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THE ROLE OF IDENTITY IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF ISSUES WITH KAI AMONG WĀHINE MĀORI

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Abstract

Eating disorders are at least as common among Māori as they are among non-Māori, and may be more common overall, yet Māori experiences remain poorly understood within dominant clinical and diagnostic frameworks. Although Māori-specific scholarship is beginning to address this gap, the relationship between Māori identity disruption and eating disorders has not previously been explored. Drawing on Kaupapa Māori and reflexive thematic analysis of interviews with 12 wāhine Māori, this article examines how Māori identity is implicated in eating disorders, reframing them as issues with kai grounded in mātauranga Māori. Three themes were identified: Not feeling Māori enough, Protective distancing and the rejection of Māori identity, and Kai as the body's response to identity disruption. Findings situate issues with kai as expressions of colonial violence, requiring responses that move beyond symptom management to centre identity restoration and connection to te ao Māori.

Keywords

Māori health, Indigenous health, Māori identity, identity, eating disorders

Introduction

> Inā kei te mōhio koe ko wai koe, i anga mai koe i hea, kei te mōhio koe, kei te anga atu ki hea.
>
> If you know who you are, and where you are from, then you will know where you are going.

For Māori, identity is centred on relationships and rooted in connections with whānau, hapū, iwi, whenua, awa, and maunga: a living connection to the past that orients us in the present (Moeke-Pickering, 1996). The colonial project in Aotearoa New Zealand has persistently disrupted those connections through legislative redefinitions of who counts as Māori and the suppression of mātauranga Māori. For many wāhine Māori, this can result in an identity that feels contested, incomplete, or conditional (Houkamau & Sibley, 2010; Webber, 2012).

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Eating disorders affect Māori at elevated rates compared with national population estimates (Lacey et al., 2020), yet research into how Māori develop and experience them remains sparse. Where it exists, it tends to frame eating disorders as individual pathologies rather than as responses to the political and historical conditions that shape wāhine Māori lives. This article argues that for wāhine Māori, eating disorders (and more broadly, eating problems) are bound up with issues of identity and that understanding one requires us to understand the other.

Drawing on a Kaupapa Māori approach and interviews with 12 wāhine Māori, this article explores how Māori identity disruption is implicated in the development of eating disorders (either professionally or self-diagnosed). In this article, we understand identity disruption as the colonial interruption of the capacity for wāhine Māori to know, claim, and live their Māori identity. We also reframe eating disorders as relationships with kai, drawing on mātauranga Māori to move beyond individualistic pathologising. In doing so, we join an emerging body of scholarship developing Māori-centred frameworks for understanding eating disorders in Aotearoa (Clark et al., 2023; Fraser et al., 2024; Pettie et al., 2026).

The following sections develop the key conceptual frameworks: the reframing of eating disorders as relationships with kai, the specific dynamics of Māori identity formation and disruption under colonisation, and the literature connecting identity issues with the development of eating problems. The research methodology, findings, and discussion follow.

Relationships with kai

Dominant Western frameworks position eating disorders along a binary of ordered and disordered, a construction that obscures the contextual, relational dimensions of how wāhine Māori experience kai. Malson (1999) observed that disordered eating experiences have frequently been decontextualised and depoliticised, treated as pathological aberrations rather than as practices embedded within the cultural and political conditions in which people live. For wāhine Māori, that decontextualisation erases the specific conditions shaping our relationships with kai, including colonisation, racism, and the disruptions to identity that are at the heart of this article.

In response, this article draws on mātauranga Māori to reframe eating disorders as relationships with kai. The use of the word "relationships" is intentional: whanaungatanga, the kupu Māori for relationships, invokes the worldview that "nothing exists in isolation ... everything in existence is infinitely and complexly in relation all the time" (Burgess & Painting, 2020, p. 210). This framing allows for a more expansive understanding of issues with food that does not require them to be categorised as good or bad, ordered or disordered. As Fraser et al. (2024) have argued, clinical categories such as anorexia or bulimia often do not resonate with Māori, and the language used to describe food distress must be meaningful for those it is applied to.

Rapata (2025) developed the concept of food colonialism to describe the ongoing systems, structures, and behaviours that uphold colonial and capitalist logics of food and food systems in Aotearoa. Her work with Kāi Tahu rangatahi documents how kai functions as a site of connection to identity, and how disconnection from those practices can shape identity. This article is in conversation with that work, attending specifically to how the disruption of Māori identity under colonial conditions creates a pathway into issues with kai among wāhine Māori.

