THE RADICAL POTENTIAL OF QUEER FRIENDSHIP IN DISRUPTING

MONONORMATIVITY

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ABSTRACT

Queer feminist theory has problematized ideologies that underpin the reproduction of the nuclear family, identifying a relationship hierarchy that underpins normative kinship expectations. Despite existing theory emphasizing how deconstructing this hierarchy is essential to subverting patriarchal kinship ideologies that perpetuate the dominance of the nuclear family, this framework has not been utilized in empirical research. My research draws on this body of literature to explore how queer university students are conceptualizing and practicing friendship in relation to romantic relationships to extend the existing theoretical framework. I performed 11 in-depth semi-structured interviews to collect data on how queer university students in Metro Vancouver between 19 and 25 years old are practicing and conceptualizing friendship, romantic partnership, and family. Findings have revealed that participants are rejecting the ideologies that uphold the relationship hierarchy in a variety of ways. Participants largely allow bounds between relationship spheres to blur and flex – allowing practices and emotions to not be confined to any form of relationship and thus equalizing diverse relationships regardless of their content. Intimate friendships were often fostered as participants identified queer friends as being essential to their identity development and acceptance, leading them to highly value the role their platonic relationships play in their life. Future goals reflect this as participants largely seek to develop an affective network or community that involves fostering intimate friendships throughout the life course.

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Feminist theoretical perspectives have long problematized the institution of the family. The nuclear family is identified as the cornerstone of patriarchal and capitalist relations due to its functions of privatizing social reproduction, mandating a gendered distribution of labor, and cutting of wider social networks. Despite this, the family is continuously reproduced through mononormative ideologies that frame monogamous romantic partnership as the only legitimate avenue through which to structure affective networks and achieve happiness and well-being. These ideologies result in the devaluation of other forms of intimate relationships, such as friendships, as the romantic partner is socially expected to form the center of the affective world. Because romantic partnership is a privileged form of intimacy, platonic relationships are neglected in comparison. This isolates people in family units and eliminates the possibility of alternative relationship structures that provide communal care and support.

Queering intimacy has been identified as a theoretical paradigm that seeks to disrupt this hegemonic relationship structure. Queering relationships is understood to involve the rejection and deconstruction of mononormative relationship norms that govern affective practices (Elia, 2003). This would allow for diverse and flexible relationships that successfully fulfill individual needs while simultaneously disrupting the patriarchal and capitalist order the nuclear family maintains. Empirical research on queering intimacy thus far has identified the chosen family, a form of kinship that is utilized by queer people who have been rejected from their origin family and have developed a family of choice comprising of a diverse range of relationships. However, theoretical paradigms posit that much more radical practices of queering intimacy are possible in the form of queer relationship practices that enable the complete erasure of relationship categories and bounds that maintain a hierarchical order. By disrupting the relationship hierarchy, an ideological system that privileges monogamous romantic relationships, queering intimacy is theoretically

capable of offering relationship frameworks that are significantly more flexible and fulfilling than the hegemonic nuclear family. Despite this, outside of research on the chosen family, there is no empirical research on how queering intimacy is actively practiced that follow from theoretical propositions.

This research therefore seeks to identify how queering intimacy exists in practice by asking: *how are queer university students in Metro Vancouver conceptualizing and practicing platonic and romantic relationships, love, and intimacy in relation to hegemonic mononormative expectations that privilege the romantic partner over other relational forms?* I will address this question through 11 semi-structured interviews that explored how queer students navigate all forms of relationships in their lives. This resulted in the emergence of five major themes; participants reported having to navigate tensions between their practices and desires and the social norms that govern relationships. These tensions largely resulted from fostering formative queer friendships during adolescence they learnt to value on par with, if not more than, romantic relationships. Significantly, this has led to the blurring of boundaries between relationship spheres, where the lines between behavior, feelings, and expectations associated with romance versus friendship are very fluid. This is reflected in how people understood their own needs and desires associated with relationships, as the majority reported that their needs could be just as easily fulfilled by strong friendships as they could a partner. Their kinship-related goals for the future echo this sentiment as they imagine a rich and diverse network of relationships that may or may not include a romantic partner.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Relationship Hierarchy

