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Exploring Motivation in the Indigenous Sport of Kī-o-Rahi: The Importance of Te Ao Māori

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ABSTRACT

Sport participation has the potential to improve physical and psychological wellbeing for individuals and communities. Yet these benefits are not always realised equitably, particularly when activities do not reflect Indigenous values or cultural needs. This study sought to understand what motivates people to begin and continue participating in Kī-o-Rahi, a traditional Māori sport deeply embedded in Māori cultural values. This rangahau (research) was grounded in Māori research principles and collaborative inquiry. For instance, the study's central question was co-developed by Kī-o-Rahi organisers from across Te Waipounamu, Aotearoa (South Island, New Zealand). Thirteen players (7 women, 6 men; 7 Māori, 6 New Zealand European/Pākehā) took part in three focus groups. Based on a reflexive thematic analysis, four interconnected motivational themes were developed. First, whakawhanaungatanga (relationship-building) was central. Second, participants described the importance of pride in te ao Māori (Māori worldview). Third, participants emphasised how wairua (spirituality) infused the sport with deeper meaning. Finally, participants appreciated how Kī-o-Rahi afforded a balance between competition and fun. Findings indicate that participants are motivated to play Kī-o-Rahi because it is a culturally grounded practice that fosters social cohesion and cultural affirmation. Future efforts to promote Kī-o-Rahi could therefore focus not only on its ability to enhance physical health but also its potential for facilitating social connections, cultural revitalisation, and a sense of community.

1. Introduction

Sport participation is widely acknowledged for its benefits to physical and mental wellbeing (Bengtsson et al., 2025; Panza et al., 2020). However, most of the existing research has adopted a Western paradigm that often overlooks the relational, spiritual, and collective aspects central to Indigenous conceptions of wellbeing (e.g., Boudreau et al., 2025). Moreover, research exploring Indigenous sports (e.g., Kī-o-Rahi, waka ama) remains scarce (Campbell et al., 2024; Severinsen & Reweti, 2021). There has been international research on Indigenous games (e.g., Fabian & Giles, 2023; Thomsen et al., 2018), and research on Māori athletes participating in colonial sports (e.g., rugby; Arellano & Downey, 2019; Hinemoa et al., 2023). However, there is limited empirical research that explores how traditional Māori games may contribute to wellbeing.

Originating in Aotearoa New Zealand and shaped by Māori cultural principles, Kī-o-Rahi is attracting growing interest (Smith & Smith, 2023). Kī-o-rahi is a ball sport played on a circular field that combines features of tag, handball, and rugby. It embodies principles of whakawhanaungatanga, wairua, and multigenerational engagement, acting as a living expression of Māori identity and cultural continuity. Considering that Indigenous wellbeing is deeply interconnected with culture,

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community, and spirituality (McHugh et al., 2019), Indigenous scholars (e.g., Biles et al., 2024; Muriwai et al., 2023) have argued that research on sport and wellbeing should not be separated from cultural identity, ancestral connection, and social cohesion. The cultural relevance of Kī-o-Rahi underscores a gap in understanding how cultural, spiritual, and relational dimensions are lived within Aotearoa New Zealand's distinctive sporting and cultural landscape.

Furthermore, the lack of research on Indigenous sports and health-related outcomes that is inclusive of Māori epistemologies (Ka'ai-Mahuta, 2011) highlights the need for methodologies that privilege Indigenous voices, knowledge systems, cultural protocols, and wellbeing frameworks. In the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, Māori wellbeing models such as Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 1998; Rochford, 2004) can provide a research framework that is culturally relevant. Te Whare Tapa Whā articulates a holistic model of wellbeing that integrates: wairua (spiritual), hinengaro (mental), tinana (physical), whenua (roots), and whānau (family) dimensions. In addition, Sport New Zealand ihi Aotearoa (2023), provides a sport-specific model, Te Whetū Rehua (The Guiding Star), which emphasises how a sport initiative can be more culturally responsive to Māori individuals. Te Whetū Rehua emphasises, for example, the importance of ensuring that sport activities take place in culturally significant physical spaces and that sport programs are delivered by Māori leadership in te reo Māori (the Indigenous language of Aotearoa). By employing a kaupapa Māori (Māori values-based) research framework, Māori participants can express, in their own voices, the potential meaning and significance of Kī-o-Rahi. This approach further challenges dominant Western models that often compartmentalise health and sport, proposing instead a holistic and culturally grounded space for supporting Indigenous Tino rangatiratanga (self-determination). Research on Kī-o-Rahi may highlight how this sport embeds Māori narratives and cultural protocols within the sport and, in the process, can serve as a powerful site for addressing health inequities, cultural resurgence, and intergenerational healing.