Throughout this article, *relationships with kai* is used as a value-neutral description of how Māori engage with food. *Issues with kai* is used to signify disruption to that relationship. The term *eating disorders* refers to clinically diagnosed conditions, while *eating problems* refers to the broader spectrum of disordered eating that does not meet formal diagnostic criteria.

The framing matters for this article specifically because it opens space for understanding how issues with kai are connected to identity. If kai sits within relationships that include whānau, history, and cultural belonging, then disruptions to those relationships, including disruptions to Māori identity, become visible as conditions that shape how we relate to food.

Identity

Prior to colonisation, Māori identity was embedded in whānau, hapū, and iwi affiliations (Webber, 2012). From birth, tīpuna used practices such as oriori to share narratives of the world with pēpi, contributing to their development as both individuals and members of a collective (Best, 1929). Through these learnings, tamariki came to understand their mana ake: their sense of self as a fully integrated ecological being, grounded in connection to land, people, and ancestry (Woodard & O'Connor, 2019). Identity was inseparable from the natural world and the lineages that preceded it.

The colonial project disrupted these foundations systematically. Legislative measures sought to

redefine and contain Māori identity by reducing it to numerical scales, for example, the blood quantum theory used until the 1986 census classified those with 50% or more Māori ancestry as Māori and others as European, severing whakapapa from identity in a single administrative stroke (Edwards, 2020). As Edwards described it, blood quantum "perpetuates self-hatred and alienation" and constitutes an "unremitting assault on our whakapapa" (p. 90). These measures created implications for those who felt disconnected from conventional markers of Māori identity, generating the conditions for what we now recognise as the experience of not being Māori "enough". Prior to colonisation, identity was seen as a living expression of whakapapa that included genealogy, ancestry, belonging, and self-identification (Gillon & Webber, 2023). Legislative attempts to contain and redefine Māori identity displaced that whakapapa-based understanding, replacing it with criteria that many Māori find themselves unable to meet.

The concept of socially assigned ethnicity adds another dimension to this. It is not only self-identification that shapes Māori identity but the way others read, accept, or refuse it (Gillon et al., 2019). For wāhine Māori who are White-passing, or who were raised away from their hau kāinga, or whose connection to te reo and tikanga was interrupted, this external gaze compounds internal uncertainty. Somerville (2010) captured the political weight of this experience:

> It feels like researching "identity" is something for those of us whose experiences of being Māori do not suit the easy monoliths of authenticity—reo, tikanga, turangawaewae, ahi ka—and were instead raised speaking English, in urban spaces not our own, and so on; doing work "about identity" is necessary for those who didn't get an identity the first time around. (pp. 41–42)

The shame associated with not being Māori "enough" has been recognised as a form of colonial trauma (Lawson-Te Aho, 2013), compounded by negative stereotypes in media and racism encountered in healthcare, education, and employment (Fulcher, 2015). These impacts can create a sense of alienation from one's own identity, and recent work by Koopu (2023) on rangatahi Māori wellbeing similarly documents identity disruption as consequential for hauora, suggesting that compromised identity and compromised wellbeing are connected rather than coincidental. As this article argues, that connection can extend into how wāhine Māori experience kai.

Eating problems

Issues with identity can have a significant impact on an individual's mental and physical wellbeing, and research has established a relationship between identity and the development of eating disorders. Croce et al. (2024) argued that eating disorders may develop and be maintained as a result of identity disturbance, and Stanghellini et al. (2018) similarly observed that disturbances in embodiment (characterised as the experience of one's own body as an object viewed and evaluated by others) can shape identity, which when read alongside Croce et al.'s argument (2024), points to a close relationship between embodiment, personal identity, and disordered eating behaviours. The influence of identity is particularly pronounced for groups whose identities are already marginalised since threats to both identity and emotional wellbeing compound the risk (Ison & Kent, 2010). For wāhine Māori, these dynamics cannot be separated from the colonial conditions that have caused identity disruptions, yet this context is largely overlooked in the general literature.

