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Love, sex, and other dangers – intimate partner relationships of young ethnic queers in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract
Open and long-term intimate partner relationships are missing from the landscape of the queer ethnic community in Aotearoa New Zealand. For young ethnic queers, this lack of visibility denies them knowledge of how ethnic queers form and develop intimate partner relationships in a society that marginalizes their ethnicity, and communities that stigmatize their queerness. Similarly, very little is known about the perceptions and experiences of intimate queer relationships among ethnic young people. Using data from a qualitative study of 43 young ethnic queers living in Aotearoa New Zealand, this paper aims to provide information on what young ethnic queers experience or expect from intimate partner relationships, and how family, community, and their own beliefs impact these relationships. The study showed that intimate partner relationships among queer ethnic young people were as diverse as the people and cultures, and young ethnic queers did not

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necessarily have prescribed ways for how these relationships took place. Importantly, despite the pressures and expectations from their communities for heterosexual relationships, young ethnic queers sought the intimacy and affirmation of intimate partner relationships.

Keywords
queer, ethnic, intimate partner, New Zealand, young people

Introduction

While carrying out an evaluation of a family violence programme undertaken by ethnic[1] communities, one of the researchers observed that many of these communities did not consider the shaming, ridiculing, and ostracization of queer[2] family and community members as types of harm or forms of abuse. Further conversations with queer young people working in family harm prevention programmes which supported young ethnic people experiencing family violence revealed that these family and community attitudes and behaviours were common. These responses by the family and community impacted young ethnic queers and, in turn, had made many of their relationships with partners unsafe. A research project was designed to investigate how young ethnic queers in Aotearoa[3] New Zealand perceived and experienced relationships with family, community, and intimate partners. The project focused on five key areas ('coming out', professional and social support, racism, community and family responses, and intimate partner relationships) resulting from consultations with queer ethnic young people, community, and LGBTIQ + organizations. This paper discusses young ethnic queers and their expectations and experiences of intimate partner relationships.

In Aotearoa, it is uncommon to hear about or see queer intimate people who are in long-term relationships. There was also no available or known New Zealand literature on intimate partner relationships among young queers or on young ethnic heterosexual intimate relationships, and none on intimate partner relationships among young ethnic queers. Although there is considerable international literature on intimacy in heterosexual relationships, less is known about intimacy in long-term gay and lesbian relationships (Umberson et al., 2015), or about the intimate relationships of queer ethnic young people. In studies of intimacy among LGBT[4] populations, researchers have noted the lack of diversity in the sample population (Balsam et al., 2011; DeBlaere et al., 2010) with little attention given to the experiences of LGB people of colour (Berg et al., 2016). In addition, the majority of the literature focused on the challenges and adversities of queer intimate partner relationships than on the expectations and experiences of positive intimate relationships among queers. This study aims to provide knowledge on the under-researched area of intimate partner relationships among queer ethnic young people in Aotearoa and their experiences and expectations of these relationships.

Intimacy, largely based on studies of how different-sex couples experience intimate partner relationships, can be defined as mutual closeness and connection (Umberson et al.,

2015). Intimacy is said to be a crucial aspect of personal relationships (Monsour, 1992) and appeared to hold the same meaning for individuals in same-sex relationships as it did for those in heterosexual relationships (Frost, 2011a, 2011b). Factors such as emotional fidelity, sexual flexibility, and greater flexibility in attitudes around sex roles contributed to long-term intimacy among older gay and lesbian couples in the US (Blando, 2001). Though these factors also characterized successful relationships for heterosexual couples, there were differences between these couples and same-sex couples. For the latter, internalized homophobia, the degree of disclosure, and open displays of affection were factors likely to cause discomfort and tension in the relationship (Blando, 2001). Sexual intimacy was considered a feature of a sustainable relationship (Hinchliff and Gott, 2004; Yoo et al., 2014).

Burton (2001) found that having open and honest communication, establishing rules for relationships, and a deep and lasting friendship were necessary for long-term relationships among gay men. Relationship commitment and maintenance, communication, relationship quality, intimacy, equality, and familial support were identified by researchers as contributing to long-term lesbian relationships (Littlefield et al., 2000).

Intimacy among ethnic minority youth in a global context showed that ethnic minority young people in Denmark accepted the involvement of their parents when forming intimate partner relationships while simultaneously assessing how these intimate partner relationships took place among the ethnic majority population (Singla, 2006). For second-generation South Asian young people in Canada, being raised as a son or daughter had implications for how cross-gender relationships and sexual activity occurred, as girls were more heavily policed by the family and community in contrast to boys who were left unchallenged at the breaking of rules and lack of conformity to cultural codes (Zaidu et al., 2014).