Overall, despite growing recognition of the cultural, spiritual, and wellbeing benefits of Indigenous sport, there remains limited understanding of the specific factors that motivate Māori and non-Māori participants to engage with Kī-o-Rahi. The current study addresses thematic and methodological research gaps by exploring motivations for participating in Kī-o-Rahi through principles of kaupapa Māori.

2. Methods

2.1. Procedures

This rangahau (research) was grounded in principles of kaupapa Māori, whakawhanaungatanga (relationship-building), and collaborative inquiry, recognising the importance of relationships and community voice in shaping meaningful research. The research process began with a hui (meeting) involving Kī-o-Rahi organisers from across Te Waipounamu (South Island), where the kaupapa of the study was discussed collectively. From this shared kōrero (discussion), the overarching research question was co-developed: What motivates participants to start and continue to play Kī-o-Rahi?

Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, where the study's purpose, risks, and potential benefits were explained. To compensate participants for their time, the chance to be included in a draw for two gift cards was offered. Participants were invited to ask questions and reflect before signing written consent forms and filling out demographic information. Ethical approval was granted by Ara Institute's Ethics Board (#APS1899). The process prioritised participant autonomy and upheld tikanga Māori (appropriate Māori protocols) throughout the research engagement. For instance, a mihimihi (the sharing of culturally significant aspects of oneself) took place at the start of each focus group. To guide kōrero during the focus groups, a series of open-ended prompts were created, grounded in the themes raised during the initial hui. These prompts encouraged reflective and relational discussion, for example: (1) What about Kī-o-Rahi inspires you to play? (2) What initially motivated you to start playing Kī-o-Rahi, and (3) how has your motivation changed over time?

Focus groups took place during rest periods between games. Overall, three focus groups, lasting between 47 and 73 minutes, were held with 4–5 participants. The group format fostered collective meaning-making and shared storytelling, in alignment with kaupapa Māori research practices that value dialogue, relational knowledge, and co-construction of insights.

2.2. Participants

Participants were recruited during a regional community Kī-o-Rahi tournament held in Ōtautahi Christchurch, Aotearoa New Zealand. This setting was intentionally chosen to honour the kaupapa of the sport and to meet participants in a context that was both meaningful and familiar. A total of 13 players (7 women, 6 men) took part in the study. Seven identified as Māori and six as New Zealand European/Pākehā, with ages ranging from 18 to 54 years ($M = 33.6$, $SD = 14.1$).

2.3. Analysis

The audio-recorded kōrero were transcribed verbatim and analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis. This approach was chosen for its flexibility and alignment with kaupapa Māori-informed qualitative inquiry, allowing for rich, contextual interpretation of meaning across participant experiences. We adopted an inductive approach, allowing patterns and themes to be generated from the data rather than applying a predetermined coding framework. The analysis was recursive and iterative, involving repeated engagement with the transcripts to ensure depth and reflexivity. Familiarisation began with close, active reading of each transcript, noting early impressions and potential points of interest. From there, initial codes were generated to capture compelling features of the data, with attention to both semantic content and underlying meaning. Codes were gathered to form subthemes and overarching major themes.

Rather than striving for code consistency or reliability across researchers, coding was understood as an interpretive act, shaped by the positionality of the researchers. We engaged in ongoing reflexivity throughout the process, recognising how our cultural standpoint, values, and relationships with the participants informed the development of meaning. Themes were developed

through an iterative process of grouping, refining, and deepening interpretive engagement with the coded data. Emphasis was placed on themes that not only recurred but also spoke powerfully to the research question and broader cultural context. NVivo (Version 15) was used to assist with the organisation, searching, and visualisation of codes and themes across the dataset.