While a substantial body of research addresses eating disorders in Western populations, far less attention has been paid to Indigenous communities. Studies examining the distribution of eating disorder symptoms have noted the underrepresentation of Indigenous participants (Mulders-Jones et al., 2017), and research with Indigenous Australians has highlighted the need for culturally valid diagnostic approaches (Burt et al., 2020). In Aotearoa, Te Rau Hinengaro (the New Zealand Mental Health Survey) found elevated rates of eating disorders among Māori adults compared with national population estimates (Lacey et al., 2020), yet Māori remain significantly underrepresented in specialist eating disorder services (Lacey et al., 2020).

A growing body of Māori-specific scholarship is beginning to address the literature gap. Pettie et al. (2026) have documented the small but developing literature on Māori eating disorders, and the picture emerging is one of significant inequity and cultural mismatch. Clark et al. (2023) found that Māori experiences of accessing eating disorder treatment were shaped by institutional racism and the privileging of non-Māori frameworks. Clark et al. (2024) explored the explanatory factors, treatment experiences, and recovery trajectories of Māori with eating disorders through participant accounts. Fraser et al. (2024) developed culturally grounded Māori terminology through the Ngā Māuiui Kai project, recognising that clinical

categories often do not resonate with Māori ways of understanding food distress. These works suggest that existing Western frameworks are insufficient on their own for understanding and responding to Māori experiences of eating disorders.

What remains largely unexplored is the specific relationship between Māori identity disruption and the development of issues with kai. If identity is a central factor in the development of eating disorders, and if Māori identity is itself shaped by colonial conditions that systematically disrupt it, then issues with kai among wāhine Māori must be understood within that nexus. This article attempts to make that connection explicit.

This article is guided by two research questions: How do wāhine Māori experience the relationship between their identity as Māori and the development of issues with kai? and How might understanding that relationship reframe issues with kai among wāhine Māori? The following sections develop the theoretical frameworks that inform our approach to these questions, before turning to the methodology, findings, and discussion.

Theoretical framework

This article has been generated from within a Kaupapa Māori research framework, understood as a "strategic intellectual intervention against the Eurocentrism that pervades research, education, and the academy" (Stewart, 2020, p. 26). Kaupapa Māori research is rooted in Māori worldviews, values, and knowledge, and challenges the dominant narratives produced by Western research paradigms that have misrepresented or ignored Māori (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). It is a transformative approach that validates and legitimises Māori worldviews while challenging power dynamics. Broadly, it refers to a "Māori way" (Cram & Adcock, 2022, p. 56), in which Māori knowledge and ways of understanding are centred. Kaupapa Māori research is characterised by its liberatory, critical, and resistance-based orientation, and its commitment to validating Māori cultural practices (Mahuika, 2008).

Historically, research has been done *on* Māori rather than *with* Māori, simplifying and commodifying mātauranga Māori in ways that benefited colonisers to the detriment of Māori (Bishop, 1999). Kaupapa Māori research challenges this by interrogating power imbalances in representation, legitimacy, and accountability within the researcher–researched relationship. This research seeks to strengthen mātauranga Māori by examining the role of settler colonialism on our identities, and by centring the voices and agency of participants through a reflexive and compassionate analytic lens.

This article also draws on Māori understandings of wellbeing as a theoretical foundation for its argument. Tā Mason Durie's (1994) model of Te Whare Tapa Whā conceptualises health as four interconnected dimensions: taha wairua (spiritual wellbeing), taha hinengaro (mental and emotional wellbeing), taha tinana (physical wellbeing), and taha whānau (family and relational wellbeing). The model emphasises that these dimensions are inseparable; disruption in one affects the whole. For wāhine Māori whose sense of identity has been disrupted by colonial conditions, this model of health makes visible what a biomedical framework cannot: that the body, the mind, the spirit, and the sense of belonging are all implicated in how we relate to kai. The identity disruptions documented in this article are, in Te Whare Tapa Whā terms, disruptions across taha wairua, taha hinengaro, and taha whānau that manifest, among other ways, through the relationship with kai.

Methodology

Participants

This article is part of a wider doctoral project that received ethical approval from the Human Ethics Committee at Massey University (Reference NOR20/42). Participants were recruited through online social media advertisements and identified as having experienced issues with eating, including eating disorders either professionally diagnosed or self-diagnosed. The first author conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 wāhine Māori over the age of 18. All participants were given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

Procedure

The interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview format, in which questions were formulated with the intention to understand how participants navigated their issues with kai and tinana as wāhine Māori. The questions were open-ended and exploratory, beginning with questions that aimed to produce a general overview of the participants' motivations for engaging with the study, and then led to more detailed questions about their specific experiences and interpretations, including how they enacted their eating problems and what the drivers behind those thoughts and behaviours were.