Underpinning normative relationship practices in the contemporary Western world is a pattern often conceptualized as a hierarchy of relationships. Although various feminist

theorists have defined and illustrated this topic differently, the essential premise is that romantic relationships are expected to be given precedence over familial, platonic, or solely sexual relationships. The earliest explicit recognition of this hierarchy appears to be by The Thinking Aro (2013), who coined the Romantic Sex-Based Relationship Hierarchy, which recognizes how romantic supremacism and sexual supremacism lead to relationships with elements of romance and/or sex being given higher status in a network of relationships. Building off The Thinking Aro's concept, Gómez (2018) developed the pyramid of relationships, which refers to how couple privilege, romantic supremacy, and sexual supremacy have given rise to a relationship hierarchy that manifests in and is maintained by symbolic, legal, and material systems. Similarly, Vasallo (2019) argues that the couple is presented as the superior form of relationship and that this romantically and sexually monogamous couple forms the hierarchy of the nucleus; our lives are structured around the nucleus (monogamous partnership), and without it, our lives feel incomplete. Scholars on this topic conceptualize the hierarchy in a variety of ways. Still, they all recognize that the relationship hierarchy, which is how I will refer to this concept, is critical to the perpetuation of mononormativity because monogamous romance is framed as superior to other forms of connections and intimacy.

Becky Rosa (1994) illustrated how the relationship hierarchy (without referring to it as such) is maintained by an ideological division between different forms of love. She posits that platonic, familial, and romantic love are believed to be distinct despite there being little to no evidence that these are varied. The cultural framing of romantic love as more intense and more important and therefore superior to other forms of love has been understood to produce a conception of love as a limited resource that should be confined to one romantic partner (Gómez, 2018; Klesse, 2018).

Intertwined with the relationship hierarchy and supported by this ideology of love is the concept of mononormativity. Mononormativity, or compulsory monogamy, is generally understood to refer to a structural and ideological system that deems monogamous romantic and sexual relationships the only proper or legitimate form of relationship. Scholars understand mononormativity as a system that functions to mandate dyadic coupling for everyone to ensure the reproduction of existing social organization and kinship structures (Gómez 2018; Klesse, 2018; Sheff, 2020; Vasallo, 2019). Typically, mononormativity is discussed as being intrinsically tied to heteronormativity as monogamy and heterosexuality are considered to be the default of any romantic relationship. This can be understood to ensure that even same-gender couples replicate the morally superior heterosexual relationship form (Elia, 2003; Klesse, 2018; Rothschild, 2018). Gómez (2018) discusses the naturalization of monogamy as a social force that ensures that all individuals, regardless of sexual orientation, build their lives and affective bonds around a single romantic and sexual relationship. This gives greater significance to the monogamous romantic relationship, continuously normalizing this one union as the center of our lives.

Monogamy has faced intensive scrutiny by queer feminist scholars and activists but as Elia (2003) highlights, monogamy continues to be perpetuated as the hegemonic ideal even though many people of all orientations do not fit into this narrowly defined conceptualization of relationships. Essentially, mononormativity is understood to ensure the ongoing reproduction of the monogamous lifestyle involving isolated family units and the patriarchal division of labour. The cultural framing of monogamous coupling as the only legitimate option leads individuals to continue to perpetuate mononormative expectations and familial structures. This understanding of mononormativity, as it is combined with and supported by the relationship hierarchy and dominant ideologies of love, is understood to ascribe differential value to an individual's romantic, platonic, and familial relationships.

Discussions around queering intimacy are careful to point out that the intertwining of mononormativity and heteronormativity does not mean that heterosexuality is required to ensure the survival of the couple form. Homonormativity refers to the tendency of same-gender couples to replicate the domestic monogamous ideal to gain legitimacy by mimicking the heterosexual form as closely as possible (Andreassen, 2023; Weeks, 2023). Andreassen (2023) argues that "it is coupledom, rather than biology, that is upholding traditional family patterns and thus framing the nuclear family as ideal" (p. 13), demonstrating that monogamy is more important than heterosexuality to the survival of the hegemonic relational form. Because the imitation of normal heterosexual relations is understood to grant gay couples some level of social legitimacy, privilege, and respect, monogamous marriage and nuclear family formation are key to gaining social legitimacy. This form of queer relationship seeks legitimacy within the pre-existing institution, rather than the transformation of that institution. (Elia, 2003; Rosa, 1994; Rothschild, 2018). The perpetuation of the romantic couple form by queer couples is understood to support the naturalization of compulsory monogamy.