Methodology – sharing experiences

This exploratory, qualitative study was designed to investigate the experiences and expectations of young ethnic queers with regard to intimate partner relationships. The majority of the 43 participants that took part in the study identified as queer though at times qualifying this identity with lesbian, gay, bisexual or something other than exclusively heterosexual; individuals also identified as transgender or gender nonbinary (e.g. genderqueer, trans woman, trans man, nonbinary, or gender nonconforming) (Drabble et al., 2020).

Participants were recruited through networks, website advertisements at universities and LGBTIQ + organizations, and social media. The young ethnic queers came or claimed heritage from countries in Africa, Asia, Middle East, and the Americas, and were between the ages of 18 and 35 with only a few participants in their 30s. Given the small population of Aotearoa (5,124,100) and the even smaller population of the close-knit communities of ethnic queers, the countries, nationalities, and ethnicities of the participants[5] are omitted to protect their confidentiality.

Interviews lasted between one hour and four hours, and took place at the participants' choice of venue. All interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants.

Thirty-nine of the 42 interviews (one interview involved two people in an intimate partner relationship) took place in Tāmaki Makarau (Auckland, the largest city with 1,652,000); the remaining five interviews were carried out in Pōneke (Wellington, the capital city with 419,000). Participants were given the option to request a copy of the transcript prior to data analysis. Only one participant chose to do so but made no changes to the transcript. Pseudonyms are used for the participants. Interviews were conducted over a three-month period in 2019.

This paper draws on data from a larger study of queer ethnic young people and their relationships with family, community, and intimate partners. The data for this paper highlight young ethnic queers' experiences and expectations of intimate partner relationships. As we sought to determine from young ethnic queers what they wanted or expected from intimate partner relationships, they also shared with us what they did not want or what made them feel unsafe.

A thematic analysis of the data was carried out which involved the researchers familiarizing themselves with the data from the time of data collection (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The transcripts were read several times to identify common experiences that could be used as central themes, and to note those that were unique. The main themes and subthemes represent the key experiences and concerns of the participants respectively.

Ethics approval for the study was granted by an institutional Ethics Committee.

Terminology

Ethnic, a contested and arguably excluding term, is used in this paper, as it officially refers in Aotearoa to peoples of Asian, African, Middle Eastern, and Latin American heritage as well as those from Continental Europe. It is an imperfect and incomplete term as it does not appropriately classify those from regions such as the Caribbean or Central America. The Ministry for Ethnic Communities' official definition[6] of ethnic excludes Māori, Pacific Island peoples, and those from the dominant European culture. The participants in this paper are those that fall under the official New Zealand definition of ethnic referred to earlier, however, people from Continental Europe were not recruited for this study. This decision was made by the researchers as it was observed that Continental Europeans appear to be more a part of the predominantly white LGBTIQ + community than ethnic queers and do not face the same intersectional challenges with physical appearance, skin colour, religion, or culture in a Eurocentric New Zealand society.

Limitations

The diversity of Aotearoa's ethnic communities means that the study cannot claim to be representative of the ethnic queer community. Given the strong cultural constraints around queerness, the choice to self-disclose meant that the voices that were heard were those of queer ethnic young people who were prepared to share their experiences and expectations. Although we could identify experiences that appeared unique to certain ethnic groups, the researchers opted not to do so as this may have drawn unwarranted attention to those groups or unwittingly diverted to them the inadequate and limited resources available to

the ethnic queer community. The focus of the study was on queer ethnic young people and does not reflect how older ethnic queers want or experience intimate partner relationships. The even smaller population of this latter group would have been beneficial for young ethnic queers to have some idea of how these relationships formed and survived particularly in a presumably less accepting environment than the one that currently exists. Given the mix of queer identities and sexual orientations among the participants, it would have been difficult to attempt to find patterns in the participants' relationships. This, however, was not the focus of the study. The impact of mental health on relationships was emphasized by several of the participants. As there are very few studies on how mental health affects queer relationships, this is an area that requires further study.

Findings

The findings are in two parts – the first set of findings reflect how participants defined intimate partner relationships, and what they experienced and expected from these relationships; the second set of findings reveal what participants perceived as challenges to intimate partner relationships.

Expectations and experiences of intimate partner relationships

Several of the young people were in relationships of varying degrees whether it was new, recently declared permanent, on the verge of going separate ways, or taking a break but still seeing one another. Almost every one of the 43 persons with whom we spoke wanted to be in an intimate partner relationship of some kind, even if not immediately. For many of the participants, what they wanted or expected sometimes differed from what they had or what they themselves offered. The expectations and experiences of intimate partner relationships are presented under the following two sub-themes – *Characteristics of a quality relationship* and *Understandings of intimacy.*

Visualizing a quality relationship

For many of the participants in the study, establishing the terms of an intimate partner relationship seemed a good way to begin one. This started with acknowledging one's shortcomings and working through them in a way that would lead to positive change in a person. This was more likely to take place if they were with someone they believed would be their life partner. Adapting to change and to the other person in a relationship was not always easy as it disrupted how a person had come to know themself.

