

Digital Wellness and Indigenous Frameworks: A Critical Analysis of Te Poutama o te Ora's Taha Matihiko

Abstract

This paper explores the first three phases of the transformational process under Te Poutama o te Ora as applied to Taha Matihiko, a Māori wellness approach to digital colonisation. The analysis is the first of three papers with the second and third studies related to Taha Pūtea (Financial Wellness) and Taha Kai-Puku (Food and Gut Wellness) respectively. Te Poutama o te Ora draws on indigenous wisdom and contemporary transformation practices, the framework guides individuals through awareness, authority establishment, and resistance building. The analysis explores how digital platforms systematically colonise attention, relationships, physical health, identity, spiritual connection, and mental wellbeing across five wellness dimensions (Whakapapa, Tinana, Tuakiri, Wairua, and Hinengaro). Through structured protocols including seven-day awareness tracking, nine-day resistance intensification, and architectural boundary design, Taha Matihiko provides evidence-based strategies for reclaiming digital sovereignty.

Introduction

The pervasive integration of digital technologies into daily life has created unprecedented challenges for wellbeing, particularly among indigenous communities already navigating intergenerational trauma and cultural disconnection (Whitinui, 2014). Digital platforms, designed primarily for engagement maximisation and data extraction, function as contemporary forms of colonisation that systematically appropriate attention, time, and autonomy (Zuboff, 2019). This paper analyses the first three steps of Taha Matihiko, a framework grounded in te Ao Māori that addresses digital wellness through structured transformation cycles aligned with indigenous concepts of mana (authority), kaha (strength), and tikanga (protocols).

Te Poutama o te Ora, the nine-element wellness framework underlying Taha Matihiko, builds upon established Māori health models such as Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 1998) while specifically addressing contemporary digital challenges. The framework's first three steps - Te Ohore (The Awakening), Te Whakatūria tō Mana (Establishing Your Authority), and Te Whakawhanake i tō Kaha (Building Your Resistance) - form a foundational sequence that moves participants from unconscious digital consumption to intentional sovereignty.

Step 1: Te Ohore - The Awakening

Conceptual Framework

Te Ohore addresses the fundamental challenge of digital unconsciousness - the phenomenon whereby individuals operate on autopilot, unaware of how thoroughly technology has infiltrated their consciousness and behaviour (Alter, 2017). The framework conceptualises this as digital colonisation, drawing explicit parallels between historical land confiscation and contemporary attention extraction. Just as colonisation displaced Māori from whenua (land) and disrupted whakapapa (genealogical connections), digital platforms displace individuals from presence and disrupt authentic relationships (Smith, 2021).

Five-Dimensional Impact Assessment

The awareness process systematically examines digital impact across five interconnected dimensions. Whakapapa encompasses the erosion of authentic connection, where digital interactions replace rather than enhance face-to-face relationships (Turkle, 2015).

Tinana addresses physical manifestations including disrupted circadian rhythms from blue light exposure, musculoskeletal strain, and sedentary behaviour patterns (Twenge, 2017). Tuakiri explores identity fragmentation through performative self-presentation and algorithm-driven curation, particularly concerning for Rangatahi (youth) forming identity in hyper-digital contexts (boyd, 2014).

Wairua examines spiritual disconnection resulting from constant interruption and inability to access stillness. Hinengaro talks of cognitive colonisation through attention hijacking and emotional manipulation designed to maximise engagement (Harris, 2017).

Step 2: Te Whakatūria tō Mana - Establishing Authority

From Awareness to Agency

Te Whakatūria tō Mana transforms awareness into actionable sovereignty through systematic mana (authority) establishment. The concept of mana in te ao Māori encompasses both inherited rights and earned capacity through consistent action (Mead, 2016). This step operationalises mana as digital sovereignty - the right and ability to determine where attention and energy are directed rather than allowing platforms to make those determinations algorithmically.

SMART Goal Conversion and Priority Selection – Te Whāriki o te Ora

The framework employs SMART goal methodology (Doran, 1981) adapted for digital wellness contexts. The protocol distinguishes between ‘wants’ and ‘needs,’ encouraging participants to focus exclusively on needs during initial transformation stages - acknowledging that attempting simultaneous change across too many domains reduces effectiveness (Baumeister & Tierney, 2011). From fifteen potential goals, participants identify nine focus priorities - one from each dimension rated highest, plus four additional cross-dimensional priorities - creating Te Whāriki o te Ora (the woven mat of wellbeing) that provides direction without overwhelming cognitive capacity. This systematic reduction from broad awareness to specific, ranked priorities operationalises indigenous principles of focus and intentionality within a framework compatible with contemporary goal-setting research.