3. Results

Based on the reflexive thematic analysis, four interconnected major themes were created that explore the participants' motivation for playing Kī-o-Rahi: *Whakawhanaungatanga*, *Pride in Te Ao Māori*, *Wairua*, and *Balance Between Competition and Fun*.

3.1. Whakawhanaungatanga

A central theme created from participant accounts was whakawhanaungatanga, which incorporates the process of building and nurturing relationships. Participants described how Kī-o-Rahi acted as a catalyst for connection that spread beyond one's own demographic (e.g., age, background, and ability). Through shared play, participants formed meaningful and often immediate relationships that resembled the bonds of whānau, in ways that contrasted sharply with more hierarchical or competitive sport environments. Three interwoven subthemes collectively highlight the social and relational essence of the sport: whānau-like bonds form quickly, multigenerational participation, and a non-judgmental, welcoming culture.

3.1.1. Whānau-like bonds form quickly

Across narratives, participants emphasised the speed and depth with which they formed bonds through playing Kī-o-Rahi. Participants entering the tournament without knowing many people expressed surprise at the rapid development of whānau-like relationships. As one participant shared, "You come in and you don't know each other but by the end you kind of feel like you're family." This comment highlighted the collective spirit fostered through the game and affirms the relational values underpinning te ao Māori, where kinship is both literal and metaphorical.

For individuals newly arrived in a city or disconnected from their existing Māori networks, Kī-o-Rahi served as a bridge to community. One participant reflected, "I came to Christchurch and I don't know anybody yet. So that's a cool way to meet some of the Māori community." This highlights the sport's role not only in physical engagement but in cultural connection, which allows for identity-affirming spaces through casual and playful means. Participants also spoke about the ways in which teams formed on the day, often without preexisting affiliations, yet still took on the character of whānau. "We created two teams from random … someone's auntie, someone's cousin." Even in randomised groupings, the relational logic of whakawhanaungatanga prevailed, and newcomers were absorbed into a familial environment.

3.1.2. Multigenerational participation

Participants repeatedly highlighted the unique intergenerational quality of Kī-o-Rahi as a defining aspect of its appeal. According to participants, the Kī-o-Rahi tournament offered a rare opportunity for multiple generations to play alongside one another, reinforcing whānau cohesion and the passing of cultural knowledge through a playful atmosphere. One participant observed, "It's cool to see our tamariki [children] playing alongside their grandparents. That's rare in sport." This was echoed in another reflection: "We've got a 60-year-old playing today, and she's still out there having fun with the kids." These insights illustrate how Kī-o-Rahi disrupted conventional age norms found in mainstream sport, where participants are typically separated by developmental stage.

Moreover, participants described the event as a gathering point for wider whānau, where shared activity transcended generational divides. "It's the fact that we're doing it as a whānau… even the little ones are getting a go." In this way, the game became a living enactment of an important aspect of kaupapa Māori, where intergenerational learning and participation are central. Another participant noted, "We've come together as a family team, cousins, aunties… it's all about that connection." The phrase "all about that connection" captures a deeper intent beyond the surface-level physical aspects of the game: a deliberate effort toward relational wellbeing. Furthermore, the sport's format enabled informal mentorship and modelling between age groups. "We got young kids playing with adults. That's the beauty of it." One participant distilled the essence clearly: "You can play with your kids, your cousins – everyone." This spirit of inclusivity and intergenerational exchange not only supported community-building but reinforced the holistic values of Māori sport.

3.1.3. Non-judgmental, welcoming culture

Another significant dimension of whakawhanaungatanga was the welcoming, non-judgmental culture described by participants. Kī-o-Rahi was framed as a space where people of all levels of fitness, background, and ability could feel safe and included. "You could play this and walk it if you couldn't run… You don't have to be super fit to play this." This low barrier to entry not only promoted access, but also reframed success as participation and presence, rather than skill or speed. The game was also praised for its cultural inclusiveness. "We've had so many different cultures in our [team]… it's still all of us getting together… having fun." Here, Kī-o-Rahi became a space for intercultural connection, without requiring assimilation into a dominant norm. Moreover, some participants spoke candidly about initial hesitations rooted in fear of exclusion or not belonging. One Pākehā participant noted, "I was a little worried about like being too white… but it's not like that at all. Super welcoming… it's a real friendly environment." Another shared, "It's not like netball or rugby. You don't get looked down on for not knowing."

