

The Art of Healing: Toi Māori and Psychotherapy

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates the question: *How does toi Māori support healing for those who engage with it?* and explores the implications for psychotherapy in Aotearoa. Grounded in a Māori-centred methodology that upholds mātauranga and tikanga Māori, this research adopts a qualitative scoping literature review to examine academic and grey literature incorporating the concepts of toi Māori, engagement, and healing. Māori-centred research amplifies Indigenous voices by prioritising Māori ontology and epistemology, ensuring ethical representation of knowledge with authenticity and respect. Thematic analysis of the literature identified five themes: *'Connection to Identity. Connection to Culture. Connection to the Collective.'*, *'Being Tangata Whenua. Using Whenua.'* *'Healing Whenua.'*, *'Shining Light on Wairua. Wairua's Shining Light.'*, *'Make Meaning. Evoke Feeling.'* and *'Honouring Tino Rangatiratanga. Honouring Mātauranga Māori.'* These themes affirm that toi Māori fosters healing for those who engage with it, highlighting the essence of healing for Māori. The findings contribute to psychotherapy practice in Aotearoa by advocating for approaches that integrate mātauranga Māori and support culturally responsive, holistic healing for hauora and wairua. This research underscores the potential for toi Māori to support the healing journey of Māori and to provide a culturally therapeutic approach for those who practice psychotherapy through a mātauranga Māori lens.

Keywords: toi Māori, healing, psychotherapy, mātauranga Māori, wairua.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor used artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed: Frances Cherie Cook

Date: 10 November 2025

Acknowledgements

to the loves of my life

Madeline . Fynley

thank you

.....

to my parents

Karen . Peter

thank you

.....

to 'te tekau'

the best ten people to walk this earth

thank you

.....

to my supervisor

Maria Haenga-Collins

thank you

.....

Allyn

this is for you, I love you xx

Wāhanga Tahī: Introduction

“The mauri of one object retains its momentum not because of its intrinsic qualities alone but because of its relationship with the mauri of others” (Durie, 2001, p. x).

Figure 1

Kōwhaiwhai, 2001



Note. Author's own toi.

The mauri (lifeforce) between these words by Sir Mason Durie and the image in Figure 1; they share an origin. It was around this time, in the early 2000s, when I drew this kōwhaiwhai (pattern) that I began to feel a connection between what I was drawing and where I was going. I now realise what I was feeling was my wairua connecting me to my Māori culture. Without the pen, there would be no kōwhaiwhai; without the kōwhaiwhai, there would be no toi; without the toi, there would be no healing; without that healing, this research would not have happened.

The purpose of this research is to explore the connection between toi Māori and healing. To begin, a brief research rationale will be provided in this wāhanga (section), including the answers to fundamental questions of ‘Why?’, ‘Who?’ and ‘What?’ as a way of laying out the boundaries and reasons for this research. Following this, Wāhanga Rua: Literature Review will situate this research within the broader social, historical, cultural and theoretical framework, and will include definitions for clarity of the key concepts: toi Māori, engaging, and healing. Wāhanga Toru: Methodology and Method will explain the research methodological framework, research design, data collection, and analysis. Wāhanga Whā: Results will present key findings from the scoping literature review and highlight the themes and patterns identified within the research. Finally, Wāhanga Rimu: Discussion will interpret and contextualise the findings and explore the implications of this research for the practice of psychotherapy within Aotearoa.

1.1 Why?

Asking ‘Why?’ is fundamental to research for its capacity to generate insight, promote curiosity, and drive meaningful exploration. For this research, answering this question has brought to the surface the complexities of carrying out research in a bicultural colonised country (Pihama & Smith, 2023).

For more than half a century, the mental health research in Aotearoa has progressively pushed for healing models that are grounded in mātauranga and tikanga Māori (Māori knowledge, values and practice), not only to restore Indigenous healing practices but also for their transformative qualities (Bennett, 2017; Durie, 1997; Smith, 1999). The development of such models is a crucial step towards decolonising the health system within Aotearoa and honouring the obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Durie, 2001; Elder, 2017; Smith, 1999).

For too long, the dominant Westernised biomedical model of understanding health has dominated the narrative and knowledge of healing, stemming back to the odious assault on Māori via the Tohunga Suppression Act 1907 (Moewaka Barners & McCreanor, 2019; Voyce, 1989). The criminalisation of Māori healing practices by tohunga (Māori healers) was a targeted attack from the colonisers and a gross attempt to assimilate Māori into Western understandings of health and wellbeing (Durie et al., 2018; Voyce, 1989). The systematic undermining of Indigenous healing practices and cultural knowledge has had a long-lasting impact, leading to adverse effects on Māori health and wellbeing, growing distrust of the healthcare system among Māori, and increased inequalities for Māori (Pihama & Smith, 2023; Durie, 2011). Despite the Tohunga Suppression Act being repealed in 1962, the impacts of the disruption to rongoā Māori (Māori healing practices) are still felt today (Pihama & Smith, 2023), highlighting the need for decolonised, Māori-led models of care that restore tino rangatiratanga (self-determination) and uphold Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Smith, 1999).

1.2 Who?

Asking ‘Who?’ is fundamental to research for its ability to uncover the intersectionality (Heard & Wigginton, 2023) and positionality (Banks, 1998), and potential biases that shape the research design, process and outcomes. For this research, I was able to reflect on these factors and consider my subjective perspectives and experiences, as well as how they may influence the research.

Intersectionality, as a theoretical framework, requires researchers to critically reflect on their own identities and positionalities within the research process. This reflexive process highlights how overlapping social identities, such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status, can influence experiences of privilege and oppression (Cho et al., 2013; Heard & Wigginton, 2023). When applying this lens, researchers must acknowledge how their own intersecting identities may influence the framing of research questions, the interpretation of data, and the discussion of results. As the researcher, I am European and I whakapapa Māori (*Māori descent and genealogy*). Over the past few years, I have been on a journey to piece together my Ngāpuhi whakapapa and Māori heritage. I am a heterosexual female and am married with two children. I grew up in a financially stable household in Auckland with two

supportive parents and an older sister. My early adult life was concentrated in the arts sector, where I worked as a graphic designer. Seven years ago, I took a step in a different direction and completed undergraduate and post-graduate studies in Psychology and Sociology. Currently, I am a full-time master's student in the Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy Programme. The intersectionality of my overlapping social identities positions me with unconscious biases. Firstly, I acknowledge Māori culture by respecting mātauranga Māori and tikanga Māori in this research. Secondly, I recognise my passion for the arts and its powerful capacity for emotional, psychological, cultural, and spiritual expression and transformation. The intersectionality of my overlapping social identities positions me with biases towards creativity and Māori culture. I acknowledge my biases in this research and will uphold the research methodological process with respect and transparency.

In addition to being responsive to intersectionality, being aware of one's positionality within research helps to mitigate unconscious bias and enhances the ethical and cultural integrity of the research. This reflexive practice is critical in research, where power dynamics and historical contexts must be carefully navigated to ensure respectful and accurate representation (Banks, 1998). As a Māori researcher, I approach this work with a commitment to honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi and upholding the key principles of a *Māori-centred* framework (Smith, 2015). These principles are: Tino Rangatiratanga (Self-determination), Whanaungatanga (Relationships), Manaakitanga (Care and Respect), Kaitiakitanga (Guardianship), Kotahitanga (Unity), Te Reo me ōna Tikanga (Language and Customs), and Aroha ki te Tangata (Respect for People). My research is located through a mātauranga Māori lens, recognising the depth and validity of Indigenous knowledge and its relevance to contemporary inquiry. I acknowledge my own positionality within this kaupapa, including the ways my cultural identity, lived experiences, and academic training shape this research process and my interpretation of the findings. This reflexive process ensures that the research is not only culturally responsive but also contributes to the broader goals of decolonisation and equity for Māori communities (Smith, 1999).

1.3 What?

Lastly, the ‘what’ in research not only guides the design of the research but also clarifies the core concept being explored. Taken together, the ‘Who?’ ‘Why?’ and ‘What?’ establish critical boundaries that facilitate purposeful and meaningful investigation. A crucial element driving this research is the concerning rates of poor mental health experienced in Aotearoa, especially by Māori (Te Hiringa Mahara [THM], 2025). A topic that has been heavily researched since the turn of the century, colonisation and intergenerational trauma are widely discussed as major contributors to the poor mental health experienced by Māori (Durie et al., 2018; Smith, 1999). In a battle to reduce the inequities experienced by Māori, Indigenous academics have emphasised the utmost importance of developing models of health and well-being for Māori that are grounded in tikanga and mātauranga Māori (Durie et al., 2018; Pihama et al., 2014; Pihama & Smith, 2023). It is here that this research finds its momentum; the relationship between poor mental health statistics and the push to innovate culturally sound ways of helping. It is here that this research finds its purpose: exploring ways to support Māori healing. Drawing upon my own experience of wairua while engaging in my toi, this research aims to develop a deeper understanding of how the healing process can be supported through engagement in toi Māori. Taken together, this research is asking the question *‘How does toi Māori support healing for those who engage with it?’* along with the sub-question *‘What might the implications be for psychotherapy in Aotearoa?’*

As this wāhanga draws to a close, an imagined picture of this research has begun to form—lines interweaving concepts like healing and toi Māori and overlapping them with mental health and psychotherapy. The picture, much like my kōwhaiwhai that started this journey, is beginning to take shape. There is more mahi (work) to do, and the following wāhanga will speak of that mahi of those who came before me as I delve into their research on a topic that I feel passionate about.