Te Pukapuka Mataara 7-Rā: Seven-Day Awareness Protocol

A structured seven-day observation period is undertaken and provides participants with empirical data about their digital behaviours without immediate intervention. This methodology aligns with motivational interviewing approaches that prioritise awareness

before change (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). Daily documentation across the five dimensions creates pattern recognition, enabling participants to identify specific triggers, peak vulnerability times, and dimensional deficits requiring intervention. The framework explicitly discourages judgment, positioning observation as information gathering rather than moral evaluation - a stance that reduces resistance and shame often associated with behaviour change initiatives (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1983).

Three-Tier Practice Architecture add Te Whakatakato tō Mahere

This awareness documentation directly informs Te Whakatakato tō Mahere, the strategic action planning protocol that bridges goal identification and daily implementation. Unlike conventional to-do lists that can lead to overwhelm, Te Whakatakato tō Mahere establishes three integrated timeframes: monthly priorities (time-bound commitments such as deadlines or significant events), weekly strategies (specific practices aligned with each of the nine focus goals from Te Whāriki o te Ora), and daily rhythms (Whakatūria tō Mana) that weave wellness practices throughout morning preparation, workday navigation, and evening reflection.

This tri-level structure reflects both Maramataka (lunar calendar) wisdom regarding optimal timing for different activities and contemporary research on implementation intentions, which demonstrates that specifying when, where, and how goals will be pursued significantly increases follow-through rates (Gollwitzer, 1999). Te Rākaunui (full moon period) supports initiating new boundaries and difficult conversations, while Ōmutu to Huna (dark moon period) facilitates planning and introspection (Roberts et al., 2004). This integration of traditional knowledge validates indigenous time-keeping systems while providing practical guidance for aligning digital practices with natural rhythms. The framework provides dimension-specific strategy templates ranging from small practices (greeting a stranger for Whakapapa) to significant commitments (eliminating screens during family meals), acknowledging that sustainable transformation occurs through incremental integration rather than dramatic overhaul. Participants are explicitly cautioned to identify practices reflecting their authentic

priorities rather than aspirational ideals, ensuring alignment between stated goals and actual implementation capacity - critical.

Three-Tier Integration System

The framework structures practices into three tiers reflecting different levels of commitment and cognitive demand. Tier 1 comprises daily non-negotiables - foundational practices performed without exception that create baseline digital boundaries. Tier 2 includes regular practices executed 3-4 times weekly, allowing flexibility while maintaining consistency. Tier 3 encompasses aspirational rhythms pursued, when possible, without self-judgment for non-completion. This tiered approach acknowledges the reality of competing demands while establishing clear priorities, consistent with implementation intention research showing that specific plans increase follow-through (Gollwitzer, 1999).

Environmental Architecture

Environmental design plays a crucial role in mana establishment. Physical modifications (charging stations outside bedrooms, designated phone-free zones) create structural barriers that reduce reliance on willpower - a limited resource subject to depletion (Baumeister et al., 1998). Digital environment modifications (app deletion, notification management, screen time limits) reduce friction for desired behaviours while increasing friction for habitual checking. This approach aligns with choice architecture principles demonstrating that environmental design significantly influences behaviour without restricting freedom (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008).

Step 3: Te Whakawhanake i tō Kaha - Building Resistance

Progressive Resistance Training

Te Whakawhanake i tō Kaha conceptualises digital wellness as developing kaha (strength) through progressive resistance - analogous to physical training where capacity increases through controlled challenge. This step acknowledges that dependency systems actively resist user disengagement through escalating tactics: increased notification urgency, algorithm refinement, convenience enhancement, and

social pressure intensification (Eyal, 2014). Building kaha requires developing capacity to withstand this systematic pushback.