The casual and relational nature of the sport also mitigated financial or logistical barriers, further enhancing its accessibility. For instance, one participant mentioned: "We wouldn't have come if we had to pay like some other sports." Others affirmed this sentiment: "It's free, it's fun, and anyone can join. That's the best part." For many, the affordability and openness of Kī-o-Rahi was integral to its appeal, enabling wider community engagement

and ensuring participation was driven by relational instead of transactional values. As one participant succinctly put it, "Everyone's just happy that you came." This simple expression of gratitude reflects the spirit of manaakitanga (hospitality) that infused the event: a generous welcome that extended to all, regardless of ethnicity, knowledge, or ability.

3.2. Pride in te ao Māori

A second key theme to be created was a profound pride in te ao Māori, expressed through engagement with Kī-o-Rahi as a living cultural practice. Participants described feelings of validation, ownership, and cultural connection when engaging in a sport that originated from and actively reflected Māori traditions and worldview. This theme comprised two related subthemes: authentic Māori spaces and reclaiming traditional practices.

3.2.1. Authentic Māori spaces

Many participants expressed a deep appreciation for the authenticity of the cultural space created by Kī-o-Rahi. Unlike tokenistic or superficial incorporations of Māori symbols into Pākehā-dominated environments, the game was experienced as an expression of cultural sovereignty. One participant succinctly captured this sentiment: "You get to be Māori in a way that's not tokenistic." This statement reflects both a critique of performative biculturalism and an endorsement of Kī-o-Rahi as a space where Māori identity could be expressed meaningfully and on Māori terms. Participants expressed pride in participating in a sport that was not merely inclusive of Māori culture but rooted in it. One participant affirmed: "This is our space, our game. We made this." This declaration of ownership speaks to participants' sense of belonging, and, perhaps, resistance against a history of marginalisation within New Zealand's sporting institutions. For many, the pride stemmed from the opportunity to be immersed in a sport that reflects and celebrates Māori values, narratives, and history: "It's Māori, so we're here for that. It's who we are." This sense of alignment between identity and activity was central to the experience for both Māori and non-Māori participants who wished to engage respectfully with te ao Māori. For Māori participants especially, the event was not just recreational but affirmational, offering a space to "exist unapologetically as Māori." Kī-o-Rahi was also described as an opportunity to enhance cultural continuity. One participant reflected: "It feels like we're not just playing but keeping something alive."

3.2.2. Reclaiming traditional practices

Closely related to the notion of authenticity was the theme of reclamation of traditional practices through Kī-o-Rahi. For some participants, particularly those raised in predominantly Pākehā environments, playing Kī-o-Rahi evoked a sense of returning to cultural roots. "We were raised playing Pākehā sports. This one feels like coming home." This comment reveals a deeper emotional resonance: for these individuals, participation was not simply playing a sport but a deep personal reconnection to ancestral traditions.

Participants also emphasised that the kaupapa of the sport drew them in. One noted, "What interested me was probably like the kaupapa around it… And just being a part of that." The appeal was not limited to physical play but extended to the embedded cultural meanings, protocols, and values that gave the game depth and context. These cultural elements offered a richer sporting experience, which differed fundamentally from the more performance-driven objectives of mainstream sport. This contrast was articulated explicitly by one participant: "That was really cool because no other sport I've really played symbolized anything really… Rugby you want to get a try … it doesn't mean anything. But there's more to it [with Kī-o-Rahi]." Here, the participant acknowledges how most conventional sports are separated from cultural narrative or spiritual significance, whereas Kī-o-Rahi was infused with meaning and drew on pūrākau (trasitional story), whakapapa (genealogy), and tikanga.

3.3. Wairua

A third core theme developed through analysis was the wairua dimension of playing Kī-o-Rahi. For many participants, the game carried a deeper resonance. It was not simply a sport, but a practice grounded in wairua. This dimension transcended the physical aspects of play, anchoring it in ancestral connection and the unseen forces that shape and guide Māori experiences. Two interrelated subthemes were identified: Ancestral presence and guidance and representing tūpuna (ancestors) through play.