All the interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom, an online video communication platform, between November 2022 and March

2023. Topics that were explored included behaviours and emotions towards their relationship with kai, Māori identity, and their body image and self-esteem.

Analysis

Immediately following the conclusion of the interview, the first author rewatched the interview, pausing to write down relevant notes. The first author then, within a week, transcribed the interview, taking further notes of important and relevant details. This file was then imported into NVivo (qualitative analysis software), where the excerpts related to the initial notes were highlighted. From there, initial coded themes began to be identified. These themes were then reread and reanalysed multiple times, until they were categorised into clear and relevant top-tier codes, which were extracted for analysis. The data in this article were analysed using a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This method was chosen for its applicability to Kaupapa Māori research (Adcock et al., 2021) which challenges dominant Western frameworks, its usefulness in capturing the experiences of participants, and its emphasis on the subjective role of the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

While most themes draw on excerpts from multiple participants, one theme is presented through the in-depth account of a single participant. Where the experiences of one wahine illustrated the dynamics of a theme with particular clarity and coherence, her account was presented in depth, allowing the analysis to follow the connected logic of her experience as she described it.

Positionality

As the first author and a wahine Māori with my own lived experience of an eating disorder, I came to this research aware of the ground that I shared with participants. This positionality gave me a particular investment into, and capacity for, the trust-based interviewing that research on sensitive topics requires.

It is also worth noting that wāhine Māori are consistently under-represented in research, and this is especially acute in the eating disorder literature, where Māori women's experiences have been largely invisible. Although eating disorders affect people of all genders, the participants who responded to my recruitment advertisements were exclusively wāhine Māori. I interpret this as meaningful, and it may reflect the particular importance of this kaupapa for wāhine Māori. In any case, the resulting dataset speaks to the experiences of wāhine Māori specifically, and this article centres their voices accordingly.

Results

The following themes draw on selected participant accounts that are representative of patterns evident across all 12 interviews. The three key themes related to identity and relationships with kai were identified from the data: (a) Not feeling Māori enough, (b) Protective distancing and the rejection of Māori identity, and (c) Kai as the body's response to identity disruption.

These are reported on in the following sections.

Theme 1: Not feeling Māori enough

Colonial conditions disrupt the foundations from which Māori identity is built. This theme documents the experience of wāhine Māori who know they are Māori by whakapapa, but are impacted by colonial messages that locate Māori authenticity in external markers (that is, reo, tikanga, tūrangawaewae), rather than in relationships and spiritual bonds that have always been its true source. The result is a sense of not being Māori enough, which in Te Whare Tapa Whā terms (Durie, 1994) represents a disruption to taha wairua and taha whānau that shapes the whole person. As Tareta stated, "And then feeling that disconnect as well. I feel like it's like, how do I walk the space with feeling like I don't know anything about anything of me being Māori other than saying that I'm Māori?" (Tareta, wahine, 30s). "How do I walk the space?" captures the experience of colonial identity disruption. The spaces Tareta described are cultural spaces that colonial inheritance has taught her to feel she must earn rather than belong to. The framing of Māori identity as a process of acquisition rather than a taonga bestowed by tīpuna is in itself a colonial imposition, one that locates authenticity in external markers rather than in whakapapa. The whakamā Tareta described reflects a product of systems that have redefined what it means to be Māori in terms that many wāhine Māori feel they cannot meet. Āmiorangi's account adds the dimension of external visibility:

> I knew I was Māori but yeah, I didn't really think also being quite Pākehā presenting. I didn't really feel like I had the right to say I was, or I didn't really feel like I was Māori enough and have definitely come to sit with that process a bit more. (Āmiorangi, wahine, 20s)

Her account illustrates how she feels that being Māori by whakapapa is not enough when Māori

identity is assessed through appearance. The concept of socially assigned ethnicity is directly present here: others' assessment of her Māori-ness based on her appearance shapes how confident she feels claiming that identity herself (Gillon et al., 2019). McIntosh (2005) has argued that Māori identities are saturated with political salience and shaped by the perceptions of others; Āmiorangi's experience shows how that plays out at the level of individual confidence. That she is beginning to "sit with" the process of identity reclamation signals a turn towards rangatiratanga over her own sense of self, even as the colonial conditions that created the uncertainty still exist. Anahera's account extends on the impact of colonial conditions by showing how it can make tūrangawaewae a site of longing rather than belonging.

