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# Abstract

## *Project Rise: Relational Insights for Systemic Empowerment*

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### **Project Rise: Relational Insights for Systemic Empowerment**

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Conversational AI is moving into the most private rooms of human life, yet it is almost exclusively built on Western defaults, by developers who treat safety as a legal disclaimer rather than a structural requirement. For Māori and Pasifika communities, this is a familiar story: technology built without us, for us, to extract from us. This research asks: How might we design ethical conversational AI for vulnerable interactions using Māori and Pasifika values?

Guided by the Kei Compass (Dell, 2025), a five-directional Indigenous framework, this project used a practice-based, build-to-think methodology across four iterative AI builds: a voice-first survey agent, Leadership AI Coach (leadership coaching), Culture Meets AI (a wānanga-based exploration of AI with Māori and Pasifika communities), and Ray, a voice-first AI relationship coach and the capstone prototype. Data was gathered across 167 survey conversations, 349 coaching sessions, a 90-minute wānanga with 12 participants, and 697 minutes of voice coaching across 59 Ray sessions. The methodology was practice-based and iterative: the building was the thinking, with autoethnography and thematic transcript analysis applied across all four builds.

Three core findings emerged. First, text-based digital systems architecturally exclude oral-first communities. Voice is not a preference, it is a justice decision. Second, cultural values like Vā and Mana Motuhake must be embedded in the system logic, not applied as labels, for participants to genuinely feel them. Third, the Human Proxy Theory: AI does not create relational trust, it borrows it from the visible accountability of the human behind it.

This research concludes that ethical conversational AI is not a features problem. It is a power problem. The vā between builder and community is where safe technology lives, and it must be tended before a single line of code is written.

### **References**

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Dell, K. (2025). Using Māori values to ethically evaluate food-enabling technologies [Lecture, Week 12]. Master of Technological Futures, GEN25. AcademyEX, 27 February 2025. Framework adapted by the author as the "Kei Compass."