3.3.1. Ancestral presence and guidance

Participants frequently described Kī-o-Rahi as an activity that incorporates the presence of participants' ancestors. The wairua of the game was felt both on and off the field, and this spiritual connection added weight and meaning to their participation. One participant reflected, "It feels like wairua's part of the game … like our ancestors are watching us." This expression highlighted how participants experienced the game as a potential spiritual window, one that linked them to those who had come before. For some, Kī-o-Rahi evoked a sense of kaitiakitanga (guardianship of cultural practices passed down through generations). One participant noted, "Our tūpuna used to play it…it's not just a game, it's a wairua thing too." This acknowledgment of lineage positioned the game as a form of cultural continuation, where players were not only engaging for fun but taking part in the preservation of ancestral knowledge. Furthermore, participants described a tangible emotional and spiritual connection to their ancestors while playing. As one shared, "You feel them with you when you're on the field, like you're doing it for them." This suggests that participation in Kī-o-Rahi was an act of remembrance and respect. In these moments, players were not only athletes. They also became vessels through which ancestral presence could be felt, honoured, and carried forward. This experience reflects a distinctly Indigenous worldview, in which the physical and spiritual realms are interwoven, and ancestral influence continues to shape the present. Rather than viewing sport as separate from culture or spirituality, participants saw Kī-o-Rahi as a powerful site of reconnection.

3.3.2. Representing tūpuna through play

Beyond sensing the presence of ancestors, participants described feeling a responsibility to represent them through their actions on the field. This dimension added a sense of purpose and accountability to their participation. One participant stated, "You're not just playing, you're representing your tūpuna." This notion of representation speaks to a deeper relational ethic, which is grounded in whakapapa and honouring those who paved the way. The weight of this reference to tūpuna elevated the game beyond recreation. It became a platform for enacting values and for continuing legacies.

3.4. Balance between competition and fun

A final theme constructed during the interpretive process discusses how participants engaged with Kī-o-Rahi with a distinctive balance between competition and fun. Unlike many conventional sports where performance and winning are central, participants described Kī-o-Rahi as a socially rich, low-pressure environment where relationality, enjoyment, and learning were prioritised. This balance supported both individual wellbeing and collective cohesion. Two subthemes captured this dynamic: competitive spirit with respectful limits and a safe learning environment.

3.4.1. Competitive spirit with respectful limits

Participants frequently acknowledged that competition was present, but not overwhelming. Instead of intense rivalry, the focus remained on social connection, emotional wellbeing, and collective fun. Many participants noted how this atmosphere offered relief from the stress of demanding work or traditional sports. One shared, "What we do [for work] is around like mental health, addiction, violence… so doing something like this and getting out and having fun and socialising outside of that mahi [work], that's an exciting thing for me." The comment speaks to the restorative role of the sport in supporting Hauora (holistic health outcomes), particularly hinengaro.

Several participants emphasised that the appeal of Kī-o-Rahi was less about the game itself, and more about the opportunity to be together. One participant noted, "I was mainly just pulled in by the social element… I enjoy my colleagues… just a chance to hang out." Others described the joy and levity the game brought: "We've just had laughs and laughs… that's part of the fun." These accounts reflect the joys of whanaungatanga as central to the sporting experience. While competition existed, participants consistently described it as secondary to enjoyment. "We're competitive, but it's not the main thing." This comment illustrates how competitive energy could exist without undermining the inclusive and social environment. Another participant explained, "You still want to win, but you don't take it home with you." This healthy relationship with competition, which was focused on engagement rather than ego, helped reduce pressure and made the event feel open and welcoming to all levels of ability.

3.4.2. Safe learning environment

Alongside the balanced competitive spirit, participants described Kī-o-Rahi as a safe and encouraging place to learn, particularly for those new to the game. The absence of harsh judgment or performance pressure created psychological safety, which allowed players to make mistakes. One participant captured this clearly: "You don't feel dumb if you make a mistake. Everyone helps you out." This emphasis on collective encouragement was echoed by another: "You weren't laughed at, you were encouraged." Rather than being corrected or ridiculed, new players were met with support, reflecting a deeply Māori ethic of manaakitanga.