Problematizing the Nuclear Family

Mononormativity and the relationship hierarchy are discussed in feminist theory due to their role in maintaining the nuclear family, a social institution that maintains the patriarchal division of labour, cuts off wider social networks, and privatizes social reproduction. The nuclear family is widely considered to naturalize a gendered division of labour where care work and domestic labour are neatly designated a women's responsibility while men are relegated to the public sphere where they engage in economics, social and cultural production and their family responsibilities are minimized (Gómez, 2018; Klesse, 2019; Rich, 1980; Weeks, 2023). Women are understood to be devalued through this process as their labour goes unpaid and is considered unproductive, while men's labour is paid and

considered productive (Rich, 1980; Weeks, 2023). Klesse (2019) illustrated how the reproduction of the gendered division of labour is fundamental to the functioning of capitalist relations, as women's work forms the backbone of the capitalist economic structure without receiving payment. The nuclear family, therefore, reproduces capitalist and patriarchal relations as it maintains a gendered division of labour that inherently devalues the care work prescribed to women.

Vasallo (2019) furthers this understanding of the nuclear family as inherently patriarchal by exploring how the implementation of the nuclear family as the cultural ideal occurred through centuries of imposing ideologies and religious beliefs onto the masses in Europe by the ruling class and eventually expanded to much of the world through processes of colonization. Vasallo (2019) understands the nuclear family as a form of social organization that maintains the bulk of colonial systems such as capitalism, the gender-sex binary, and white-supremacy as the nuclear family forms mandates patrimonial transmission, the privatization of reproductive labour, and the reproduction of the monogamous sex-gender system (pp. 681-682). Additionally, the family structure as discussed by Elia (2003) can be understood to rest in a reproductive sexuality confined to a private marital agreement between a man and a woman; this specific brand of heterosexuality has been safe-guarded and promoted as demonstrated through the efforts by contemporary Republicans and conservatives to protect the "family-values" that keep marriage and the family sacred and, importantly, heterosexual. Feminist scholars who critique the nuclear family understand it as an institution that mandates heterosexuality and monogamy to uphold patriarchal, capitalist, and colonial systems.

The relationship hierarchy is understood to function to reproduce the nuclear family because by framing monogamous romance as the symbol of happiness and well-being, as discussed by Gómez (2018) and Schippers (2019), individuals internalize the notion that

prioritizing romance and pursuing marriage is the key to personal fulfillment. Weeks (2023) highlights how instead of achieving the fulfillment they sought, many find that they become isolated into anti-social family units. The anti-social family, as discussed by Weeks (2023), is a "small and fragile institution that is supposed to meet all our needs for physical, social and emotional sustenance" (p. 440). Because members of anti-social family units become isolated from wider social networks, women become solely responsible for the well-being and maintenance of their households. In addition to increasing the labour burden relegated to wives and mothers, the anti-social family socially isolates them from their platonic relationships outside the family, thus decreasing the community care and emotional support they would be able to access if they were able to maintain a strong social network.

By considering Gómez's (2018) discussion of the naturalization of monogamy in the context of the anti-social nuclear family, mononormativity can be understood to ensure that all individuals, regardless of sexual orientation, build their lives and affective bonds around a single romantic and sexual relationship. This both normalizes this one union as the center of our affective lives and promotes the idea that we should rely on a singular partner to fulfill all our emotional, physical, and social needs. Rosa's (1994) discussion of love ideologies furthers this understanding of the perpetuation of the nuclear family as the hierarchy of relationships is maintained by the idea that certain needs can only be met by forming a couple relationship; romantic love and connection are therefore given precedence over platonic love. Dominant ideologies regarding love and relationships are understood by critics of the family to perpetuate a system of isolation; individuals are confined to anti-social family units where they are expected to rely heavily on a single partner and are cut off from wider social networks.