Wāhanga Rua: Literature Review

Ehara taku toa I te toa takitahi, engari he toa takitini.

My success is not mine alone, it is the success of the collective

(Whakataukī, as cited in Elder, 2020).

Figure 2

My Home, 2005



Note. Author's own toi.

This whakataukī reminds me that I am not walking this research journey alone. As I reflect on this and observe my toi, I notice the interweaving lines surrounding it, guiding the viewer's focus towards the maunga (mountain) in the centre. The idea of using creativity as a healing tool has many predecessors who have explored research questions similar to mine. Much like the toi featured at the beginning of this wāhanga, with its interwoven lines and shapes drawing the viewer's eye to the centre, this wāhanga will weave together the literature that explores how healing is supported through engagement with art and creativity.

To begin this literature review, key terms from the research question are defined for clarity within the context of this research. The key terms are 'toi Māori,' 'healing,' and 'engage.' Following this, a broad literature review will outline the contextual understanding of healing through a mātauranga and tikanga Māori lens. The review will then synthesise relevant literature on Māori healing models and modalities, followed by a synthesis of relevant Māori-centred research. From there, the review will expand to include some Western perspectives from art therapy, psychotherapy, and neuroscience regarding the relationship between healing and artistic engagement. Finally, the mātauranga Māori research that explores healing through toi will be discussed, concluding this wāhanga.

2.1 Definition of 'Toi Māori'

The book 'A Dictionary of the Māori language' (Williams, 1971) provides the definitions for 'toi' and 'Māori'. 'Toi' as art, and 'Māori' as native or belonging to the New Zealand Māori (Williams, 1971). Together, 'toi Māori' refers to Māori art. The scope of 'toi Māori' included in this research will be explained in the eligibility sub-section in Wāhanga Toru: Methodology and Methods.

2.2 Definition of 'Healing'

This research includes two definitions of healing: the first is the Māori understanding of healing through te reo Māori 'rongoā', described as 'preserve, to take care of' (Williams, 1971), and 'ora', meaning 'alive, well, in health' (Williams, 1971). The second defines healing as 'the process of getting well again, especially after a wound or injury' and 'if something has healing powers or properties, it is able to make people feel better physically or mentally' (Collins, n.d.-b). Additionally, words or phrases like whakaora (to heal and restore), mauri

ora (life principle, protecting vitality), restore, improved wellbeing, recover, and therapeutic are included to guide understanding of ‘healing’ and its application in this research. A more detailed explanation of a mātauranga Māori perspective on healing appears later in this wāhanga.

2.3 Definition of ‘Engage’

The Collins online dictionary defines engage as ‘If you engage with an activity, you do it or are actively involved with it’ (Collins, n.d.-a). Other definitions include involvement, participation, interest, and immersion. For this research, the key term ‘engage’ covers all these definitions and words, applying this term to the activity of toi Māori.

Wāhanga Toru: Methodology and Method will specify the precise parameters for the inclusion and exclusion criteria for this research regarding all three key terms.

The research question *‘How does toi Māori support healing for those who engage with it?’* deliberately uses the adverb ‘how’ rather than the auxiliary verb ‘does.’ The reason for this is that a broad range of historical and contemporary literature across the arts, health, and spiritual disciplines discusses the connection between creativity and being well (Acar et al., 2021; Allen, 1995; Beverland, 2023; Hagood, 2000; Henderson et al., 2007; Jung et al., 2010; McNiff, 2004; Schouten et al., 2015). From a mātauranga Māori perspective, healing is not one-dimensional, and so asking the question ‘how?’ is central to this research.

2.4 Mātauranga Māori and Healing

It is essential to start this literature review by examining Indigenous knowledge related to healing and wellbeing. Leading this examination is the recent publication by esteemed academics Leonie Pihama and Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2023), *‘Ora Healing Ourselves: Indigenous Knowledge, Healing and Wellbeing.’* This book was produced to compile and share a wide range of mātauranga Māori and Indigenous healing knowledge that supports tino rangatiratanga and mana motuhake (self-determination and sovereignty). Additionally, the book includes crucial literature that significantly aids the regeneration and revitalisation of mātauranga and tikanga Māori, especially within education, justice, and health systems (Pihama & Smith, 2023). Like many works within Indigenous literature in Aotearoa over

recent decades, this publication is a direct response to Māori inequities resulting from repeated failures of the state and breaches of Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations, as indicated by the Waitangi Tribunal Report (2019). Recognising this report is important as it underscores several shortcomings relevant to this research, including the lack of resources for Māori health services, the lack of support for culturally appropriate services, and the systemic and institutional racism that contribute to health disparities experienced by Māori (Waitangi Tribunal, 2019).

For Māori, healing is regarded as “a significant process that is as important to self-determination as decolonisation, mobilisation and transformation. Healing includes physical, spiritual, psychological, social, collective, and restorative dimensions” (Pihama & Smith, 2023, p. 15). Literature on the healing process emphasises the importance of having a profound understanding of culture when developing healing pathways (Bamblett & Lewis, 2007; Durie, 2001; Dutta, 2015). For Māori, connecting through whakapapa, whanaungatanga, and tikanga are essential ways of fostering connections that can support the healing process (Pihama & Smith, 2023). Māori have consistently held the position that Māori healing practices are vital for wellbeing; historically, presently, and into the future, and therefore, they should be revitalised and reasserted for their cultural relevance (Durie, 2001; Pihama & Smith, 2023).

To help explain mātauranga Māori epistemology of the healing process, Graham Hingangaroa Smith's evocative words provide a contextual framework for the reader to understand that the concept of healing for Māori is not one-dimensional. He advises to “read the words and the world – that is, to not overlook the social, cultural, economic and political context in which the ‘words’ are situated” (Smith, 2023, p. xiv). That is, to recognise the inequities Māori face stemming from a complex interplay of social, cultural, economic, and political contexts rooted in colonisation and systemic injustice (Durie et al., 2018; Pihama et al., 2014). Intergenerational trauma from colonisation, such as land wars, land theft and imperialist practices, has affected whānau (family), hapū (kinship group) and iwi (tribe) for many Māori (Pihama & Smith, 2023; Wirihana & Smith, 2019). The ongoing impact of colonisation is evident in the mental health disparities faced by Māori, largely due to the rise of the dominant Westernised biomedical approach to healing over the past century (Durie, 2001; Pihama & Smith, 2023; Wirihana & Smith, 2019). This forms the basis for this

critical research. International and local researchers agree that initiatives and interventions that promote healing, health, and wellbeing should be designed with a relationship to culture (Archibal & Dewar, 2010; Dudgeon et al., 2024; Durie, 2011; Pihama et al., 2023).

A groundbreaking piece of research exploring this relationship and Māori understandings of trauma and healing is 'He Oranga Ngākau: Māori Approaches to Trauma Informed Care' (Pihama et al., 2017). Guided by Kaupapa Māori, the researchers aimed to identify the key mātauranga and tikanga Māori principles vital for healing. The main themes identified for trauma healing include: Rangatiratanga (self-determination and autonomy); mana atua, mana tūpuna, mana tangata (Māori spirituality connected to deities, ancestors, and lands); tikanga; mātauranga; te reo (language); karakia (prayer); rongoā (healing); mauri ora; whanaungatanga (relationship); whakapapa (reconnecting to our lands, people, and ourselves; and manaakitanga (respect, kindness, and generosity). Among the many vital lessons from this research, the key message relevant to this topic is "the use of Māori principles in their own [health and wellbeing] practices, and understanding the nuanced way in which mātauranga works in clinical and community-based contexts" (Pihama et al., 2023, p. 46). Pihama and Smith (2023) clarify that healing is an ongoing process that requires continuous care and nourishment; the mauri is always present for both individuals and the collective. Numerous Māori models of healing and wellbeing have been developed over the decades and regularly feature in Indigenous health research. Below are a few models commonly used in my profession as a child and adolescent psychotherapist.