> Soon: *I think that defining my relationship, it is really one where you want to grow and transform, but the transformative nature of this relationship can be extremely uncomfortable. But I think it's being with someone or seeing someone that you want to be with or grow with beyond just today or right now.*

Kenzie: *We've learnt so much shit within the relationship with each other about ourselves, and so the relationship has been transformative, but that's unique to me and my relationship with Soon compared to other ones.*

Burton (2001) found that the features of successful long-term relationships for gay American men included valuing autonomy and personal freedom, and spending time together to keep the relationship vibrant. Intimate partner relationships for the participants in this study were about wanting and working towards a purpose and a future with a partner who would bring out the best in them. Intimate partners would be a source of support and encouragement without limiting their expressions and expectations.

Rippen: *An intimate partner would…be supportive and encourage you to grow…constantly pushing you to be a better version of yourself…. Not restrictive, someone that helps you to feel more free.*

Young ethnic queers saw an intimate partner as someone with whom they could share the routines of their daily life but who also recognized the need for individual space and solitude.

Tash: *It's like you feel comfortable even though you don't have to try to be romantic. It's like, I do dishes and then the other person reads books or does the cooking. It doesn't have to be completely like kissing or whatever, it's just the comfort. You feel relaxed when that person is around, and you tell each other anything and everything but you still have a bit of privacy, and you give each other that space.*

Certain cultural aspects gained from living in Aotearoa had had an impact on some of the participants' views around living with a partner. Wanting and having personal space while in an intimate partner relationship was not something with which Honar was familiar prior to coming in Aotearoa, but became something he had learned to value while living there. He appreciated having time to himself without the constant presence of his partner and this had become his expectations for any future intimate partner relationships.

Honar: I have noticed, including for myself, that (ethnicity) couples spend more time together, especially now that I am dating this guy who is New Zealand European. There is definitely a higher demand for personal space. I also dated more recent migrants from (country) and I felt that I had adapted more to the New Zealand culture because I had a high demand for personal space as well.

Adopting behaviours and practices may not necessarily mean an assimilation into a world that was once foreign to a person but rather an adaptation to a lifestyle that is perhaps more agreeable to them than behaviours learned at an earlier stage of their life. The participants' awareness of their changing habits suggests that they were growing more comfortable with how they formed and maintained intimate partner relationships.

Understandings of intimacy

Studies on intimacy revealed a number of characteristics that contributed to relationship quality including expression of appreciation and affection, physical contact and sexual activity, and mutual closeness and connection (Julien et al., 2003; Peplau, 2001). Behaviour expectations for romantic same-sex partners were higher than the expectations of same-sex friends due to the higher levels of exclusivity and emotional connectedness identified in intimate relationships, the commitments involved, and the attachment to their partners (Arriaga and Agnew, 2001; Fuhrman et al., 2009).

Intimacy among young ethnic queers was expressed in various ways to reflect the type of relationship that participants were in or were seeking at the time. Relationships were more likely to be considered intimate if it involved sexual contact which, along with the mutual sharing of household chores, was also a measure of how serious the participants determined a relationship to be.

> *Kearn: An intimate relationship would be like a sexual relationship. So I guess that, for me personally, an intimate relationship would be someone that I was dating and someone I was seeing with the intention of it being serious.*

> *Talie: For me, my intimate partner is someone that I perform domestic duties with and we have sex together. I would say that my friendships are also incredible, like intimate partnerships.*

Same-sex friendships are shown to differ from romantic relationships (Monsour et al., 1994). Some of the participants made a distinction between intimate partnerships and intimate partner relationships with the latter not necessarily being the significant relationship in their lives. An 'intimate partnership', which could be interpreted as a close friendship that was not a partnered relationship, did not always involve sex even when the intimacy went beyond what the participants usually had in their friendships. With non-sexual intimate partnerships, there was love, and those involved felt strongly connected to each other. On the other hand, 'intimate partner relationships', for these participants, appeared to involve both physical and sexual intimacy.

> Lia: *An intimate partner is someone you can share different levels of intimacy, whether that's like physical, sexual… But I would also say, I think it's quite normalised in western culture that the intimate partnership relationship is like the main relationship, but for me, that's not the necessary key relationship.*

> Posa: (An intimate partner is) a*nybody who you choose to be close to you in a way that the general population is not close to. Whether that involves physical intimacy is not necessary. But it could be sex, it could be emotional connection, it could be like sharing your life with someone or more than one. I feel like my friendships and intimate connections, like my relationships, my romantic relationships and friendships, they overlap because I feel like it's good to have more than just the one person that you rely on.*

Although engaging in sexual activity was, for many of the participants, the difference between friendship and intimacy, it did not mean that a person had to be monogamous or to maintain a certain amount of contact to be considered an intimate partner.