However, cultural ideologies are not the only factor that ensures the reproduction of the nuclear family. Both Gómez (2018) and Rothschild (2018) discuss how the relationship

hierarchy both manifests in and is maintained by the law because the monogamous romantic couple is the only chosen relational form that can access legal protection and legitimation through the institution of marriage. Therefore, marriage based on a monogamous romantic relationship is the only avenue through which chosen relationships can access necessary protections. Structuring one's life around other relational forms deprives individuals of structural protections. The law then reflects and enforces the ideologies of compulsory monogamy. It ensures adherence to the privatized family form by allocating resources and protections accordingly.

Friendship in Contemporary Society

As discussed in reference to the relationship hierarchy, friendship is widely devalued in comparison to monogamous romantic relationships that are ideologically and structurally privileged. However, sociologists generally understand friendship to be essential to the fabric of society and individual well-being. Friendship provides the basis for the formation of strong communities that ensure ongoing social support. Due to their voluntary and reciprocal nature, friendships can provide communion and solidarity that provides the basis for social worth and ongoing companionship (Pahl & Spencer, 2004; Perlman et al., 2015; Vela-McConnell, 2017). When considering friendship in relation to monogamous romance, Rosa (1994) posits that friendships voluntary nature offers more autonomy, independence, and freedom to individuals and unlike monogamous romance, which Rosa (1994) conceptualizes as inherently patriarchal, friendships are considered more egalitarian in nature.

Additionally, Perlman et al. (2015) highlight how strong individual friendships, and wide social networks foster happiness and well-being. A lack of social ties with friends increases mortality and morbidity even when baseline health, health practices, and SES are controlled for. Emotional support, validation, and affection provided by deep friendships serve to reduce morbidity and mortality by protecting from the adverse effects of stress.

Furthering this idea, Perlman et al. (2015) discuss how maintaining diverse networks of strong and varied relationships is associated with higher levels of happiness and well-being as well as lower levels of depression, anxiety, and loneliness. Meanwhile, small family-focused networks are more susceptible to poor well-being. These findings demonstrate how, despite the nuclear family and monogamous romance forming the ideological ideal of happiness and well-being, diverse social networks that are rich in deep friendships are far more conducive to personal health and happiness.

Research on friendship demonstrates how the role of friends changes drastically throughout the life course. Anthony (2015) and Perlman et al. (2015) explore how friendship plays a particularly important role to individuals during their emerging adulthood years that are often spent in the university context. It is at this stage of life where friendships become the most deep and meaningful as people learn about themselves through their similarities and differences with others. Individuals reinforce their sense of self and self-worth through their connections with others with whom they share important values and beliefs. Boyd (2023) furthers these ideas, highlighting how these effects are more pronounced for queer students who often build family-like connections with their peers that are important for their identity development. Boyd (2023) found that queer university students in New Zealand formed temporally grounded families with whom one shares their university home and life with. Friendships offer family-like support in this stage of life as students form deep and meaningful platonic relationships with people who share their values and offer social support during this period of change and upheaval.

However, exploration of the role of friendship into middle-age is consistent with the conceptualization of the relationship hierarchy as when people begin getting married, their friends and family get relegated to a secondary role, and the single romantic spouse is expected to provide the majority of support and companionship (Perlman et al., 2015).

McPherson et al. (2001) found that time spent with friends decreases dramatically in middle age and friendships that do remain are often built through and structured around the marital unit. Platonic relationships are built as a couple or through a romantic partner's connections. Because social networks are built surrounding the monogamous couple, it is reified as the center of affectual importance. Perlman et al. (2015) and Roseneil (2004) echo these sentiments as they discuss how while married couples do have friends, less time is spent with them, which makes them less deep and meaningful. As the monogamous couple, and any children they may have, form the center and majority of individuals' lives, friendships fall to the wayside and are deprived of their depth.

Queering Intimacy

Recognizing how the devaluation of friendship results in decreased well-being and how the nuclear family perpetuates patriarchal values, queer feminist theorists posit that queering intimacy is important to moving beyond the anti-social nuclear family. As Elia (2003) discusses it, queering intimacy extends beyond same-sex relationships and instead offers radical paradigms for disrupting hierarchies of relationships and destabilizes dominant ideologies surrounding sexuality, gender, and intimacy. Arguing that "queer is antithetical to the kinds of boxes, borders, and oppressive qualities that have constituted the heteronormative model of relating" (p. 77), Elia (2003) highlights how queering relationships must involve disruption of the norms, labels, and expectations traditionally applied to varying forms of intimacy. Similarly, Foucault (1994) recognized the significance of queer identity not as a form of desire, but as a radical form of life. Because queer relationships are ungovernable and do not conform to the norms of relationships, they "introduce love where there's supposed to be only law, rule, or habit" (p. 137). It is not a queer sexual and romantic desire that is in and of itself radical, but rather the alternative modes of life that queerness allows for.