One of the most widely recognised frameworks is Te Whare Tapa Whā, developed by Sir Mason Durie (1997), which emphasises the importance of four interacting dimensions: taha tinana (physical health), taha wairua (spiritual health), taha whānau (family and social wellbeing), and taha hinengaro (mental and emotional wellbeing) as they find balance on whenua (connection to the land). The model highlights the need for interconnected balance and strength across all four dimensions so that the whole whare (house) stands strong in mauri ora (wellbeing, vitality).

Another influential model is Te Wheke, developed by Dr. Rose Pere (1991), which uses the metaphor of an octopus to illustrate eight interconnected dimensions of wellbeing. The head symbolises the whānau, and the tentacles represent hinengaro (the mind),

wairuatanga (spirituality), taha tinana (physical wellbeing), whanaungatanga (extended family), mauri (life force in people and objects), mana ake (unique identity of individuals and family), hā a koro ma, a kui ma (breath of life from forebears) and whatumanawa (the open and healthy expression of emotion). This model emphasises harmony and balance across all aspects of our being to foster a deeper sense of wellness (Pere, 1991).

Lastly, the Tihei-wā Mauri Ora (Piripi & Body, 2010) is a kaupapa Māori resource that uses Māori creation pūrākau (narratives) to guide personal reflection, healing, and identity development. It outlines a cyclical journey through stages: Te Korekore (realm of potential being), Te Pō (realm of becoming), Te Whei-Ao (realm of transition), Te Ao Mārama (realm of being), and Tihei-Wā Mauri Ora (the breath of life). Rooted in mātauranga Māori, the resource guides a person through the stages of being, offering insights into how they feel, their relationships, health, and wellbeing.

It is important to note that all the models and resources mentioned above share the view that mātauranga and tikanga Māori healing and wellbeing are understood by recognising the interconnection of the collective, rather than through the individualistic approach typical of Western models of healing (Durie, 2001).

2.5 Healing Exemplar in Aotearoa

One of the most significant pieces of research conducted here in Aotearoa that relates to my topic is by Anna Reeves, a registered counsellor working in Aotearoa who specialises in complex trauma and sexual violence. Reeves' research thesis explored the psychological, emotional, and spiritual impacts of her relationship with te taiao (the natural world) and mahi toi Māori (Māori art practice). Additionally, the research discussed how toi Māori might be utilised therapeutically in a counselling setting within the Aotearoa context. Using an autoethnographic research methodology, Reeves was able to explore and connect through reflexivity, linking personal experiences with cultural, social, and political contexts. Her research describes the transformative healing she experienced through her artistic practice, which utilises the natural world. Personal reflections on her experiences with substance abuse, sexual violence, and complex trauma were shared as Reeves guided the reader through her journey towards healing. Reeves describes her process as therapeutic and

powerful. Through words and supporting imagery of her *toi*, she expressed that creating her own artworks and practising through artistic mediums was the channel through which her healing occurred. The research discusses important reflections on cultural connection and restoration through the integration of *whenua* and *toi*. Reeves states, “I have experienced the healing power of art in my own life” (Reeves 2023, p. 144) and “Through acts of creative expression, I have re-established a sense of personal power” (Reeves, 2023, p. 141). These words speak of a *mana*-enriching and *mauri*-enhancing practice, which aligns with the guidance given by those who research in the field of healing, as mentioned earlier. Reeves’ research aligns with the *mātauranga Māori* literature on healing discussed in this review and provides an insightful example of a healing journey through engagement with a culturally based practice.

This example of healing through *toi* Māori is rare in the published body of literature. Therefore, the next part of this review will discuss Westernised theories of healing and draw parallels between the two different worldviews that support the common vision.

2.6 Art Therapy

The field of art therapy aligns closely with Reeves and is where most of the literature exploring the link between art and psychological wellbeing is found. Including it in this literature review is essential due to its relevance to the topic; however, it is important to note that art therapy in Aotearoa is a small but growing sector within the mental health professions, and therefore, research opportunities are limited, especially regarding *mātauranga Māori* art therapy. Art therapy, or expressive arts therapy encompasses various arts such as visual arts, dance, music, and drama (Gladding, 1992). Its origins can be traced to Freudian and Jungian psychoanalytic theories (Hogan, 2001; Swan-Foster, 2020; McNiff, 1998). Specific concepts like ‘The Collective Unconscious’, ‘Active Imagination’, and ‘Mandala Symbolism’ played a significant role in formalising the discipline of art therapy (Henderson et al., 2007; Jung et al., 2010; McNiff, 1998; Swan-Foster, 2020). These ideas promoted using art as a way to access the unconscious mind and gain psychological insights (Hogan, 2001; McNiff, 1998; Swan-Foster, 2020). By the mid-20th century, thanks to the efforts of psychologists, artists, and educators like Margaret Naumburg, art therapy had

established itself as a recognised profession (Hinitz, 2013; Hogan, 2001; Junge, 2015), and since then, the discipline has continued to expand both internationally and within Aotearoa.

Recognised for its effectiveness in guiding clients through self-expression and self-discovery beyond words, art therapists specialise in helping people with a wide range of challenges, including complex trauma, neurological disorders, mental illness, and grief (DeLucia & Kennedy, 2021; Gussak, 2007; King, 2016; Schouten et al., 2015). A recent literature review of expressive art therapies identified the healing potential of these treatments within populations affected by complex trauma, such as childhood sexual abuse (Lavania & Ballal, 2025). The review found that art therapy modalities are supported by neuroscientific research, showing that artistic activities are linked to positive changes in brain structure related to emotional regulation (Stuckey & Nobel, 2010). It also indicated that expressive art therapies offer survivors of complex trauma support towards healing and empowerment (Lavania & Ballal, 2025). The review provided meaningful clinical implications for future research in therapeutic healing, highlighting that cultural and social nuances may influence treatment effectiveness. Consequently, further research is necessary to understand the cultural specificity of these treatments and to develop cultural competence, thereby avoiding misappropriation and challenging dominant cultural assumptions (Lavania & Ballal, 2025; Regev & Cohen, 2018; Weinberg, 2018).

There is agreement on the significant impact of cultural awareness on the health and wellbeing of professionals in arts therapy and mental health fields. A recent article published in a psychotherapy arts journal explored the health implications and therapeutic benefits of Indigenous art practices within the context of art therapy across various colonised nations. Findings from this study showed that reclaiming Indigenous artistic traditions in therapeutic settings supported personal healing (Arslanbek et al., 2022). This evidence aligns with existing literature, which demonstrates that reasserting cultural identity can serve as a powerful form of cultural healing (Archibald & Dewar, 2010). Although the study recognised the connection between cultural practice and healing, the authors emphasise the importance of remaining aware of the diverse cultural nuances present in therapy. For both therapist and client, the appropriateness of including cultural elements in treatment requires careful thought (Arslanbek et al., 2022; Cameron, 2010; Potash et al., 2017; Talwar, 2015).

An influential piece of art therapy research, from a psychological and medical perspective, that highlights the healing capacities of art engagement was conducted by Henderson et al. (2007). Their empirical study examined the therapeutic effects of mandalas on participants suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The participants created mandalas as a healing tool inspired by Jung's Mandala theory (Swan-Foster, 2020), which posits that one's unconscious processes can be explored through the creation of a mandala. Compared to the control group, the mandala group results showed reduced PTSD symptoms at the follow-up review one month after the intervention (Henderson et al., 2007). These findings support the widely discussed idea in the art and creative literature that those who engage in creative activities or expressive arts experience an improved sense of wellbeing (Arslanbek et al., 2022; Gladding, 1992; Lavania & Ballal, 2025).

Building on Henderson et al. (2007), a case study by Stace (2014) explored the healing potential of engaging in artistic doll making with a client who had experienced complex trauma. The author shared reflections on the therapeutic recovery her client experienced while creating the dolls, emphasising phases of self-expression, empowerment, and self-integration (Stace, 2014). This research was compelling, as trauma literature indicates that talking therapies can have limitations when working with clients with complex trauma due to the vulnerable nature of verbal communication (Kezelman & Stavropoulos, 2012; Lawson et al., 2013). Furthermore, this case study highlighted the importance of integrating visual and tactile sensory stimuli as a transformative method for processing the unconscious (Stace, 2014). Neuroscientific research supports this notion that sensory stimulating therapeutic strategies (such as touch, visual and auditory) engage the brain regions associated with emotional regulation and have the potential to improve overall wellbeing (Barnett & Vasiiu, 2024; Phipps et al., 2010)

2.6 Psychotherapy and Art

Psychotherapy and art therapy are two approaches that share a focus on wellbeing through self-expression, symbolic communication, and the use of unconscious processes. The use of artistic media in psychotherapy is a common practice in both adult and child psychotherapy, globally and locally. Materials such as paint, colouring pencils, pastels and musical instruments are often found within the therapeutic space to facilitate clients' self-expression

(Blake, 2018; Cabaniss, 2016). This section of the literature review highlights the crucial role of the therapist, the therapeutic relationship, and the collaborative impact of integrating artistic and creative methods into the healing process, as understood by the psychotherapy discipline.