> Ish: *I feel like there's a wide range of relationships that you could have that would still fall under intimate partner in my head. I think once you start sleeping with someone then that's what changes it from friendship to intimate, whether or not you're dating that person or you're seeing them often; or monogamous or not monogamous. I've had lots of intimate partner relationships where I only see this person like once or twice a month.*

In an environment where sexual expressions have arguably become more accepted, Olir described themselves as demi-sexual, and defined it as needing to develop an emotional bond with someone before developing a sexual attraction for them.

> Olir*: I'm demi-sexual - meaning, for me to be sexually attracted to a certain person, I must have a deep, strong, solid emotional attachment to them. I just don't get sexually attracted or horny towards a lot of people because for me, I'm not really comfortable…. They say that 'maybe you're just being conservative'. I'm not really conservative. If they're going to talk about sex stuff, I'm okay with that, very much open to that. A lot of my friends are disclosing to me their sexual frustrations with their partners and I'm okay with that. However, when it comes to me having intimacy, sexual intimacy to other people - no.*

According to Olir, their views were perceived by some as conservative. For several of the participants from cultures which held to a strict gender binary identity, contemplating or engaging with a queer identity was considered unconventional and had been quite a liberating and progressive step to take.

The participants cautioned that it was important to be realistic about what an intimate partner relationship entailed so that a person did not romanticize the notion of being or having an intimate partner nor did they become too idealistic about a relationship. They advised establishing a friendship with a person before becoming their intimate partner rather than make an initial and definitive choice as to whether the person became a friend or a lover. Intimate partner relationships had brought heartache, as they did for many people in relationships, but the participants said it was important for a person to be honest about what they wanted or expected from a relationship.

> Ish: *I'm trying the whole thing where you are friends with the person before you start dating them. I've never done that before. It's a foreign concept to me coz, you know, you're either in the friend's category or you're in the maybe category - someone that I just started to sleep with. But I don't really wanna be in these serious relationships anymore. They are stressful. And I always end up being heartbroken because I just get too idealistic about the person. There's a difference between being open and being yourself, and also sleep with them or just be physically intimate with them.*

Monogamy and permanence were not unconditional expectations of intimate partner relationships for many of the participants. Societal perceptions of relationships are strongly skewed towards monogamy and fidelity, and these perceptions had an influence on how relationships took place and were managed. Although the participants' views were informed by traditional definitions of monogamy and intimacy, this was not always how they saw or engaged in their own relationships. Autonomy and the freedom to determine how their relationship took place were new learnings for many of the participants.

> Honar: *I feel like this definition (*of intimate partner relationship*) is really person to person. To me, the definition has changed overtime. I do definitely think culturally there is a significant difference as well. For me as a migrant kid growing up, there was a sort of traditional (ethnicity) values - it's like you stay together forever. It's a bit shameful to admit but growing up, my wondering was to find a nice husband to have a monogamous, close relationship with. But growing up... it taught me a difficult lesson because peoples' thoughts about relationships can be very different from mine.*

Posa felt that it was damaging to a relationship to believe that it had to live up to the ideals of monogamy. Posa had engaged in polyamory, choosing to opt out from the toxicity that they claimed is endemic to monogamous relationships.

> *Posa: It changes all the time. I have been in polyamorous relationships, but at the moment, I am in a monogamous relationship. But that doesn't define me. I don't like monogamous ways of thinking, even though I like monogamous relationships. I like to not take the monogamous, toxic ideas of what relationships should be.*

Dale and Raban had contrasting views on the value of monogamy in an intimate partner relationship as well as the value and impact of it on their lives and on their wellbeing. Dale considered monogamy as essential to a secure and steady relationship.

> Dale: *I know that I am monogamous, so I tend to just focus on one romantic partner and have a nice stable relationship. That's my ideal kind of thing.*

Raban, on the other hand, had struggled with monogamy in the early stages of their current three-year relationship. For Raban, continually establishing new intimacies was more in keeping with the person that they were; although they had tried to be monogamous in their relationship, primarily due to the wishes of their partner, Raban felt that such a situation was not truly what they wanted.

> *Raban: I have had a partner for three years. But the experience was really defeating for me because she was very monogamous. And I don't believe that I am monogamous at my core. So I was like, I gotta give it a go to make sure I know, and that was quite heart-breaking actually. That was like 10 months ago. And now, I wouldn't say I've made it but you know, I'm like rebuilding myself and like experiencing intimacy with more people.*

Challenges to queer intimate partner relationships

The second set of findings relate to what participants perceived as challenges to intimate partner relationships. For many ethnic queer communities in Aotearoa, gender and sexual diversity were determined within cultural and religious constructs that viewed homosexuality as Western immorality (Nakhid et al., 2022a). Religious values and culture were associated with negative perceptions and beliefs around queer identity and this had affected the psychological health, and social and cultural wellbeing of young ethnic queers. Factors impacting the wellbeing of young ethnic queers and on their relationships with intimate partners included vulnerability, family and community attitudes and behaviours, and mental health. Participants stated a number of factors that they believed contributed to destabilizing their intimate partner relationships, and recalled the times when they had experienced or might have contributed to unhealthy and unsafe relationships. Being ethnic and queer held particular challenges for the participants as they were confronted by their own feelings of racialized self-loathing because of their ethnicity, or had internalized homophobia because of the lack of acceptance from their communities towards their queerness. Families and communities that held homophobic attitudes had used cultural beliefs and practices to undermine the relationships that young ethnic queers had with their partners. Young ethnic queers had also experienced a range of harmful and abusive situations in their relationships with partners. These included physical violence, racism, and the psychological abuse that came from a mentally unwell partner.