> It's quite … I still have that real weird sense of, like lack of belonging, actually. Lack of sense of belonging because my mum's from Toko and she never really took us back to Toko itself because she was the black sheep. (Anahera, wahine, 20s)

Here, Anahera's narrative illustrates the idea that proximity to marae is not sufficient for a sense of Māori identity; what she experiences as missing is the sense of belonging to specific people in a specific place. The "black sheep" metaphor points to how those bonds are disrupted from within. In Te Whare Tapa Whā terms (Durie, 1994), this is a disruption to taha whānau that affects the whole person and, as this article argues, can extend into the relationship with kai. While Anahera described a lack of belonging despite a connection to her marae, Manaia's account speaks to the active work of reconstruction, and what it means to put the puzzle of Māori identity back together: "And so now I'm trying to find that for myself. Like, I know that I am Māori, but I just need to sort of put the puzzle back together" (Manaia, wahine, 20s). By using a puzzle metaphor, Manaia suggested that the pieces of her identity are scattered. She knows she is Māori, but colonisation has prevented access to what that means and what it looks and feels like in practice. Her framing of reclamation as a personal journey signals a claiming of the right to define and build her own Māori identity (Cuthers, 2018; Te One & Clifford, 2021). Her reference to the reconstruction of her identity is evidence of the damage.

Tiaho described registering with her iwi only "a few years ago", following a lengthy process of gathering the documentation required to confirm her whakapapa. Moments of reconnection were also described as emotional experiences. Tiaho recalled attending her first Ngāi Tahu course and explaining that she "nearly cried when it started because it just … felt good". That whakapapa required institutional verification reflects how colonial systems have come to mediate Māori identity through bureaucratic processes rather than relational ones. Yet when reconnection did come, it was visceral. The emotional weight of that moment speaks to how heavy the absence had been, and how much belonging had been waiting to be reclaimed.

Koea described experiencing an ongoing sense of identity ambiguity, explaining that she felt she was between competing racialised expectations: "There's such that like identity crisis where it's like, oh, I'm not like White enough. But I'm not Brown enough … so it's like, I constantly have this like image battle" (Koea, wahine, 20s). Koea's account captures how colonial conditions produce standards that wāhine Māori are measured against. Neither Māori enough nor White enough—she described a battle that has no resolution because it was never hers to win. The standard of Māori authenticity she described is itself a colonial construction, one in which identity is defined by external markers rather than whakapapa. Her account was not unique; across interviews, wāhine Māori described navigating the same colonial standards for identity.

Participants also described not feeling Māori enough in physical places. Amiria recalled declining invitations to a Māori prizegiving, explaining that she "didn't think … I was really Māori". This hesitation shows how identity disruption can produce a form of self-exclusion that presents as a withdrawal from Māori spaces. Here, socially assigned ethnicity is working from the inside, as external refusals of Māori identity are internalised and imposed by the self (Gillon et al., 2019).

Participants also described striving for body ideals that were shaped by dominant Pākehā norms rather than Māori embodiments. Reflecting on her childhood, Moehewa explained that she had grown up "only identifying with Pākehā, only seeing White Barbies … aiming for this look I was never going to have" (Moehewa, wahine, 30s). Moehewa's account highlights how the dominance of Pākehā imagery influenced her early sense of identity and bodily ideals. Having grown up with Whiteness as the dominant reference for beauty, she described striving towards an unattainable appearance. Her account suggests a connection between identity and the body that the following themes explore more fully.

"As a young child I didn't even know that I was [Māori] (Tiaho, wahine, 20s). Tiaho describing that she didn't know she was Māori as a young child reflects what colonisation does to intergenerational transmission, severing the connections through which identity, language, and belonging are passed down. Read alongside Manaia's account, Tiaho's story shows that for many wāhine Māori, Māori identity must be actively reconstructed in the gaps that colonisation has created.