The article 'Counselling, Psychotherapy and Creativity' by Holm-Hadulla and Hofmann (2012) argues that creativity is a fundamental part of effective therapeutic practice. The authors suggest that a 'creative attitude' (openness, flexibility, and innovation) in therapy allows both the therapist and the client to work together to build new narratives. Additionally, research into 'Integrative Arts Psychotherapy' provides valuable insights into the healing process. Nash (2022) examines how visual art, movement, and the body can be used in psychotherapy to express and transform emotional experiences. Nash (2022) introduces the idea of the 'Creative Cycle,' where clients engage in metaphorical and embodied expression to externalise inner feelings. Through a collaborative therapeutic relationship, clients use visual media and movement to access unconscious material, reflect on their journey, and gain insights. The research highlights the power of creative metaphor as a physical and symbolic tool for healing and personal growth. This research aligns with the mātāuranga model of Tihei-wā Mauri Ora (Piripi & Body, 2010), which uses pūrākau as a guide to healing.

2.6 Neuroscience Perspective

As mentioned earlier, the idea that artistic engagement can positively influence healing and wellbeing is widely accepted in the neuroscientific community. This final discussion contributes to the review of the literature by connecting the embodied and physical aspects of healing. A recent review examined how creativity can transform mental health and wellbeing. A comprehensive literature review across various disciplines found that creativity can positively impact emotional regulation, cognition, and foster a sense of connection (Jean-Berluche, 2024). The review highlights the healing potential of creativity and advocates for incorporating creativity-based therapeutic approaches into the mental health field (Jean-Berluche, 2024). Furthermore, from a behavioural neuroscience perspective, researchers suggest that both active and passive engagement with the creative arts are linked to improved mental health by observing the activation of adaptive neural circuits involved in

emotional regulation, such as the amygdala (Barnett & Vasiliu, 2024; Ghanai, 2023; Zhang et al., 2023).

A relevant example of this perspective is a recent study involving a small group of adults living in a mental health facility in Aotearoa who participated in a sensory modulation intervention exploring kapa haka (performing arts) as the sensory medium. Sensory modulation intervention is an occupational therapy technique that helps individuals regulate emotions through sensory inputs like sound, touch, or movement (Brown et al., 2019). Semi-structured interviews showed that the participants developed a sense of connection and identity, a feeling of physicality, and an embodied emotional experience. These findings are valuable for the current research because they demonstrate that engaging in a culturally relevant practice can foster a sense of embodied healing and wellbeing on psychological, spiritual, and emotional levels (Hollands et al., 2015). This research aligns with the mātauranga Māori view of healing as a multidimensional experience (Smith, 2023; Pihama & Smith, 2023).

2.7 Healing Through Toi in Aotearoa

Across health, arts, and Indigenous research in Aotearoa, literature highlights how engagement in toi Māori practices can enhance wellbeing. For this review, selected literature focusing on healing through toi Māori or Māori cultural practices will be examined. It is important to note that this research concentrates on toi Māori within the visual arts; however, the literature review will draw on other forms of toi Māori to enhance the overall understanding of healing through toi. To start, research by Hinekura Smith (2025) explored how whatu (weaving) promotes Māori community wellbeing through its practice. This qualitative study interviewed three wāhine kaiwhatu (woman weavers) and examined their learning experiences, teaching methods, and reflections on how their whatu practice has evolved. The findings indicated that whatu pedagogy is deeply connected to cultural identity and involves an intergenerational transfer of knowledge and skills. The author notes that engaging (as teachers or learners) in whatu is understood as oranga (wellbeing and prosperity). One of the kōrero (discussions) noted the link between toi and ora (healing) as a multidimensional connection to culture and wellbeing, stating “It’s deeper than just being well or happy. It’s a connection to your tūpuna because we are using the same techniques

that they passed down to us ... It's about being in space together, it's about the kōrero that comes out. It's about the story that's being woven into this kākahu." (Smith, 2025, p. 148). Smith's research adds to the growing body of toi Māori literature exploring its links to healing and wellbeing.

While this research focuses on toi within the visual arts, it is important to recognise the value of other toi Māori, such as kapa haka. Avalon Hewitt's (2024) research thesis examined the impact on rangatahi (youth) hauora (health and wellbeing) by incorporating kapa haka into a school-based music therapy program. The action research employed a rigorous three-stage cycle of planning, action, evaluation, and reflection. The study's findings showed that rangatahi experienced manaakitanga, tino rangatiratanga, and whanaungatanga through their engagement with kapa haka. These findings are important because they directly relate to the mātauranga Māori epistemology of healing discussed earlier in this review. This research supports the work of Pihama et al. (2014), highlighting the power of kapa haka in fostering positive collective social outcomes for Māori through building whanaungatanga.

This wāhanga centres on understanding healing through a mātauranga Māori perspective and offers snapshots of healing in Aotearoa across different disciplines. The literature review draws a parallel between mātauranga Māori and Western literature and shares the mahi of those with a similar focus to this research. That is, exploring how artistic engagement supports the healing process. The following wāhanga will outline the methodological approach and methods used in this research to discover how toi Māori supports healing.

Wāhanga Toru: Methodology and Method

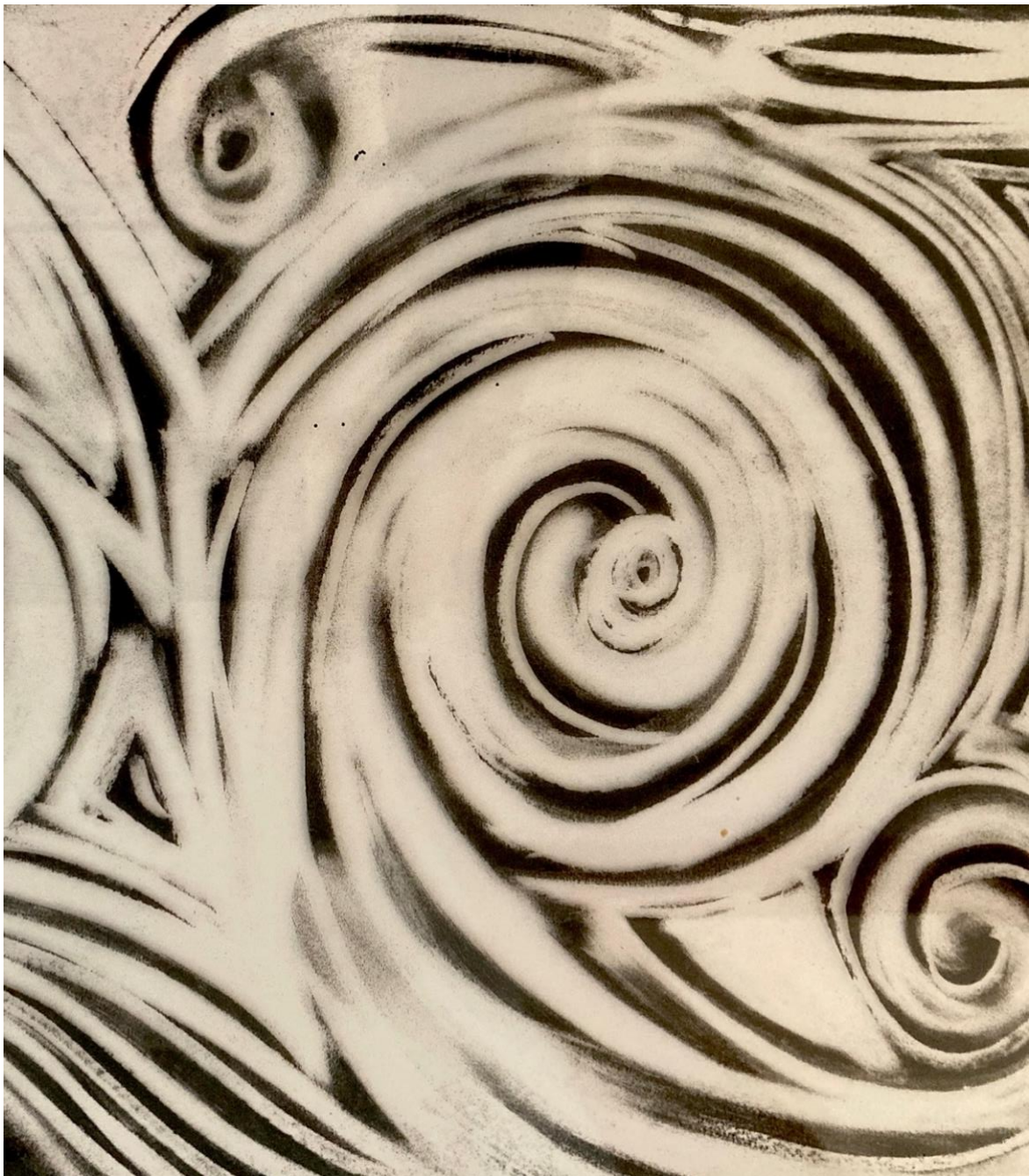
E taru ana I tāku.