The queering intimacy perspective recognizes the relationship hierarchy and seeks to deconstruct the oppressive ideologies that uphold it. As Klesse (2018) and Rosa (1994) discuss, queering intimacy involves deconstructing and denaturalizing monogamy. Anti-monogamous approaches denaturalize monogamy and romantic supremacism in favour of a flexible and pragmatic approach to diverse relationships centered on community building and friendship; rejecting monogamy and romantic supremacism allows for free choice and flexible relationships. Speaking from a feminist perspective, Rosa (1994) highlights how reviving and nurturing women's friendship is vital to the success of feminist movements because women are divided from each other through a monogamous ideology that insists on life being centered around a single, typically male, romantic partner. The development of strong friendships and care networks is crucial to queering systems of intimacy as resistance movements are developed and nurtured through the rejection of mononormative expectations.

Empirical explorations of queering intimacy primarily revolve around the concept of the chosen family. Originally discussed by Weston (1991) in her ethnography of queer people living in the San Francisco Bay Area, the chosen family is a distinctly queer concept that refers to how some queer people form families of choice that consist of friends, lovers, queer elders, ex-partners, and sometimes children. Members of chosen families are chosen out of love rather than biology. Chosen families are particularly important for queer people who have experienced rejection or strained relationships with their origin families. This kinship structure provides emotional support, mutual understanding and identity affirmation in a context where queer people are unable to access the support a nuclear family is typically expected to provide (Andreassen, 2023; Anthony, 2015; Boyd & Wei, 2023; Roseneil, 2004; Weston, 1991). The chosen family offers an alternative form of kinship for queer people who face abandonment by their origin families due to homophobia or transphobia.

Boyd and Wei (2023), for instance, found that queer university students developed friendships with other queer people who helped them feel more comfortable in their identity and gave them space to explore their queerness. Queer university students found unconditional acceptance and understanding with their chosen families in the university setting. These findings are echoed by Alessi et al. (2021) who found that queer migrants in South Africa relied on familial-like relationships with friends and partners that provided them emotional, financial, and social support. Moreover, Zitz (2014) posits that the construction of friends as family establishes a sense of lasting and mutual commitment to the relationship that is not typically expected of friendships. This reflects the hierarchy of relationships where family is placed above friends, but friends can obtain the relational label of family if the relationship has qualities of reciprocity and longevity.

Despite the prominence of chosen family in the literature on queering intimacy, discussions largely ignore how the chosen family continues to privilege familial relationships over platonic ones. Instead, discussions focus on how the agentic nature of chosen kinship relations deemphasizes distinctions between various relationship forms as it brings them all together as chosen family. This allows for friendship and other non-romantic relations to be valued on par with romantic partnerships even without entirely deconstructing the hegemonic emphasis on family (Anthony, 2015; Roseneil, 2004; Weston, 1991). Additionally, the model of the chosen family does not account for instances of queering intimacy practiced by people who have not experienced rejection by their origin families, despite this group being presumably equally as capable of disrupting norms surrounding kinship. Although chosen families have been shown to offer vital networks of support for queer people who face rejection from their families and marginalization within society as a whole, they do somewhat replicate the family-oriented kinship model queering intimacy perspectives seek to disrupt. I do not mean to imply that the chosen family needs to be problematized; families of choice do

allow for the disruption of biology and marital-centered kinship networks by emphasizing the value of alternative forms of intimacy but the heavy emphasis on chosen family in literature on queering intimacy risks overlooking instances of queering intimacy that are increasingly subversive.