In this theme, we saw that each of these wāhine knew she was Māori, yet each felt that Māori identity required something more that colonisation had made difficult or impossible to access. The feeling of not being Māori enough was imposed on them by structures and systems that have defined Māori identity through external markers, legislative criteria, and visibility, which has left whakapapa undervalued or invisible. At the same time, several participants described working towards a reclamation of their mana to stand in those spaces, suggesting that identity disruption and identity reclamation are part of the same ongoing processes. As the following themes explore, these disruptions do not stay in the domain of identity alone.

Theme 2: Protective distancing and the rejection of Māori identity

The second theme explores how colonial conditions can compel wāhine Māori to distance themselves from their Māori identity. Amaia's account illustrates how racism, religious imposition, poverty, and structural attacks on Māori identity converged to make her actively seek out ways to deny this side of her: "I never took te reo Māori at school. I only took sciences because Māori don't take sciences, they take sports or Māori … I had unconsciously decided I don't wanna be that picture of what they say Māori are like" (Amaia, wahine, 20s). Here, Amaia shares how racist stereotypes about Māori shaped her educational choices at a level she herself described as unconscious. Her insistence on taking science over Māori subjects is not about a genuine interest in science but about the distance it places between her and a stereotype. Racism of this kind has been documented as a response to sustained exposure to negative representations of one's own group (Goffman, 1963). This suggests that when being Māori is publicly associated with failure or limitation, distancing can feel like self-protection.

> I remember at primary school, I don't know why, but they were weighing all the kids. I remember being at least 30–40 kg heavier than everyone in the class. And because, [school location] is predominantly made up of Pākehā and a smaller minor group of Māori at the time, it was just those two kind of groups and I just remember feeling like oh my gosh I'm way heavier than everyone else. (Amaia, wahine, 20s)

Body size and identity is present in Amaia's account. Being the heaviest in a predominantly Pākehā school and being Māori merged into a single experience of difference and shame. Research on the relationship between racial minority status and body dissatisfaction documents how existing as a visibly different body in a majority-White context compounds vulnerability (Harris & Kuba, 1997). For Amaia, her body became a marker of her Māori identity at a point when that identity was already under pressure. The desire to escape the stigma of her body and the desire to escape being Māori became, in her experience, the same desire.

> And so, there was a lot of battling going on between me and myself, around whether being Māori is actually "Christianly" okay or not. My whole family is Christian and they're very open and bold about it, so I think at a young age I got told off in church for being in kapa haka so I was the leader of kapa haka and I got told off about it because I was going to too many marae noho and stuff like that so I guess that kind of influenced like how much I didn't want to be Māori I guess. (Amaia, wahine, 20s)

Amaia's account illustrates how religious spaces became another site where her Māori identity was positioned as problematic. Being reprimanded for participating in kapa haka and attending marae noho sent a clear message: te ao Māori and Christianity were incompatible. In response, Amaia distanced herself from her Māoritanga. This kind of identity negotiation, in which expressions of Māori identity are suppressed in order to maintain belonging in another space, reflects a pattern described across interviews, that the cost to belong in one world required the partial relinquishing of another.

Each environment Amaia moved through—school, church, and a predominantly Pākehā community—made her feel that being Māori was not accepted. Her response was to create distance between herself and what she understood Māori identity to be (Gillon et al., 2019; Goffman, 1963). As the following theme shows, this same logic extended into how participants experienced kai.

Theme 3: Kai as the body's response to identity disruption

The preceding themes have shown how wāhine Māori navigated identity disruption across whānau, institutional, and cultural spaces. The third theme makes the connection to kai explicit, drawing on participant accounts that directly link identity disruption to the development of issues with kai. While that connection is present throughout this article, it is stated most directly in these accounts.

> A lot of my eating patterns came from a violent home, Christianity, whether they like to say it or not, racism at school, even though I wasn't directly, no one was directly racist to me, but I could see it in the school. (Amaia, wahine, 20s)

Amaia's reflection illustrates how issues with kai emerged from a range of influences. By linking her eating patterns to experiences of violence in the home, religion, and racism in the school environment, she situated her relationship with kai within a broader context of structural factors. Notably, Amaia emphasised that racism was not always directed at her personally, but was visible within the wider environment, suggesting that witnessing racialised dynamics within institutions can also shape how individuals experience belonging and self-worth. Here, issues with kai appear as one way in which these identity tensions and structural inequities can manifest through everyday relationships with food.