It will be done; it's my garden.

(Brougham et al., 2012, p. 121).

Figure 3

Transparent, 2008



Note. Author's own toi.

Much like the whakataukī at the beginning of this wāhanga suggests, taking responsibility for one's research and applying the appropriate methodology to the research question is a critical step in the inquiry process. The following wāhanga outlines the chosen methodology, the ethical framework, the method used, and the data analysis that is applied in this research.

3.1 Methodology

This research has adopted a Māori-centred methodology, chosen for its holistic, ethical, and culturally grounded approach (Hudson et al., 2010; Smith, 2015). Deeply embedded within te ao Māori (the Māori worldview), this methodology upholds the core principles of mātauranga Māori, tikanga, and whakapapa (genealogy). Māori-centred research amplifies Māori voices by prioritising Māori ontology and epistemology, creating a space for Indigenous knowledge to be ethically represented with respect to accuracy and authenticity (Cunningham, 2000; Hudson et al., 2010). It contributes to the decolonisation of research practices within Aotearoa and promotes tino rangatiratanga (Smith, 1999; Walker et al., 2006).

3.2 Ethical Framework

This research is guided by Te Ara Tika (Hudson et al., 2010), an ethical framework based on four tikanga principles: whakapapa, tika (research design), manaakitanga (cultural and social responsibility), and mana (justice and equity). By honouring these principles, this research aims to maintain ethical standards through integrity, respecting authorship and intellectual contributions.

In alignment with the Te Ara Tika ethical framework, Māori academic supervision has guided this research to ensure ethical considerations have been honoured, both culturally and academically. As reflected upon in the introduction wāhanga, the researcher's positionality, motivations, and biases in relation to this research have been outlined and made transparent as a measure of ensuring ethical standards are being honoured. Additionally, this research, through its methodology and research topic choice, speaks directly to Vision

Mātauranga, the policy framework designed to enhance the innovation and participation of Māori research by focusing on four key themes: Indigenous Innovation, Taiao (the natural world), Hauora and Oranga (health and wellbeing) and Mātauranga (Ministry of Research, Science and Technology, 2007; University of Auckland, n.d.).

3.3 Method

This research is a qualitative scoping literature review, following the framework outlined by Arksey and O'Malley (2005). This method allows for an in-depth exploration of the literature, providing an overview of existing research related to the topic. This preferred approach has been selected for its alignment with a Māori-centred methodological perspective (Cunningham, 2000) and for its flexibility, which permits a broad range of literature to be included in the inquiry, such as academic literature, grey literature, and oral sources (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Badger et al., 2000). Additionally, scoping reviews enhance research efficacy by identifying gaps and pinpointing key concepts from diverse sources. This method has been chosen for its inclusiveness and exploratory nature, offering an open pathway for conducting culturally responsive research on this emerging topic (Chandna et al., 2019; Levac et al., 2010).

An essential part of the research method is to ensure that the review process is systematic and transparent (McGowan et al., 2020); therefore, this study has used the PRISMA-ScR reporting guidelines (Tricco et al., 2018), thereby ensuring transparency and rigour in the reporting process.

3.4 Scoping Review Design Protocol

Both practical constraints and methodological considerations shaped the scope of this research. The review aimed to identify literature incorporating the three key concepts: *toi Māori*, *engage* and *healing*, as defined in the previous *wāhanga*. The academic literature search was conducted using a combination of databases: Scopus and Dimensions for academic literature, and DigitalNZ for selected sources of grey literature. The decision to include grey literature in this scoping review was intentional for its ability to provide insightful, non-academic sources of knowledge on the topic (Chandna et al., 2019). The scoping review of grey literature employed a search strategy developed in consultation with

research librarians at Auckland University of Technology, adopting a simplified search strategy similar to that used by Chandna et al. (2019). As part of the grey literature search, YouTube was used to identify relevant video content with specific search criteria. Searches were limited to reputable sources, including government agencies, academic institutions, and Māori organisations, with each video assessed for relevance, credibility, and alignment with the eligibility criteria.

3.5 Limits of the Scope

The Scopus database was selected for its extensive coverage of health science literature and interdisciplinary access. The Dimensions database was chosen as a search tool for its comprehensive view of research outputs, and finally, DigitalNZ was selected for its focus on publishing New Zealand content and providing access to scholarly works and grey literature. The scope was limited by setting boundaries within the inclusion criteria for *toi Māori*. Since *toi Māori* is an umbrella term covering a wide range of artistic media and outputs, this research has placed a limit on this aspect, as detailed in the following eligibility criteria. Additionally, to preserve the focus of this research, the key term '*toi Māori*' must appear within the selected literature to ensure the scope aligns with the research question. The key term '*healing*' is included in the initial search to connect the information sources with the research question.

3.6 Eligibility Criteria

The eligibility criteria used the PRISMA-ScR flow chart (Tricco et al., 2018), checklist to ensure clarity in the search inclusion and exclusion criteria. Some forms of *toi* have been excluded from this research because they fall outside the parameters set by this dissertation.

Inclusion Criteria

1. Literature must include the key term '*toi Māori*.'
2. *Toi Māori* in this research refers only to the visual art practices of painting, drawing, sculpture, and photography.
3. Literature must include key terms of '*healing*' and '*engage*' either explicitly or implicitly as per the definition provided in the literature review.

4. Sources of academic literature, including studies and reviews.
5. Sources of grey literature, including master's theses, editorials, artist statements and videos.
6. All academic and grey literature must be in English.
7. All academic and grey literature must be created between 2000 and 2025.

Exclusion Criteria

1. Literature not in English.
2. Literature created before 2000.
3. Books and book chapters.
4. Literature that does not include key terms: 'toi Māori,' 'healing,' and 'engage.'
5. Literature that expands the key term 'toi Māori' beyond the inclusion criteria, such as: kapa haka (performing arts), whakairo (carving), waiata and taonga pūoro (singing and music), raranga (weaving), tā Moko (tattooing), tukutuku (decorative panels) and whai kōrero (spoken word).

3.7 Literature Selection and Data Collection Process

The PRISMA-ScR (Tricco et al., 2018) research selection process employs a 20-item checklist, guided by the PRISMA flow diagram, which requires a step-by-step approach to screening and selecting suitable literature. Key elements on the checklist include detailing a comprehensive search strategy that specifies the databases, keywords, and timeframes used (Tricco et al., 2018).

Information Sources, Search Strategy, Selection Process

An advanced search was conducted on the Scopus and Dimensions databases accessed through the AUT library database and used Boolean operators to identify potentially relevant literature. The searches were:

- toi Māori AND healing*
- toi Maori AND healing*
- toi Maaori AND healing*

Following guidance from an AUT research librarian, three variations of spelling Māori were included, and the asterisk truncation symbol was used on the key term healing, enabling all variations to be retrieved. Results were exported as an Excel spreadsheet, and duplicates were removed before screening titles and abstracts against the inclusion criteria.

The process of retrieving grey literature was conducted in two phases. The initial phase involved a targeted search on the DigitalNZ database with free online access and using the search phrase:

- toi Māori and healing

The second stage involved searching for oral sources of grey literature through a broad exploration of the 'Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki' YouTube channel using free online access. A manual browsing method was used instead of an automated keyword search. To reduce potential selection bias, only videos from reputable sources were chosen and carefully assessed against the eligibility criteria. Additionally, I received a small number of grey literature sources from academic recommendations within the AUT community.

The PRISMA-ScR checklist (Page et al., 2021) recommends explaining one search strategy as a demonstration of the approach taken across all the search databases. Outlined below is the search strategy taken for Dimensions:

1. Accessed Dimensions through the AUT library database link, and a sign-in using AUT credentials was required.
2. An advanced search strategy was selected, and the key terms were entered and applied using Boolean operators.
3. The eligibility criteria of date range, language and type of literature were applied as automated search filters.
4. All search results from Dimensions were exported into a Microsoft Excel (CSV) format for screening, eligibility and extraction.

As mentioned earlier, this four-step approach was used across all databases used in this research. The grey literature search strategy was conducted manually using a similar approach, as the automated functions were not available.

Data Collection

The search strategies used on Scopus, Dimensions, and DigitalNZ identified a limited amount of eligible literature, reflecting the narrow scope of research conducted on this topic. Due to this small dataset, a manual screening of the key term ‘toi Māori’ was carried out as part of the inclusion criteria. This process was completed in two stages:

1. Retrieval of literature involved entering ‘toi Māori’ into the search engine to determine relevance based on eligibility. Literature where ‘toi Māori’ appeared only in the citations and not in the main text was excluded.
2. The remaining literature was evaluated independently to assess it against the practices of toi Māori according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

To reduce bias in the data selected to answer this research question, each stage of the search, selection, and collection process was guided by the ethical standards outlined in Te Ara Tika (Hudson et al., 2010) and overseen through academic supervision.