Positive reinforcement took precedence over critique, reinforcing trust and comfort. Participants appreciated the freedom to learn without the pressure to master the game. "I like that I'm learning, but I'm not expected to know it all." The removal of perfectionist expectations created a more inclusive experience where the process of learning was valued over performance outcomes. One player shared, "I knew that it was social, not real competitive, which made me feel comfortable to come and learn." Knowing that the environment was social and welcoming gave new participants the confidence to show up and try. This safe space for learning reflects kaupapa Māori that emphasizes relationality, humility, and experiential learning.

Overall, participants appreciated that while Kī-o-Rahi allowed for healthy competition, it was always held within the boundaries of respect and connection. The emphasis on encouragement and safety, especially for newcomers, underscored Kī-o-Rahi's role as a culturally grounded learning environment. Through its balance of playfulness and competitiveness, Kī-o-Rahi embodied Māori approaches to sport that prioritise people over outcomes.

4. Discussion

The results of this study highlighted the multifaceted motivations that underpin participation in Kī-o-Rahi. It appears that Kī-o-Rahi is experienced by participants as more than just a competitive sport. It is a culturally grounded practice that fosters social connection, cultural affirmation, and spiritual connection. Taken together, the findings suggest that Kī-o-Rahi holds unique potential as a culturally grounded, socially cohesive, and spiritually meaningful Māori sport. Its emphasis on whakawhanaungatanga, cultural pride, spiritual connection, and inclusivity contrasts with the values often ascribed to mainstream sport, which often prioritise competition and individualism (Rai et al., 2024). For Māori and Pākehā, Kī-o-Rahi may offer a restorative and affirming space that bridges generations, affirms identity, and supports holistic dimensions of wellbeing.

4.1. Comparison of Indigenous and Western sports

Several Western sports (e.g., hockey, football), have strongly been associated with a focus on performance and competition (Rai et al., 2024). There are notable exceptions, both in Aotearoa New Zealand and abroad, of sport initiatives that placed a focus on balancing performance and opportunities to enjoy the sport (e.g., Balance is Better; Taylor et al., 2024). Nevertheless, participants in the current study highlighted how they felt Kī-o-Rahi placed comparatively less emphasis on competition and instead celebrated aspects such as multigenerational presence and whanaungatanga instead of sport performance. These findings reflect similar themes that have been found in recent research on Kī-o-Rahi (Campbell et al., 2024). Furthermore, the elements of

inclusivity and intergenerational exchange not only supported community-building but reinforced the holistic values of Māori sport, which are values often lost in age-banded, competition-driven sports environments such as rugby. Furthermore, the game held space for difference without othering, which appeared to reduce the hierarchies of knowledge, ability, or ethnicity. These findings are consistent with that of Palmer et al. (2009), who found that Kī-o-Rahi catered to a wide range of skill and fitness levels, provided an opportunity for interaction between ethnicities, genders, age, and peer groups, and allowed the expression of Māori identity and pride. These accounts reflect some of the broad values of Kī-o-Rahi. Namely, newcomers are embraced rather than assessed, and cultural humility is encouraged.

Furthermore, participation in Kī-o-Rahi was understood as an act of cultural stewardship, which helped to revitalise practices that had once been diminished or displaced. These findings reflect previous Canadian research, which suggested that sport can offer Indigenous youth opportunities to strengthen community ties and deepen cultural connections (McHugh et al., 2019). This process could in turn help contribute to the intergenerational survival of mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge). Even for those who were still learning or reconnecting with their Māori identity, Kī-o-Rahi provided a non-threatening, embodied way to engage with te ao Māori. The game offered more than just physical activity. It also offered participants an evolving sense of who one could be as Māori. In doing so, Kī-o-Rahi acted as a subtle yet powerful decolonial practice, which may have the potential of restoring cultural relevance to physical activity and challenging the dominance of colonial sporting models. Namely, Pride in te ao Māori highlighted how Kī-o-Rahi is more than a sport. Kī-o-Rahi offered authentic Māori spaces where culture was honoured and supported the reclamation of traditional practices.