Three sub-themes relating to the challenges of intimate partner relationships for young ethnic queers were *Vulnerable spaces (Physical and emotional harm, Racialized self-loathing, Gendered violence*), *Mental health,* and *Familial and cultural coercion.*

Vulnerable spaces

Physical and emotional harm

Intimate partner violence is a major concern in Aotearoa (Fanslow et al., 2021; Marie et al., 2008) with ethnic and queer communities suffering disproportionately. The World Health Organization[7] defines intimate partner violence as 'any behaviour within an intimate relationship that causes physical, psychological or sexual harm to those in the relationship'. Many ethnic queers labelled as offenders are shown to be victims of racism and homophobia and find it difficult to seek help for partner violence (Cunneen, 2010). While some studies suggest that same-sex intimate partner violence occurs at a similar or lower rate than heterosexual partner violence (Brand and Kidd 1986; Tjaden and Thoennes, 2000), other studies found a higher prevalence of intimate partner violence in similar-sex relationships (Balsam et al., 2005; Turell 2000) or those who identified as sexual and gender minorities (Messinger, 2011).

Dealing with acts of violence perpetrated against her in the past was difficult for Chloe. Sexual assault by her intimate partner – though Chloe had been unable or unwilling to

name it as such – had adversely affected their relationship. It had caused her great mental anguish for which she eventually had to seek the advice of a therapist.

> Chloe: *I was sexually assaulted by one of my partners like four years ago and it took me a long time, just because I had never had that happen before, to even be able to call it what it was. I was just like, 'oh yeah, this thing happened', and it definitely created a strain in our relationship. It was a very brief relationship and afterwards I just felt really down and depressed, and I realised it was because of the situation, like I wasn't talking about it with anybody. So then I finally went and saw a therapist and she was like 'yeah, let's call it what it is'.*

Emotional safety was valued by the participants as a crucial part of intimate partner relationships. Emotional safety was seen as caring and being cared for in a non-manipulative way, and where a person's vulnerability was not exploited. If the relationship involved more than two persons, participants believed that it should be advantageous and beneficial for all those involved. Mack said that safe intimate partner relationships should allow for people to be themselves and to grow without jeopardizing the welfare of the other. Making someone vulnerable or exploiting their vulnerability was a form of abuse and a betrayal of the trust that the partner had in them.

> Mack: *When I think of intimate relationships, I think of being with someone or say, like one other person, or for argument sake could be more, but being with a person and mutually benefiting from that relationship whether it is security, support, being an economic partnership, all of these things. So when I think what could be abusive, that would be using that relationship, that dependence for improper ends or leveraging one aspect of it for your own gain. It's taking advantage of someone's relationship with you who has some feelings for you and what you share, and using that in an exploitative way…it's exploiting what is inherently one's vulnerability.*

Being in a relationship where there was a power imbalance left some participants at a disadvantage especially when the partner with inherent power attempted to control the relationship. Hura described facing threats of deportation from his partner which prevented him from leaving a violent relationship. Knowing that his residency status was dependent on his partner made it difficult for Hura to seek support.

> Hura: *That was the challenge you know, when there were attempts (*by me*) to leave the relationship - threats of calling immigration to deport me as a way to coerce me into staying in the relationship. And this happened all the way until I got my residency to even after I got my residency. I was out but he was out only with his family... That extra layer of being queer and a relationship that wasn't safe made it extra complicated to leave an unsafe situation.*

The control that Hura's partner had over his economic situation, social activities, and resident status left Hura with little option but to remain in the relationship as legal assistance was not available or accessible to him given his migration status. His situation

highlighted the impact that power and privilege could have on making an intimate partner relationship precarious.

> Hura: *That verbal coercion, the use of threat to threaten my immigration status as a way to make me stay in a relationship or make me stay somewhere. I guess I would consider it manipulation and verbal abuse. It didn't change the cycle of abuse but it was definitely a form of extortion.*

An interesting contrast to Hura's situation is shown in Kanuha's (2013) research study of Asian Pacific lesbian and queer women in which the tenuous immigration status of the abusive partner was used to dissuade their intimate partner from reporting the abuse for fear of deportation.