3.8 Data Analysis

The data was analysed using Braun and Clarke’s (2021b) reflexive thematic analysis, a qualitative method that provides a flexible and in-depth approach to data analysis. Known for its emphasis on actively engaging the researcher with the data, reflexive thematic analysis acknowledges that the researcher’s positionality—recognising that personal experiences and biases can affect the analysis and interpretation—plays a crucial role (Braun & Clarke, 2021a; Braun & Clarke, 2021c). In qualitative research, this process is especially useful for identifying and interpreting themes, patterns, and deeper meanings within diverse datasets. Chosen for its alignment with the Māori-centred research framework, reflexive thematic analysis involves six interrelated phases: familiarising oneself with the data, generating initial codes, developing themes, reviewing those themes, defining and naming them, and the final write-up. This approach encourages the researcher’s active participation in meaning-making, providing flexibility and depth. Additionally, health and wellbeing research literature indicates that reflexive thematic analysis is particularly appropriate for culturally responsive research because of its reflexivity, relationality, and respect for Indigenous knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2021a; Braun & Clarke, 2021c).

Phase 1: Familiarisation with the Data

The first phase of reflexive thematic analysis involved immersing myself in the dataset to develop a deep understanding and feeling for the content. I began by reading and re-reading the narratives of healing, allowing myself to become familiar with the tone, nuances and mauri of each author's story. Given that it was a small dataset, I was able to complete this phase manually using printed material. During this process, I made preliminary notes and observations in the margins, highlighting all the phrases and words that stood out as potentially meaningful. This phase laid the foundation for subsequent analytic work by beginning to notice patterns and repetitive rhetoric that would later inform the development of codes and themes.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

In the second phase of this analysis, I started systematically transferring my highlighted phrases and words onto Post-it notes through manual annotation. I approached this stage reflexively by adding a second round of highlighting to each annotated Post-it note, allowing codes to develop naturally from the data. This intuitive process brought the raw data to life, and recurring patterns began to stand out.

Phase 3: Developing Themes

In the third phase, I started developing initial themes by grouping the coded data that shared similar meaning or wording. This involved clustering related codes and exploring how they related to the research question. Instead of seeing themes as already existing entities waiting to be found, I actively created them through interpretive engagement with the data. This process included grouping the Post-it notes on the floor and placing a draft title above the coded groups as a potential theme. During this phase, some codes were moved, merged, or discarded as I aimed to capture the richness of how toi Māori supported healing. This stage marked a shift from descriptive coding to a reflexive process, laying the groundwork for deeper thematic refinement.

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes

In the fourth phase, I reviewed and refined the initial themes to ensure they accurately reflected the patterns of meaning within the dataset. This involved revisiting the coded data extracts associated with each theme and assessing whether they were answering the

research question. I examined the internal consistency of each theme and considered whether the themes were sufficiently distinct from one another. Where necessary, I split, merged, or discarded themes that overlapped conceptually or lacked enough supporting data. I also revisited the entire dataset to confirm that the themes aligned with the research question and broader concept of healing. This phase was vital for improving the clarity, depth, and interpretive strength of the thematic framework.

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

In the fifth phase, I focused on defining and naming the themes to ensure each captured the essence of meaning within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). This involved writing detailed descriptions of each theme, clarifying their scope, and articulating the central concept they represented. I revisited the coded extracts and thematic maps to refine the boundaries between themes and ensure they did not overlap conceptually. Naming the themes was a creative and interpretive process; I chose titles that captured the essence of ‘how’ healing was supported. This phase laid the groundwork for presenting the analysis in a compelling, accessible way.

Phase 6: Theme Write-up

The final phase involved producing a detailed and cohesive write-up about each theme in relation to the research question and broader literature. I crafted a narrative that wove together the themes, supported by vivid and compelling data extracts that illustrated each theme’s core meaning. This write-up was not merely descriptive; it provided interpretive insights into the importance of the themes and how they connected to narratives within the data. I also reflected on my own role in shaping the analysis, recognising the influence of my positionality (Banks, 1998).

In summary, this wāhanga has outlined the Māori-centred methodological framework in which this research has set out to amplify Māori voices of healing through toi. A detailed outline of the method used in this research has been provided, guided by the PRISMA ScR checklist (Page et al., 2021) recommendations of search strategy and data selection. Lastly, an explanation of the thematic analysis process has been laid out, offering insight into the reflexive process employed in this research. The following wāhanga presents the results of this methodology, emphasising the key themes and patterns identified.

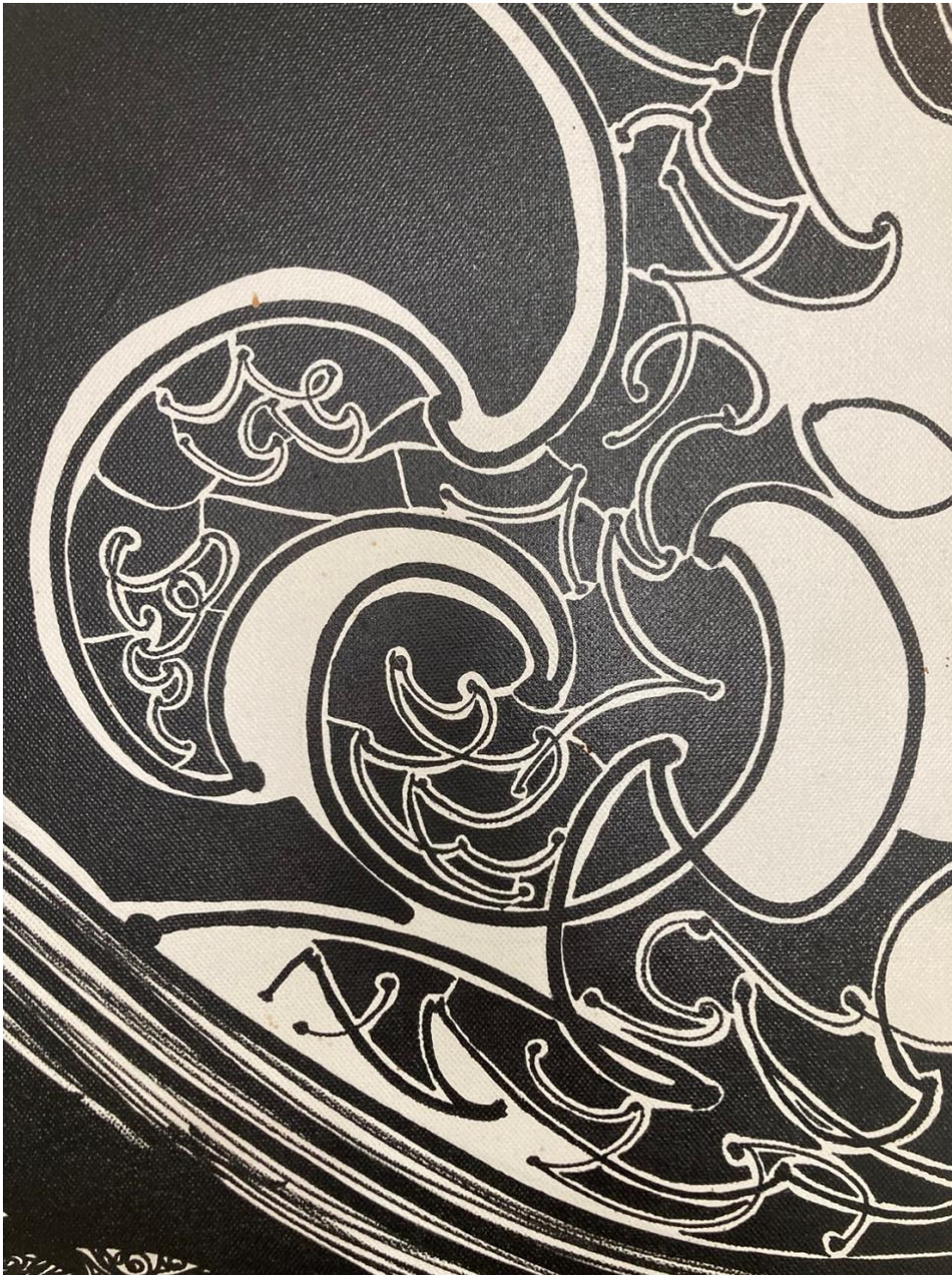
Wāhanga Whā: Results

“The approach to life is governed by one’s perception of reality.