A more subversive instance of queering intimacy lies in the practical and theoretical paradigm of relationship anarchy. Discussed at length by Gómez (2018) and The Thinking Aro (2013), this paradigm is distinguished by its complete rejection of the relationship hierarchy based on romantic and sexual supremacy. Practitioners of relationship anarchy reject the idea that love is a limited resource as well as relationship labels that imply the contents of a given relationship (e.g., 'just friends,' lover). This disrupts the hegemonic relationship model that compartmentalizes bonds based on their sexual and romantic content. The rejection of labels and hierarchies of relationships then allows for differentially structured systems of care that are not centered around a single monogamous partnership. The decentralization of romantic bonds provides room for the emergence of more diverse kinship structures based in affective caregiving networks (Gómez, 2018). This paradigm reflects Rosa's (1994) discussion of how expanding networks of people with whom we develop deep relationships can put less pressure on individual relationships as we allow our needs to be met by a wider group of people. This has the potential to improve the quality and longevity of relationships. Ultimately, by equalizing forms of love, relationship anarchy removes the rules and expectations tied to relationship labels. This allows for the construction of diverse and meaningful relationships in individual lives and communities.

What is missing from the discussion of relationship anarchy is any empirical evidence. Although promising as a theoretical paradigm, relationship anarchy does not appear to be discussed in empirical explorations of queering intimacy. There is little to no empirical discussion of any form of queering intimacy outside of the chosen family. Although the

chosen family offers an essential system of care and disrupts the isolated nature of the hegemonic family model, it is only one form of queering intimacy. Considering queer feminist conceptualizations of mononormativity, the relationship hierarchy, and love ideologies that maintain the colonial and patriarchal system we exist in, identifying forms of queering intimacy that are being actively practiced is critical to furthering and re-thinking understandings of queering intimacy and subverting the relationship hierarchy. This research seeks to move beyond conceptions of the chosen family to identify how queer university students are conceptualizing and practicing love and intimate relationships. Particularly, I seek to identify how queer students understand friendship and the significance of platonic intimacy within their lives and affective worlds. The practices and conceptions of platonic intimacy by queer university students have implications for understanding how romance-supremacist discourses are being subverted or reinforced by a population of emerging adults. This research seeks to expand empirical research on queering intimacy to understand how queer relational paradigms are being practiced, therefore offering opportunities for liberation.

METHODS

This research aims to empirically explore how queer university students are conceptualizing and practicing platonic and romantic relationships, love, and intimacy in relation to hegemonic mononormative expectations that privilege the romantic partner over other relational forms. To do this, I conducted eleven semi-structured qualitative interviews with 19–25-year-old students attending university in Metro Vancouver who self-identified as queer. Semi-structured in-depth interviews allowed me to access the nuanced conceptions and practices of friendship, romance, love, intimacy, and queerness that my participants held. Participants were able to share significant detail and clarify any misunderstandings we

encountered throughout the process, allowing for a deep understanding of their experiences. In addition, the semi-structured nature of these interviews allowed for flexibility in asking follow-up questions regarding participants unique circumstances while still following a predetermined set of questions that allows data to be compared across participants. Despite the benefits of this method, this data is limited in the sense that it is not generalizable to a wider population and is prone to the interviewer-bias effect. However, given that no previous empirical research exists on this topic, in-depth semi-structured interviews allow for a bridge between the existing theoretical literature into empirical analysis; the qualitative data collected is theoretically rich and highly detailed, thus allowing for participants' experiences to be understood through and contrasted with existing theory.

Additionally, I ensured that my participants were aware that I am also a queer person to ensure that they felt more comfortable sharing their experiences with queerness with me. I acknowledge that my positionality as a queer person, as well as someone who is personally passionate about deconstructing the relationship hierarchy, will impact how I interpret and understand the information my participants are sharing with me. To avoid my own preconceptions influencing the data as much as possible, I ensured that I asked my participants to define and explain their experiences rather than interpreting them through my pre-existing notions of queer identity and experience. However, I feel that my positionality was ultimately an asset in this research as it allowed participants to feel more comfortable opening up to me about their feelings and experiences

As mentioned, the sample involved eleven participants who self-identified as queer. Inclusion criteria, as outlined on recruitment materials were self-identification as queer, being between the ages of nineteen and twenty-five, currently attending a university and living in Metro Vancouver, and generally considering themselves to reject the notion that romantic relationships are inherently superior to platonic relationships. Due to the small sample size

and limited resources of this project, this last criterion ensured that data collected would be theoretically relevant to the topic at hand. The age and university criteria narrowed the sample to those at a stage of life in which friendship is typically more-highly valued and influential in day-to-day life, particularly for queer students who have been seen to develop 'chosen families' within the university context (Boyd & Wei, 2023).