4.2. More than a sport

Based on the results of the current study, Kī-o-Rahi functioned as more than a sport and lead to a multitude of holistic benefits. Previously, Akbar et al. (2020) conducted a systematic review on wellbeing and traditional Indigenous sports that took place in Canada, the United States of America, New Zealand, and Australia. Akbar et al. (2020) found numerous emotional, mental, and spiritual benefits of traditional physical activity. Similarly, in the current study, Kī-o-Rahi was described as prioritising connection over competition, belonging over performance, and togetherness over hierarchy. Overall, Kī-o-Rahi was described as functioning not only as a form of recreation but as a site of cultural resurgence and identity affirmation. For instance, participating in Kī-o-Rahi was accompanied by a claim of belonging, and, perhaps, resistance against a history of marginalisation within New Zealand's sporting institutions.

Based on the current study, Kī-o-Rahi acted as a vehicle for whakawhanaungatanga. The tournament allowed participants to create relational networks that resembled, reflected, or became whānau. The sport's inclusive structure, multigenerational format, and relational focus collectively fostered a culturally grounded, community-affirming experience. This connection was at a deeper level than typified in western sport, where, playing Kī-o-Rahi was not just about movement or strategy, it was also about connection to one's tūpuna. Kī-o-Rahi became a space where wairua could be lived, rather than simply talked about. The theme of Wairua revealed the depth of spiritual meaning participants found in playing Kī-o-Rahi. For many, the game served as a bridge between worlds. It helped link the past and present, physical and spiritual, self and ancestors. Participants described feeling guided by their tūpuna and compelled to represent them through play. These findings reflect earlier research in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand. Namely, Griffiths et al. (2023) in a review of social benefits of sports in Aotearoa New Zealand, found that for Māori athletes, participating in sport helped strengthened their sense cultural identity. Indeed, according to Moon (2012), "while sport can be an instrument of 'cultural suppression and cultural hegemony on the one hand', it can paradoxically serve as a force for '…cultural regeneration and cultural survival on the other'" (p.29).

Furthermore, findings of the current study reinforce those from a scoping report by Palmer et al. (2009), that found Kī-o-Rahi to be a way of passing down beliefs, traditions, and protocols from one generation to the next. Similarly, in the context of another traditional Māori sport, called waka ama, Severinsen and Reweti (2021), found that when participants were afforded opportunities to connect to their culture, their wellbeing improved. Internationally, the review by McHugh et al. (2019) also found that sport and recreation may provide valuable opportunities for Indigenous youth in Canada to connect with their communities and access role models. In summary, participants in the current study, expressed that Kī-o-Rahi functioned not only as a form of sport or recreation but as a site of cultural resurgence and identity affirmation, where the game was accompanied by a claim of belonging.

4.3. Implications

From a policy perspective, there is a compelling case for increasing structural and financial support for traditional Indigenous sports such as Kī-o-Rahi. Kī-o-Rahi can be supported not only as a recreational activity to promote physical wellbeing but as a tool for supporting broader goals around Māori wellbeing. Incorporating games like Kī-o-Rahi into schools, community centres, and health initiatives may help strengthen cultural identity and foster community connection. Importantly, such initiatives should be led by Māori and embedded in kaupapa Māori approaches, to ensure authenticity and uphold the cultural integrity of the game.

For instance, Kī-o-Rahi could be included in school curricula, not just as physical activity, but as a culturally rich learning tool that connects students to mātauranga Māori. In community contexts, funding Kī-o-Rahi-related efforts could help support intergenerational engagement and whānau connectedness. Local government, regional sporting organisations, and community development agencies could prioritise funding for Māori-led sport and recreation initiatives, especially those that use Indigenous games, such as Kī-o-Rahi, for strengthening identity and community wellbeing. Finally, Kī-o-Rahi, could be used to support national level health promoting strategies such as He Korowai Oranga (New Zealand's Māori Health Strategy). Particularly, Kī-o-Rahi, may be used to foster whānau ora (family health) and culturally relevant pathways to wellness. Public health agencies can collaborate with iwi (Māori tribes) to implement Kī-

o-Rahi-based programmes that address physical inactivity, mental health, and social disconnection, which are key determinants of Māori wellbeing outcomes.