Since ultimate reality is for the Māori the realm of the spirit, this concept plays a major part in his approach to healing.” (Marsden & Royal, 2003, p. 96)

Figure 4

Link, 2015



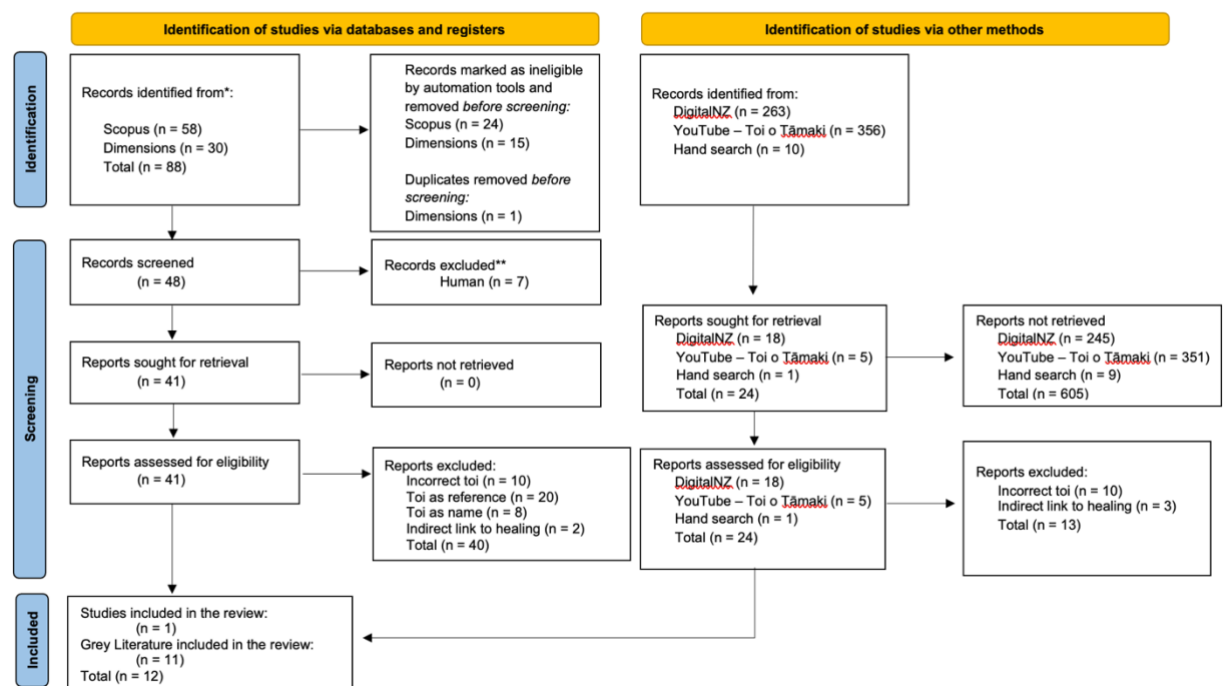
Note. Author’s own toi.

As I meticulously went through each of the analysis steps outlined in the previous wāhanga, I gained a sense of the reality Māori Marsden speaks of in the quote that began this wāhanga. As each new piece of raw data was added to the pile, the wairua of the patterns and themes of healing through toi Māori started to come alive. The unknown connection I was hoping to find in my research was soon becoming a reality.

To ensure transparency in the scoping review data selection process, the PRISMA flowchart was used to document the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion of studies, as seen in Table 1.

Table 1

PRISMA Flowchart showing study selection process



Note. Source: Page et al. (2021)

4.1 Synthesis of Scoped Literature

As suggested in the PRISMA-ScR checklist (Page et al., 2021), each piece of data included in this scoping review is presented and cited; this can be found in Appendix A: Data Set Citation List. During the thematic analysis process, I was aware of the potential for bias both in data selection and in theme interpretation. To address these concerns, I followed the reflexive

thematic analysis approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021a), which emphasises the importance of researcher reflexivity, transparency, and critical engagement with the data, following the six phases of thematic analysis outlined in the previous wāhanga. This method allowed me to play an active role as the researcher in developing themes and reflecting on the data, ensuring my interpretations were guided by the research methodology and utilising the mātauranga Māori lens rather than preconceived ideas. Acknowledging that the majority of my dataset was grey literature, I prioritised data that reflected first-person experiences, annotations, and narratives directly authored by the individuals who engaged in toi Māori. This approach aligns with the principles of reflexive thematic analysis, which emphasise the importance of centring authors' voices and lived experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). By focusing on these personal accounts, I aimed to ensure that the themes developed were grounded in the authentic perspectives of those represented in the selected data, rather than being filtered through secondary interpretations.

4.2 Themes

Below are five key themes that emerged from the thematic analysis. These themes reflect recurring patterns in the dataset and offer insights into the lived experiences and perspectives of healing from people who engage with toi Māori.

Connection to Identity. Connection to Culture. Connection to the Collective.

The essence of this theme is connection. Recognising, affirming, and embracing one's Māori identity through engagement with toi Māori strengthens bonds with whānau, hapū, iwi, whakapapa, tangata, and tūpuna. Expressions like: "Through my art and through making contact with people on the coast and becoming strong in my Māori identity, because that was always lacking in me, I know, this is what has made my life" (Kahukiwa, 2014, 0:56). Building these connections deepens the experience of healing, captured in this statement: "It seems that a prescription of creativity, laughter and heaps of aroha have had a healing effect on Arama and his whanau" (Findlay, 2007, p. 79). These examples describe how creating toi Māori has deepened connections to Māori identity, culture, and the collective and how these connections have had a healing effect for the artist and their whānau. This theme captures the profound impact of connecting.

Being Tangata Whenua. Using Whenua. Healing Whenua.

The essence of this theme is being tangata whenua, or people of the land. Upholding and honouring the responsibility of being tangata whenua means serving and protecting the land. This theme reflects the healing experienced through the multidimensional sense of belonging to and being part of whenua, and how toi Māori acts as a way to connect with and protect it. This is described in the quotes: “to let healing back into the land” (Joesph, 2022) and “Sometimes it’s more the feeling of the environment. Sometimes the wairua of the land itself” (Gossage, 2014, 3:42). This theme highlights that engaging with whenua through toi Māori creates a dual feeling of healing, with land, with self.

Shining Light on Wairua. Wairua’s Shining Light.

The essence of this theme is wairua. Toi Māori paves a path between the physical and spiritual realms, as captured in the quote, “The first thing I sensed when entering the space was the wairua present.” (Ireland, 2024, p. 52). Toi Māori lights the way, linking people to atua, the cosmos, and wairua, with a felt sense of mana and mauri, both individually and collectively. From within, the light of wairua shines, enabling the physical and metaphysical worlds to connect. Captured in the following statements: “...it’s about shining a light on their mana. Yeah, it’s shining a light on their creativity and who they are as people” (Woodruffe, 2020, p. 56), and “These works remind us how toi is a vital tool that allows us to tap into a greater force than ourselves” (Joesph, 2022 p. 286).

Make Meaning. Evoke Feeling.

The essence of this theme is the activation of emotion and the capacity to create meaning. Expressions of celebration, balance, and sensory stimulation are felt through symbolism, metaphor, storytelling, shape, and form in the toi. For example Reeves states, “To me, making art is a vibrant and spiritual activity. Art makes me feel alive, at one with the cosmos, and confident of my place in it” (2023, p. 137). Toi Māori is utilised as a tool to evoke emotions and thoughts, both for the artist and the viewer, as Joseph (2022) explains, “toi [is seen] as a powerful tool that can bring balance back into Māori lives” (p. 277). Toi is seen as a powerful method for connecting internally and externally and for finding meaning, as expressed by “Enabling engagement with those thoughts as they connect with the pattern” (Potaka, 2021, p. 33).

Honouring Tino Rangatiratanga. Honouring Mātauranga Māori.

The essence of this theme is honouring tino rangatiratanga and mātauranga Māori. The weaving together of mātauranga and tikanga Māori with the toi initiates kōrero for political justice. Toi Māori provides space for the collective to practice tino rangatiratanga and to protect Māori culture. Vividly described in this quote, “I’ve got responsibilities. I’m thinking about generation and generations now. I’m not just thinking about myself, so it’s an ongoing thing that you just have to keep finding a way for it to be functional and useful...” (Te Ratana, 2014, 5:52). Toi Māori allows people to look backwards to go forwards, and these reflections guide the healing as Morrison-Young explains:

In each layer, I have something from each: past, present, future. The collective effort required for healing has a deep ecology: hence the fragments I have been fortunate to unearth in my healing journey have been embedded into the layers, as reminders to turn to tikanga Māori for my answers – my puna, or wellspring of wisdom (2011, p.79).