Racialized behaviours

Racism within the queer community, and heterosexism among ethnic communities have been shown to prevent queer ethnic young people from disclosing their sexual orientation or gender identity to avoid being socially excluded or coerced into cultural practices (Jaspal, 2012; Malebranche et al., 2009; Patel, 2019; Rosenberg, 2017; Ruez, 2017; Schulte and Battle, 2004). Felipe et al.'s (2020) quantitative study of LGBTQ + identified individuals of colour (Black, Latinx, Asian, and Indigenous) from a range of sexual and gender identities revealed a lack of recognition and visibility within LGBTQ + communities, and that perceptions of racism within the mainstream queer community impacted ethnic LGBTQ + people's relationship with other ethnic queers.

The participants in this study had to confront their own racialized self-loathing in encounters with the dominant white queer community. This meant coming to terms with their subconsciously held beliefs of the negative attitudes, behaviours, and images that white society had of them, and the ways that they used these beliefs against themselves and others in similarly racialized positions. Golna described her own racialized self-loathing in her intimate partner relationship with a white woman and realized that the process of working through this was unlikely to align with her partner's views on racism.

> Golna: *At the earliest stages of our relationship, I think that I would have held a lot more internalised racism and I think I was much less aware. I have done much more processing about my own internalised racism. Now I understand racism more broadly than I had…we would have conversations where race would inevitably come out. We haven't been able to completely work through that or I haven't felt like my partner is fully appreciative about the impact of those conversations even though she probably has learnt a lot more now.*

Although Golna remained aggrieved by her partner's unwillingness to confront her racism, she recognized that this had prompted her own journey to understand her own racialized self-loathing.

Golna*: I guess one thing I will never ever, ever forget her saying, and still feel angry at myself, or I'm not able to really reconcile with it - I remember her saying very early on in our relationship that she would never have - I feel so much shame saying this - she would never have thought about dating an (ethnicity) person before me. And I think that just shows how racist she was at that point… As I started to unpack my own internalised racism, we would have other conversations that relate to race and there was stuff that she just didn't understand, that she is ignorant about, and she had racist beliefs.*

For participants who identified as black, the intersectional spaces of being black and queer meant having to engage in additional emotional work which they believed white queers did not have to do. Kenzie believed that intimate partner relationships held challenges for black queers that did not exist in the relationships of white queers.

Kenzie*: Because of the added layers of us being…queer, black, and African...we are working through so much external stuff, the stuff that we deal with so much in the world that mirrors in our relationship; or we are working it out in our relationship, and that's another level. I don't think white queer people would have to go through that.*

For queer black women in South Africa, race was added to their minority statuses of female and queer (Matebeni, 2013). The narrative that being black and gay betrayed the race and made a person less authentically black was seen by Matebeni to contribute to black queer persons feeling isolated. The minority stressors from holding socially constructed disadvantaged positions and having to adapt to an inhospitable racist and heterosexist society (Meyer et al., 2008; Russell and Bohan, 2006) were revealed to be overwhelming for those concerned.

Gendered violence

The concept of hegemonic masculinity presumes the subordination of nonhegemonic masculinities, with certain masculinities more associated with authority and social power than others (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Internalized heterosexism is said to play a significant role in a queer individual's connection to the LGBTQ + community (Felipe et al., 2020). Gender expressions of masculinity and butchness were critical to how older Chinese lesbians and bisexual women understood their own behaviours in the outcomes of same-sex romantic relationships (Tang, 2022).

Dale acknowledged that he had difficulty accepting how his partner wanted to express themselves. He had internalized the prejudices held of certain gendered expressions and had subjected his partner to these prejudices. Dale saw his partner's portrayal of masculinity as not holding the same privilege and status as that of a heterosexual male.

Dale: *I think since there's a lot of restriction around being able to express my orientation, I internalized that prejudice you know, and it has passed on to my partner. And you know, at the time I didn't really know any better especially when they are trying to express their gender in a different way, and it's almost as if I'm not letting them express that. And I can understand*

from their point of view they need space to do that and because of how I acted and because of the background that I came from, it's almost like they couldn't.

Research shows that men are predominantly responsible for the intimate partner violence that occurs in different-sex relationships[8] and this made it difficult for women's violence towards women to be taken seriously. The pervasiveness of the 'male as aggressor' stereotype in relationships had impacted the personal relationships of many of the participants. The violence transgressed on Kenzie was dismissed by her because the perpetrator was a woman. In turn, Kenzie regarded her violence towards other female partners in a similar way and did not see her behaviours as abusive.

Kenzie: *The normal yelling, belittling, I mean like being hit, like physically being hit, a lot of it I didn't take as seriously as I would have if that happened to me with a man. I have stuff with men as well but, you know, these relationships (with women), I think I took (the violence) less seriously because I thought that I could, if I really wanted to, I could handle myself in such situations. So I didn't feel as abusive as what I was taught about abuse when I was with my parents or grandparents.*

For some participants, childhood events had shaped their gendered view of violence in their past and current relationships. Ish had come to understand how the different aspects of a violent relationship was related to learned behaviours as a child, and that her childhood trauma had been internalised and redirected in unanticipated ways.