For some participants, kai, including the preparation and sharing of kai, was identified as a space through which they felt their Māori identity could be safely expressed. Niwareka explained that "My safe space would be in the kitchen … that is the only part of my Māori identity that I was probably really confident in because I can cook and I can cook well and for large groups" (Niwareka, wahine, 30s). Niwareka's positioning of the kitchen as a "safe space" suggests that her Māori identity did not feel secure across all areas of her life. That cooking kai for others was the one place she felt genuinely confident in her Māori identity speaks to the relational dimension of kai within te ao Māori, where the preparation and sharing of food is an expression of whanaungatanga and care for others. For Niwareka, that relational expression of identity remained available even when other expressions did not. Her account complicates a straightforward reading of issues with kai: kai was simultaneously a site of struggle and a site of connection, and those two dimensions were held together rather than kept apart.

On talking about her restricting behaviours with food, Āmiorangi stated "I remember I think it was pretty peak in my feelings of not being Māori enough was at that time too" (Āmiorangi, wahine, 20s). Āmiorangi made the connection explicit, illustrating how the peak of her issues with kai coincided with the peak of her feelings of not being Māori enough. When her sense of her Māori identity was at its lowest, her relationship with kai became a site through which that disconnection was managed and expressed. Āmiorangi described the coincidence of identity disruption and issues with kai. Tairi's account names that relationship directly:

> My personal experience, when it came to the things that I was going through at the time and my eating problems, they were so heavily related to being Māori and not being recognised that I am like that was a huge part of the issue. (Tairi, wahine, 30s)

Tairi's language is clear. "Heavily related" and "huge part of the issue" are direct attributions that show that her issues with kai emerged from, and were sustained by, her identity struggles as wāhine Māori. Specifically, she pointed to not being recognised as Māori—the external refusal of her identity that Gillon et al. (2019) described as socially assigned ethnicity—as a driver of issues with kai.

While Āmiorangi and Tairi described identity disruption and issues with kai occurring alongside one another, Māhina's account shows what happens when there is an absence of Māori identity altogether:

> I think by the time I was 16, the disordered eating was probably the only real solid thing that I had … it was probably the central piece of my identity. That was how I understood myself. So definitely that lack of having an identity outside of that was definitely a major factor, I would say. (Māhina, wahine, 20s)

Māhina described how her eating disorder moved into the empty space created by a lack of Māori identity. Fanon (1952/2008) argued that the psychological conditions of colonisation can lead colonised people to take on identities shaped by the coloniser as a way of preserving a sense of self. For Māhina, disordered eating became that alternative identity.

In this theme, participants spoke directly to the connection between identity and kai, making explicit what the broader literature has not yet named: that for wāhine Māori, the disruption

of Māori identity can be a pathway into issues with kai. Wicksteed (2000) observed that eating problems often reflect a desperate effort to establish control in the face of deficits in self-concept. What this article adds specifically is the colonial dimension: the deficits in self-concept these participants described are structural, produced by a colonial context that systematically disrupts the conditions under which Māori identity can be formed. Issues with kai are one of the ways the body responds to the violence of that disruption.

Discussion

The findings across these 12 wāhine do not represent a single Māori identity, since each participant understood and related to her Māori identity differently, shaped by her own whānau history, proximity to te ao Māori, and experience of colonial conditions. What they share is the experience of those conditions, and how those conditions are related to their relationships with kai.

The experience of not feeling Māori enough, documented across all 12 participants, suggests that the colonial disruption of Māori identity operates regardless of individuals' specific circumstances or levels of connection to te ao Māori. A participant raised on her marae with strong tikanga still felt a lack of belonging. A participant who had recently discovered her Māori whakapapa felt equally uncertain. Proximity to te ao Māori was not a protective factor.

For these 12 wāhine, the disruption of Māori identity impacted their relationships with kai through several routes. For some, issues with kai emerged when the pressure of not feeling Māori enough was at its peak. For others, the distancing from Māori identity under colonial pressure produced eating patterns responsive to the same conditions driving that distancing. For Māhina, the displacement of Māori identity left a void the eating disorder filled. These pathways differ, but each reflects the same dynamic, which Durie's (1994) model of Te Whare Tapa Whā helps to make sense of. When taha wairua and taha whānau are affected by conditions that deny wāhine Māori their sense of Māori identity, the consequences extend across all dimensions of hauora, including taha tinana and its relationship with kai. This suggests that disruption to identity and the disruption to the relationship with kai are dimensions of the same colonial harm.