4.4. Strengths and limitations

This study offers valuable insights into Kī-o-Rahi, a culturally significant sport in Aotearoa New Zealand that is gaining in popularity but remains underrepresented in academic literature. Throughout this study, cultural integrity and tikanga was upheld throughout the process. For instance, focus groups were conducted in a familiar and meaningful context, which fostered participant comfort and supported the authenticity of responses. Furthermore, the research question emerged collaboratively through a hui with Kī-o-Rahi organisers, grounding the inquiry in lived experience and community priorities.

Nevertheless, a key limitation of this study lies in the context-specific nature of its data collection. Because all focus groups were conducted during a single regional Kī-o-Rahi tournament in Ōtautahi Christchurch, the findings may overly reflect the enthusiasm that was present during the heightened social, emotional, and cultural atmosphere of the event. Furthermore, the perspectives of younger participants and Kī-o-Rahi participants from Te Ika-a-Māui (the North Island) were not included in the current study. In addition, there was a lack of negative findings or challenges expressed by Kī-o-Rahi participants. This can likely be explained by the tournament's context, which emphasised connection and cultural pride, and may have amplified relational or spiritual reflections and underrepresented other aspects of motivation (e.g., health, routine) that might emerge in day-to-day Kī-o-Rahi practices. Consequently, future research may benefit from establishing data collection on a longitudinal basis or taking place in non-tournament settings. Moreover, an exploration of motivation from the point of view of people discontinuing participating in Kī-o-Rahi could be warranted.

Conclusion

The overall findings of this study reveal that the motivation to take part in Kī-o-Rahi incorporates the deeply relational, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of the game. Kī-o-Rahi is a site where whakawhanaungatanga flourishes, where cultural identity is reclaimed and celebrated, and where ancestral presence is honoured through collective play. For many, it is not just a sport, it is a lived expression of kaupapa Māori, offering pathways for connection, competition, spirituality, safety, cultural resurgence, and te ao Māori.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Appendix A: Glossary of Kupu Māori (Māori words)

Te Reo Māori	English
Hauora	Holistic health outcomes
He Korowai Oranga	New Zealand's Māori Health Strategy
Hinengaro	Mental
Hui	meeting
Iwi	Māori tribes
Kaitiakitanga	Guardianship of cultural practices passed down through generations
Kaupapa	Māori values-based
Kōrero	Discussion
Manaakitanga	Hospitality
Mātauranga Māori	Māori knowledge
Mihimihi	Sharing an introduction about oneself, which is used to establish links with other people present and let people know who you are, and where you come from
Ngā taonga tākaro	Indigenous sports
Pākehā	New Zealand European
Pūrākau	Traditional stories
Rangahau	Māori research methodologies
Tamariki	Children
Te ao māori	Māori worldview
Te reo Māori	The Indigenous language of Aotearoa
Te Waipounamu	South Island, New Zealand
Te Whare Tapa Whā	Māori model of wellbeing
Te Whetū Rehua	The Guiding Star
Tikanga	Appropriate Māori protocols
Tinana	Physical
Tino rangatiratanga	Indigenous self-determination
Tūpuna	Ancestors
Wairua	Spiritual
Whakapapa	Genealogy
Whakawhanaungatanga	Relationship-building
Whānau	Family/community
Whānau ora	Family health
Whenua	Roots, land

Appendix B: Focus Group Interview Guide

- Tell me about your experiences with sport or exercise.
- Can you tell me about how you got started with Kī-o-Rahi?
- What about Kī-o-Rahi inspires you to play?
- What initially motivated you to start playing Kī-o-Rahi, and how has your motivation changed over time?
- What has made you want to come to this tournament?
- How does training for kī-o-Rahi compare to this type of tournament?
- How would you describe the feeling of playing in a competitive setting like this?
- What keeps you involved in Kī-o-rahi over time?
- Can you tell me about any challenges or obstacles you have faced?
- What support or resources have helped you continue playing?
- How do relationships with teammates or coaches influence your participation?