presents differently according to context. They argue against homogenous approaches that assert mainstream tenets of entrepreneurship are equally applicable in Indigenous contexts. While Altman’s (2009) HEM explores the customary context of Indigenous entrepreneurship, its focus is on the structure of these system-level elements of state, market, and custom. Whilst HEM is a useful framework for high-level analyses of economic development, in this research we focus on the situational nature of Indigenous entrepreneurship at the actor level, that is, on the Indigenous entrepreneur and how each navigates commercial and cultural imperatives. We, therefore, propose a contingency model for navigating the hybridity inherent in Indigenous entrepreneurship (see Figure 2). The model categorises strategies that Indigenous entrepreneurs employ to navigate cultural and commercial imperatives into four dimensions. The dimensions are low cultural-high commercial, high cultural-low commercial, high cultural-high commercial, and low cultural-low commercial. We include quotes from participant of this study for illustrative purposes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAVIGATION STRATEGY</th>
<th>QUOTE NUMBER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contingency planning to satisfy both cultural and commercial imperatives</td>
<td>A:2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapport building with non-Indigenous stakeholders</td>
<td>A:4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoiding corporate structures to avoid rigidity and retain cultural elements</td>
<td>B:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural awareness training for all employees</td>
<td>B:4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capitalise on changing attitudes in society towards Aboriginal culture</td>
<td>B:6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impression management to suit audience</td>
<td>C:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diplomatic approaches to communicating grievances</td>
<td>C:5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prioritising cultural protocols of significance</td>
<td>G:2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorporate social outcomes in business outcomes</td>
<td>J:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code switching to suit audience</td>
<td>J:3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 Examples of navigation strategies.
consequences of implicit and explicit racial biases against Aboriginal people in mainstream society (Denny-Smith & Loosemore 2017; Foley 2003; Paradies 2005; Ruhanen & Whitford 2018). Participants report that interaction with non-Aboriginal people and mainstream entities can be intimidating. As Wood and Davidson (2011) suggest, Aboriginal entrepreneurs face discrimination and exclusion from networks in mainstream circles. Participants navigate mainstream interaction using impression management and code switching as strategies to mitigate social harm and attain mainstream legitimacy.

The high cultural-low commercial quadrant (bottom right) of Figure 2 emphasises the prioritisation of cultural over commercial imperatives. In this quadrant, cultural stewardship holds primacy and strategies are applied to protect cultural elements even at the cost of commercial imperatives. As Dana (2015) suggests, profit and cultural stewardship are success factors for Aboriginal enterprise and the rationale for cultural decisions, which may seem incongruent with mainstream assumptions. For example, Participant G bidding low in a tendering process to ensure an Aboriginal company works on a culturally significant site. This may mean culture and identity supersede profit in decisions that have cultural impact (Degen 2007). For Participant G, profits were sacrificed for cultural stewardship when they said, ‘economically, it probably wasn’t the best thing to do, but culturally it was really important.’

The high cultural-high commercial quadrant (top right) of Figure 2 represents an even weighting of both cultural and commercial imperatives. The navigation strategies in this quadrant suggest that participants seek to harmonise cultural and commercial imperatives. For example, Participant B capitalising on more favourable attitudes toward Aboriginal culture in the mainstream to enhance commercial outcomes. This approach was especially prominent for Participant B as they were well positioned in a niche market. They were an Aboriginal business acting as an intermediary between their clients and the Aboriginal community. Cultural awareness training was implemented in the business, and non-Aboriginal employees were paired up with Aboriginal employees to learn from them in the field.

Of the 10 Indigenous entrepreneurs interviewed, there were no examples in the low cultural-low commercial quadrant (bottom left) of Figure 2. Several reasons may explain this. First, participants were successful Aboriginal entrepreneurs who value their identity and being business owners. Second, participants do not see commercial and cultural imperatives as trade-offs. Third, participants may evaluate imperatives as consistent with a long-term view of business. For example, taking care of ‘sorrow business’ now,
means a commitment to the entrepreneurial endeavour from those who were supported in the long term.

The findings show that Aboriginal entrepreneurs iteratively assess their environment to determine appropriate strategies for given situations. As Figure 2 shows, Aboriginal entrepreneurs will assess whether they feel empowered, intimidated, emboldened, threatened, safe or at risk in mainstream business contexts. Depending on their assessment, they move within the bounds of the matrix in Figure 2 to decide how to respond, whether high cultural-low commercial, high commercial-low cultural or high cultural-high commercial. Migration between these combinations of entrepreneurial imperative is highly fluid as they are facilitated by the entrepreneur’s assessment of cultural fit between context and strategy. For example, Participant J shares that, ‘I often refer to myself as a cultural code switcher... firmly rooted in my Indigenous origins... but I’m also adept in the European construct... It’s in that space that I flip the switch... I have to think differently, speak differently, and navigate differently.’

We note that these strategies are contextual and cannot be generalised to all Aboriginal entrepreneurs. Nonetheless, the model helps to provisionally illustrate how Indigenous entrepreneurs navigate cultural and commercial imperatives in their entrepreneurial practice.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how Aboriginal entrepreneurs navigate cultural and commercial imperatives in business. Aboriginality was inextricably integrated within Aboriginal enterprises, with entrepreneurs making decisions that align with their cultural and commercial imperatives at strategic and operational levels. This alignment occurs in a context that favours Aboriginal identity, values, and practices. Altman’s (2009) hybrid economy model was a useful framework for analysing how Aboriginal entrepreneurs interact with cultural and commercial imperatives at a structural level. This research, however, highlights nuances at the actor level where entrepreneurs have settled on strategies that offer cultural fit. We propose a contingency model to illustrate the process of Indigenous entrepreneurs navigating cultural and commercial imperatives in business.

In practice, Aboriginal entrepreneurs’ navigation strategies in non-Aboriginal business contexts spotlight opportunities for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal enterprises to transform their employees, sectors, and communities. This transformation can occur through demonstrating the feasibility of implementing both cultural and commercial imperatives. Cultural education and shifting biases toward indigeneity is crucial to achieving Indigenous self-determination and economic sovereignty. These findings support previous research that calls for Indigenous control of the entrepreneurial process (Foley 2000; Peredo et al. 2004; Warren et al. 2017) as proficiency in the navigation process facilitates Indigenous self-determination.

As a contribution, we add to the contingency theory of Indigenous entrepreneurship (Peredo et al. 2004) with a situational approach to reconciling mainstream values with Indigenous cultural precepts. This research involved a specific group of Aboriginal entrepreneurs. Longitudinal studies are needed to determine how these strategies may evolve over time and whether they lead to self-determination among Indigenous entrepreneurs in a sustainable way.

Although encountering bias, stereotyping and discrimination, this strengths-based research illustrates effective strategies Aboriginal entrepreneurs use to avoid, minimise, or overcome such obstacles. Further research on the process of navigating cultural and commercial imperatives is needed in other Indigenous contexts to determine when and how Indigenous businesses can thrive by embracing their cultural identity and world view.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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