Ish*: A lot of that (the violence) is actually me. I had a boyfriend who cheated on me and I found these pictures about a woman on his laptop and I slapped him. I thought that was fine, you know. You see in the movies people get slapped coz 'he cheated on me'. But that actually really scared me. I've grown up around a lot of violence and I've always thought that I wouldn't have internalised that because I know better, but it runs deeper than that… I think the examples of men that I had growing up were abusive, and being around them it didn't seem to have any like sensitive, emotions side... so sometimes it's very like 'you do whatever you want to do'.*

Familial and cultural coercion

The constraints placed on young ethnic queers by cultural and religious institutions that had rejected their queer identity and influenced their parents' attitudes towards them, had negatively impacted their relationships with family and community. For ethnic young people in Aotearoa, the risks of disclosing their queer identity included homelessness, ostracization, shaming, and ruining the family's reputation in the community, with many choosing to perform to the expectations of their parents' heterosexual ideals (Nakhid et al., 2022a). Family and community, however, were never far from the lives of ethnic young people. Social and cultural interactions were welcomed and appreciated, particularly for the distinction they offered from Pākehā[9] society. Family provided young ethnic

queers with a place in which they could position themselves, celebrate customs and traditions, and make connections through language or accent (Nakhid et al., 2022b).

Community and family were also a source of irritation and discrimination when it came to the participants' intimate partner relationships. Secrecy around relationships for fear of repercussion or harmful gossip put a strain on these relationships. Hura's experiences were not unique.

> Hura*: Unsafe intimate relationships for me, like if you gave me those words, I would probably just think fear. Intimate relationships itself carried a risk to my or my partner's safety in terms of me feeling like the wider community or family cannot know of my intimate relationships coz there would be negative repercussions and that creates feeling unsafe.*

Ethnic young people relied on family for cultural traditions and connections and often hid their queerness from their families. The participants knew that the institution of the heterosexual family was preferred by their communities, and not being able to fulfil the norms of this social institution isolated them and their partners. Jana's emotional struggle to meet the cultural expectation of a heterosexual marriage, with children as the outcome of that marriage, was exceedingly frustrating for her and she had initially concealed her identity as a lesbian. When Jana did disclose her queerness to her parents, they were not supportive and did not acknowledge her partner. As a result, she did not discuss her intimate partner relationship with them.

> Jana*: You have to hide who you really are. When my dad asked you when you are going to get married and things like that, my immediate reaction is to confront him but then I don't….I can't be who I want but probably the expression of my queerness is just reserved because of that experience of having to hide (my queer identity and relationship).*

Jana's relationship was made unsafe by her family's attitudes and expectations around marriage. Many of the participants reported receiving the same reactions from their family towards their relationships. Being excluded from engaging in rituals and attending family gatherings further alienated young ethnic queer people. For Jana, this had an influence on her personality, and she was now more inhibited for having to hide who she was as a person.

Choosing between disclosing their intimate partner relationships and maintaining family relationships was a choice that many of the participants found themselves having to make.

> Talie: *We have an uncle that has supported me for a long time. And I know that if I tell them I have a partner, he would not be okay because he's very religious and very traditional…I think not being able to share a really important part of my life with people who I like and respect because they grew up with my mother is really hard and so I can't, I can't be myself around them.*

Mental health

Mental health is known to impact social functioning and subsequently affects social connectedness. Mental unwellness was a threat to safe intimate partner relationships for

several of the participants. Although it was known that depression and anxiety were being experienced by members of the community, the stigma and shame for family and community whose children suffered mental ill health prevented them from disclosing these issues or seeking help for them.

The mental health of Rippen's partner had made the relationship unsafe for both of them. Her combative and self-harming behaviours impacted on Rippen's wellbeing and sense of self.

> Rippen*: I guess relationships where they've become toxic… that is kind of unsafe in itself. Like my first girlfriend - she was struggling with a lot of mental health issues and it became unsafe because it was affecting me mentally as well. I wasn't concentrating so much at university. And I had to take time out from that…it was like I had to drag myself down to be with her towards the end. And sometimes she'd get aggressive and threaten to self-harm, and just psychologically, it wasn't a very safe environment.*

Discussion

Young ethnic queers, as expected, held a variety of expectations of intimate partner relationships. From seeking monogamy to the desire for polyamory, from wanting assurance of permanence to expecting partners to accept that relationships can be finite, young ethnic people in queer relationships did not – or perhaps did not see the need to – follow a prescribed pattern. The absence of literature or pre-scripted information on queer ethnic intimate partner relationships might have enabled a greater freedom for these relationships to form and develop in ways that were more reflective of young people's environment and expectations. For instance, their views on monogamy may well have been due to their younger age. Despite cultural traditions forbidding certain types of relationships, and the expectations for certain practices to take place, relationships were as varied as the people and cultures. For young ethnic queers in Aotearoa, intimate partner relationships existed despite being constrained by a small ethnic queer community and the expectation for heterosexual relationships within their ethnic communities.