The nine-day challenge protocol progressively increases resistance across specific domains. Unlike Step 2's focus on establishing baseline practices, Step 3 deliberately stress-tests boundaries to identify weaknesses and build capacity for sustained resistance. This resistance is built through consistency (Tū Pūmau) that leads and realises as success and productivity (Whai Mua) which in turn create stability (Tū Maia). The nine-day timeframe holds cultural significance while providing sufficient duration for habit disruption and new pattern establishment (Lally et al., 2010). Each day targets a different dimension or challenge type, preventing adaptation while building comprehensive resistance skills.

Architectural Boundary Systems

Building kaha extends beyond willpower to structural implementation of architectural boundaries that function automatically. Device segregation separates work and personal technologies, creating physical barriers to multitasking and work intrusion into personal time. Space segregation designates phone-free sanctuaries where technology cannot penetrate. Time segregation establishes communication windows, creation windows, and rest windows - protecting deep work and genuine rest from constant availability demands. These architectures embody the framework's understanding that sustained change requires environmental support rather than perpetual conscious effort (Wood & Neal, 2007).

Authority Statements and Social Pressure Navigation

A critical component of kaha development involves preparing responses to social pressure - often the strongest force undermining digital boundaries. The framework distinguishes between justification (which signals negotiability) and authority statements (which assert sovereignty without apology). Pre-scripted responses reduce cognitive load during confrontation and model boundary maintenance without defensiveness. This approach acknowledges that digital wellness exists within social systems that may

actively resist individual change, requiring explicit strategies for navigating relational pressure (Christakis & Fowler, 2009).

Collective Resistance

The framework explicitly encourages formation of resistance circles - small groups pursuing digital wellness collectively. This reflects indigenous understanding of change as fundamentally communal rather than individualistic (Durie, 1998). Collective resistance provides normalisation, shared strategy development, accountability, and social support - factors consistently associated with behaviour change success (Prochaska & Velicer, 1997). Meeting structures emphasise celebration of sovereignty victories alongside problem-solving, reinforcing progress while maintaining forward momentum.

Discussion and Implications

The first three steps of Taha Matihiko demonstrate how indigenous frameworks can address contemporary challenges while honouring traditional knowledge systems. The explicit naming of digital colonisation connects historical trauma with present-day attention extraction, validating Māori experiences while providing conceptual clarity. The framework's integration of te Reo Māori concepts (mana, kaha, tikanga, Maramataka) with evidence-based behaviour change methodologies exemplifies cultural adaptation - maintaining indigenous integrity while incorporating useful Western approaches.

The structured progression from awareness to authority to resistance acknowledges that sustainable change requires sequential capacity building rather than immediate transformation. This contrasts with digital detox approaches that emphasise abrupt disconnection without addressing underlying patterns or building long-term capacity (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020). The framework's emphasis on architectural solutions over perpetual willpower reflects contemporary understanding of ego depletion and decision fatigue (Baumeister & Vohs, 2016).

For indigenous communities, Taha Matihiko offers culturally grounded pathways for addressing digital challenges without requiring assimilation to Western wellness models.

The framework's explicit acknowledgment of intergenerational trauma and cultural disconnection as vulnerability factors for digital colonisation demonstrates understanding of how historical and contemporary oppressions intersect. This positioning may increase framework acceptability and effectiveness within Māori communities while offering valuable insights for other populations navigating digital wellness.

Future research should examine framework effectiveness across diverse populations, particularly comparing outcomes between Māori and non-Māori participants. Longitudinal evaluation across all nine transformation steps is needed to understand sustainability and relapse processes. Parallel investigation of collective and individual modes of implementation may also clarify the extent to which community structures support ongoing digital wellness.

Conclusion

Taha Matihiko advances a phased pathway toward digital sovereignty by aligning Māori knowledge systems with contemporary behavioural science, utilising Te Poutama o te Ora a Māori Wellness Model. Moving from initial awareness to confident digital authority and finally to strategic resistance, participants cultivate the skills needed to disrupt attention-extraction cycles embedded in modern platforms. As digital technologies continue proliferating, frameworks like Taha Matihiko offer crucial pathways for navigating technological integration without sacrificing wellbeing, presence, or sovereignty. This sequencing strengthens digital self-determination while ensuring that cultural values anchor all technological engagement. In an era of accelerating digital saturation, this framework offers a culturally grounded method for sustaining presence, wellbeing, and autonomy within online environments.

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