This wāhanga began with a reflection on a felt sense of reality as the wairua in the narratives of those who engage in toi Māori came to life. As the themes began to emerge, it was undeniable that a sense of healing was felt by both those creating the toi and those viewing them. I hope that *‘Connection to Identity. Connection to Culture. Connection to the Collective.’*, *‘Being Tangata Whenua. Using Whenua.’*, *‘Healing Whenua.’*, *‘Shining Light on Wairua. Wairua’s Shining Light.’*, *‘Make Meaning. Evoke Feeling.’* and *‘Honouring Tino Rangatiratanga. Honouring Mātauranga Māori.’* captures the essence of the reality that healing is supported for those who engage with toi Māori.

Wāhanga Rima: Discussion

‘Ora’ is both a noun, a naming of our wellbeing, and a verb, meaning ‘to be well’

To aspire to live on ora is to aspire to live in wellbeing in all parts and dimensions of our lives and our world (Pihama & Smith, 2023, p. 1).

Figure 5

Moana, 2025



Note. Author's own toi.

The phrase ‘all the parts’ in the words from Pihama and Smith’s book on healing is what leads the discussion in this last wāhanga. Discovering ‘all the parts’ of healing through the engagement with toi Māori has inspired much of this research. Key themes emerged during the reflexive process of reading, listening, reflecting, interpreting and understanding the voices of Māori who had shared their journey through toi. A strong feeling of ora spoke volumes during this phase of the research, and this is reflected in the contextualisation of the themes that are discussed below.

The theme ‘*Connection to Identity. Connection to Culture. Connection to the Collective.*’ described how engaging with toi Māori fosters deep connections to Māori identity, culture, and collective belonging. Similar to Smith’s (2025) research, wāhine Māori expressed their connection to tūpuna as they engaged with their toi, using the same techniques passed down through the generations. Making connections to identity, culture and the collective through toi is part of the healing journey for Māori.

Earlier in the literature review, we learned how the artist Anna Reeves (2023) integrates her toi with whenua, and she describes the restorative feeling of healing through this process. The theme ‘*Being Tangata Whenua. Using Whenua. Healing Whenua.*’ explained the multidimensional sense of belonging to and being part of whenua, and how toi Māori is a portal of connection to and protection of whenua. The engagement with toi is a powerful way to heal whenua and ultimately to heal as tangata whenua.

Throughout this process, it feels like many lights have been shone on what it means to heal for Māori. For me, the words of Māori Marsden (2003) in Wāhanga Whā shine the brightest: “...ultimate reality is for the Māori the realm of the spirit...” (p. 96)—the theme ‘*Shining Light on Wairua. Wairua’s Shining Light*’ explains how the creative process illuminates wairua, connecting people to atua, to the cosmos, and to a deep feeling of mauri. This theme is captured in the words of an observer of Kim Ireland’s (2024) toi: “The first thing I sensed...was the wairua present” (p. 52). Throughout this research, many have spoken about the importance of wairua and spirituality and the part it plays in wellbeing (Durie, 1997; Pere, 1991; Pihama et al., 2017), and this theme captures the essence that toi Māori can support healing for Māori by connecting beyond the physical realms of reality.

The artist Kelly Joseph (2022) speaks of *toi* as a powerful healing tool that brings balance to Māori lives. The creative journey has led him to feel balanced, much like the wellbeing model 'Te Whare Tapa Whā' (Durie, 1997) encourages us to do, that is, find balance amongst all the parts. The theme '*Make Meaning. Evoke Feeling.*' explains that a powerful sense of healing through balance can be experienced when balance is found between 'making meaning' of the *toi* and 'evoking feeling' through the *toi*.

In the introduction to this research, the question of 'why this research' was asked. The answer described the impact colonisation has had on the wellbeing of Māori, and a part of honouring the obligations of Te Tiriti o Waitangi is to centre the voices of Māori when working with Māori. This research is asking the question of how *toi* Māori supports healing, and so it feels fitting that the theme '*Honouring Tino Rangatiratanga. Honouring Mātauranga Māori.*' emerged amongst those voices that were heard in this research. We listened to examples of healing for rangatahi Māori earlier in Wāhanga Rua as they engaged in *toi* and experienced *manaakitanga*, *tino rangatiratanga*, and *whanaungatanga* (Hewitt, 2024). Similar to Hewitt's research, this theme reminds us all that honouring *mātauranga* and *tikanga* Māori is the essence of the healing journey for Māori, and engaging with *toi* Māori is one of many ways of honouring.

All the themes identified and discussed have provided an answer to the research question. *Mātauranga Māori* understanding of healing is a multidimensional process (Pihama & Smith, 2023) that is experienced physically, spiritually, psychologically, socially, and collectively. This research honours that understanding and contributes to the healing literature by shining the light on *toi* Māori as a gateway to supporting healing.

5.1 Implications of the Research

Another essential part of this research was to answer the sub-question of '*What might the implications be for psychotherapy in Aotearoa?*' The Māori-centred methodological approach enabled me, as a Māori researcher, to place the focus on the needs of Māori in my role as a psychotherapist. We have heard from the voices of many across disciplines in health and wellbeing in this research, that integrating culture into health practices not only supports healing but is grounded in *tikanga* Māori, the right thing to do. Doing the right thing is not exclusive to Māori; Western health and wellbeing literature recognises that, despite

knowing that culture supports the healing process, appropriate implementation and practice should be at the forefront for the safety of the client and against appropriation (Durie et al., 2018; Lavania & Ballal, 2025; NiaNia et al., 2016; Regev & Cohen, 2018; Weinberg, 2018). Therefore, this raises the question of how the findings from this research contribute to the practice of psychotherapy in Aotearoa. To answer this question, I return to discussing the 'why, who and what' aspects of this research; What? Aotearoa has concerning rates of poor mental health, especially among Māori (THA, 2025). Why? Colonisation has suppressed Māori understandings of healing, resulting in the lack of culturally centred and appropriate methods of helping. Who? Māori are the most impacted and the centre of this research. Therefore, the findings of this research contribute to the practice of psychotherapy for Māori and can be used to support healing by psychotherapists who implement a mātauranga Māori approach in their practice.

5.2 Research Limitations

The main limitation of this research is the limited scope of available data beyond grey literature sources. As the literature on health and wellbeing has been dominated by Western perspectives for a long time, it was difficult to find mātauranga Māori literature that discusses the connection between toi Māori and healing. Therefore, the limited scope supporting the findings in this research may require further investigation to gain more understanding. Another limitation was the narrow inclusion criteria for the types of toi included in this research. This decision was made to fit within the constraints of this dissertation. Including a broader range of topics could have helped explore more themes of healing and deepen understanding. Future research that encompasses all forms of toi Māori in the search strategy would enhance the growing body of literature on this topic.

5.4 Final Reflection

As I reflect on this research journey, I think back to the time when I was making my toi, and wonder about how this led me to explore the intersection of my Māori culture, my passion for the creative arts, and my training as a psychotherapist. I stated that the purpose of this research was to explore the connection between toi Māori and healing. I feel the ora as I read my words, as I hope you do too.

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Glossary

Hauora	Health and holistic wellbeing
Karakia	Prayer
Kaitiakitanga	Guardianship and stewardship
Kapa Haka	Māori performing arts
Kotahitanga	Unity and collective strength
Kōrero	Discussions or conversations
Kōwhaiwhai	Māori patterns
Māhi	Work or activity
Mana	Spiritual force, power and prestige
Manaakitanga	Care, respect, and hospitality
Mana Atua	Spiritual power connected to deities
Mana Tangata	Spiritual power connected to people and land
Mana Tūpuna	Spiritual power connected to ancestors
Mana Motuhake	Autonomy and independence
Mātauranga Māori	Māori knowledge systems
Mauri	Lifeforce or vital essence
Mauri Ora	Life principle, protecting vitality
Maunga	Mountain
Oranga	Wellbeing and prosperity
Ora	Life, health, and wellbeing
Pūrākau	Traditional narratives and stories
Rangatahi	Youth or younger generation
Rangatiratanga	Leadership and authority
Raranga	Weaving
Rongoā	Healing or remedies
Rongoā Māori	Māori healing practices
Tā Moko	Traditional Māori tattooing
Taonga Pūoro	Traditional Māori musical instruments
Te Ao Māori	The Māori worldview
Te Reo	Māori language
Tika	Correctness or research design
Tikanga Māori	Māori values and practices

Tino Rangatiratanga	Self-determination and sovereignty
Tohunga	Māori healers
Tukutuku	Decorative panels
Tūpuna	Ancestors
Waiata	Song
Wāhanga	Section or part
Wāhine Kaiwhatu	Women weavers
Whatu	Weaving
Whai Kōrero	Formal speech or oratory
Whakapapa	Genealogy and ancestral connections
Whanaungatanga	Relationships and kinship
Whenua	Land and connection to land
Whakaora	To heal and restore

Appendices

Appendix A: Data Set Citation List

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