The participants in this study did not define themselves by their intimate partner relationships and believed that the direction the relationship took should be mutually determined. Learning from past relationships to improve current and future ones was an approach taken by several of the participants. Adapting to relationships appeared to be more important than the duration, a finding similar to that found in Gabb's (2019) study of 50 long-term heterosexual and LGBTQ partnerships, though this depended on the depth of feeling for the person and the nature of the relationship. Emotional, physical, and cultural safety were important for participants in any intimate partner relationship and that included being able to be oneself, and mutually accepting the type of relationship desired.

Participants defined intimacy in ways that accommodated the type of relationship they were seeking at the time. These intimate relationships were often sexual with the intention of being permanent or short-term. Intimate partnerships differed from intimate partner relationships for some participants in that the former did not involve sex though there were strong emotional connections among those involved. As shown by Goldberg (2013),

experiences and expectations of friendships for the participants were influenced by personal interactions and situations, and participants found intimacy of a non-sexual nature with persons who were meaningful in their lives. Although the participants talked about monogamous and polyamorous relationships, there was no direct discussion of open relationships although Raban may have hinted at it in their interview.

For many of the ethnic queer female participants, multiple minority statuses resulted in additive stress caused by racism and having to hide their sexuality. Additive stress has been found by researchers to impact mental health, substance use, and the uptake of social-psychological resources (Lehavot and Simoni 2011; McLaren and Castillo, 2021). Frost and Meyer (2009) have observed that an individual's connectedness to their minority community counters the adverse impact of minority stress.

Societal condemnation of homosexuality had left many of the participants internalizing homophobic behaviours which led to conflict with their intimate partner. This was not unusual as people in queer relationships were often surrounded by a homonegative community (Campbell et al., 2020; Crosby et al., 2016; Totenhagen et al., 2018). In a similar way, participants in relationships with those who held racist beliefs found that the relationship undermined their self-worth particularly if they had chosen to continue the relationship.

In a society where heterosexual relationships have been socially constructed as the norm, some of the participants held heteronormative ideals of relationships. Intimate partner violence was typically aligned with a male aggression/female powerlessness gendered binary (Cannon et al., 2015). Having been socialized to see men as inherently more violent than women, some of the female participants did not regard physical violence from or towards someone of the same sex in the same way that they did violence perpetrated by males upon females.

Mental health is rarely acknowledged or discussed in most ethnic communities in Aotearoa and it was difficult for the participants to know how to cope with or seek help for mentally unwell partners. Interventions and approaches to building and improving social connectedness with queer organizations and sexual and gender minority ethnic communities could improve mental health which will benefit intimate partner relationships. Ostracization and stigmatization from family members and communities were common experiences for the participants and affected their wellbeing and subsequently the relationships with their partners. The presence and influence of queer ethnic leadership and a supportive and connected ethnic LGBTIQ + community will be essential to the wellbeing of young ethnic queers (Murphy and Hardaway, 2017).

It is hoped that this paper will enable young ethnic queers seeking knowledge of intimate partner relationships to find identity, comfort, belonging, support, and connection even if their experiences and expectations of queer intimate relationships may differ. Despite the challenges facing many young ethnic queers in their intimate partner relationships, many approached intimate partner relationships with enthusiasm, caution, and anticipation. In the absence of a shared space in Aotearoa where discussions on queer intimate partner relationships can be held or where openly queer diverse ethnic voices can be heard, this study assures young ethnic queers that these relationships are taking place,

that there are no predetermined or prescribed ways in which they take place, and that they bring with them as much heartache as they bring joy.

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Notes

1. The use of the term ethnic is discussed later in the paper.
2. Queer is used in this study except when authors' work reference other terminology (e.g. lesbian, gay, and trans persons). Most of the participants identified as queer.
3. Aotearoa – Māori name for New Zealand and will be used throughout the paper as it is now common usage.
4. Acronyms and words (e.g. LGBT, LGB, gay, and lesbian) used in this paper are those used by the authors in their work.
5. The following conventions apply to this paper – where participants refer specifically to their home country, the country is identified as (country), (ethnicity) when referring to an ethnic heritage, or (nationality) when referring to being a person from a particular country.
6. https://www.ethniccommunities.govt.nz/community-directory/.
7. World Health Organization https://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/world_report/factsheets/ft_intimate.pdf.
8. https://www.2shine.org.nz/resources/gender-and-domestic-violence/ See also https://www.nzfvc.org.nz/frequently-asked-questions.
9. Māori word for European New Zealander.

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