This article contributes a specific dimension to the emerging body of Māori eating disorder scholarship. While Clark et al. (2023, 2024) have documented the barriers Māori face in accessing treatment and the factors shaping their experiences, this article identifies identity disruption as one of the conditions producing those experiences in the first place. Fraser et al.'s (2024) development of culturally grounded Māori terminology for food distress and Rapata's (2025) documentation of food colonialism as a structural force shaping Māori relationships with kai both point towards the same conclusion this article reaches from a different direction: that Māori issues with kai cannot be understood outside of the colonial conditions that shape Māori lives.

Pettie et al. (2026) noted how little is still known in this space. This article attempts to address one part of that gap by naming identity disruption as a specific colonial pathway into issues with kai among wāhine Māori—a connection that has not previously been made explicit in the literature. Perhaps the most significant finding is how collective that experience is. Despite having fundamentally different lives and different relationships to te ao Māori, all 12 wāhine shared the experience of not feeling truly or confidently Māori, suggesting the disruption is structural rather than circumstantial.

These findings have practical implications. If identity disruption is implicated in the development of issues with kai, treatment approaches focused on symptom management without addressing the underlying conditions will be insufficient. As Clark et al. (2023) found, culturally safe services are not a supplement to eating disorder treatment for Māori but a prerequisite for it. Policy must address the structural conditions that produce both identity disruption and issues with kai: the racism, legislative constraints on Māori identity, and cultural erasure documented in this article. Healing, for wāhine Māori, may require the restoration of identity, which means creating conditions for connection to whānau, iwi, and te ao Māori.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the disruption of Māori identity under colonial conditions is implicated in the development of issues with kai among wāhine Māori.

Across 12 wāhine with different lives, and different relationships to te ao Māori, identity disruption was present in every account. Colonial conditions had made Māori identity feel conditional or out of reach, and that disruption had impacted their relationships with kai. Through racist schooling, religious pressure, bureaucratic barriers to whakapapa, and the accumulated weight of messages that being Māori was incompatible

with being valued, colonial conditions systematically undermined the foundations from which Māori identity is built.

Recognising this requires a different way of understanding what issues with kai among wāhine Māori are. This article found that they are expressions of colonial harm. Therefore, responses that address only symptoms, without attending to the identity conditions that produced them, will be insufficient. What is required is conditions in which wāhine Māori can know, claim, and live their Māori identity without the thresholds colonisation has placed in the way. That means removing the institutional and bureaucratic barriers that prevent wāhine Māori from accessing their own whakapapa and cultural spaces. It means creating conditions in which connection to whānau, iwi, and te ao Māori is possible and supported.

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Glossary

ahi kā	burning fires of occupation
Aotearoa	New Zealand
awa	river
hapū	subtribe
hau kāinga	home
hauora	health
iwi	a group descended from a common ancestor and land
kai	food
kapa haka	Māori cultural performance
Kaupapa Māori	Māori approach, ways of doing
kupu	word
mana	power, control
mana ake	the unique power, or essence, within each person

Māoritanga	Māoriness
marae	tribal meeting grounds
marae noho	a stay at a marae
mātauranga	knowledge
maunga	mountain
oriori	lullaby
Pākehā	non-Māori, usually of European descent
pēpi	baby
rangatahi	young people
rangatiratanga	sovereignty
taha hinengaro	a dimension from te whare tapa whā that refers to the mind
taha tinana	a dimension from te whare tapa whā that refers to the body
taha wairua	a dimension from te whare tapa whā that refers to the spirit
taha whānau	a dimension from te whare tapa whā that refers to family and relationships
tamariki	children
taonga	treasure
te ao Māori	the Māori world
te reo	the language, commonly used to refer to the Māori language
tikanga	customs and rules
tinana	body
tīpuna	ancestors, grandparents
tūrangawaewae	a place to stand; refers to a sense of belonging and connection
wahine	woman
wāhine	women
whakamā	shame
whakapapa	ancestry, genealogy
whānau	family
whanaungatanga	relationships
whenua	land

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