I recruited through convenience sampling involving posters with study and contact information being posted around university and college campuses in Metro Vancouver as well as my own personal social media. Participants were not offered any stipend for participation. Prospective participants were directed to a Qualtrics form, via a QR code on recruitment posters, which outlined the study information and digitally collected consent for participation in the study. This form also included a series of pre-screening questions to ensure participants met the necessary criteria. Participants were asked whether they identified as queer (no criteria except for self-identification were necessary), how old they were, what university they attend, what city they live in, whether they value friendship more than, equal to, or less than romantic relationships, and who they spend the majority of their time and energy on (options being: close friends, casual friends, family, romantic partner(s), unsure, other). The latter two questions sought to filter out participants who largely centre romantic relationships in their lives as this research seeks to primarily identify the alternative forms of intimacy queer students are fostering.

Participants embodied a wide range of queer-identities and a multitude of relationships orientations, which can be viewed in Table 1. The gender distribution of participants was relatively mixed, with an overrepresentation of non-binary (as in identifying outside the gender binary) and cis women. Men (both trans and cis) made up a minority of the sample. The sexuality labels participants used were also relatively mixed, with no significant overrepresentation of any one label. Only one participant identified as asexual or aromatic,

however, this did not appear to significantly differentiate their experiences from the rest of the sample. No patterns solely regarding the specific gender or sexuality labels my participants used emerged in relation to the major findings. The demographic information that was more significant in influencing participants' experiences, was their relationship orientation (e.g. monogamous, polyamorous) and their relationship statuses. 7/11 (64%) participants identified as monogamous, and these participants were all in long-term relationships. 4/11 (36%) of participants identified as polyamorous or flexible and these participants were all single (in the traditional sense). This overrepresentation of monogamous participants was unprecedented, but this group provided insights into how practices of queering intimacy can involve a monogamous romantic partner if an individual so desires. Those that identified as polyamorous or flexible, were largely more radical in their deconstruction of relationship norms and often had little to no desire to develop a traditional romantic relationship. Both groups provided unique and relevant insights into practices of queering intimacy.

This sample therefore encapsulated a variety of queer experiences, including a range of people from those who have radically deconstructed the labels applied to relationship categories to those who are in long-term monogamous romantic relationships. While including participants in monogamous romantic relationships may seem antithetical to the goals of this research, they provide important insights into how queer community building and friendships can be fostered despite the presence of a single romantic partner

Table 1

Participant Attributes

Pseudonym	Pronouns	Gender Label(s)	Sexuality Label(s)	Relationship Orientation	Relationship Status
Adam	They/them; He/him	Trans-masculine	Queer	Monogamous	Partnered
Anderson	He/him	Trans-masculine, Trans-man	Bisexual; queer	Monogamish	Partnered
Andrea	She/her	Cis woman	Lesbian; queer	Flexible	Single
Anne	She/her	Cis woman	Pansexual	Flexible	Single
David	She/her	Cis woman	Pansexual; demisexual	Monogamous	Partnered
L.C.	He/him	Cis man	Gay	Monogamous	Partnered
Moise	She/her	Gender-nonconforming	Lesbian; dyke	Monogamous	Partnered
Richard	He/him	Agender	Pansexual	Polyamorous	Single
Sam	They/them	Nonbinary	Gay; queer	Monogamous	Partnered
Sirius	They/them	Nonbinary	Asexual; aromantic	Flexible	Single
Strawberry	She/her	Cis woman	Bisexual; queer	Monogamous	Partnered

After participants completed the Qualtrics form, I contacted them to arrange a time and place for an in-person interview. Interviews lasted between 45 and 70 minutes and covered a range of topics to investigate how participants have (1) practiced relationships throughout their life and currently, with a focus how their queerness has impacted their relationship practices and satisfaction; (2) how participants are conceptualizing love, the importance of their relationships, and the expectations they place on their relationships; and (3) the kinship-related goals participants had for their future.

Interviews began by allowing participants to choose their own pseudonym and inquiring about some surface level information surrounding when they began identifying as queer, what labels they use to describe their queer identity, and what these labels mean to them. I utilized a semi-structured interview guide which first prompted participants to discuss their experiences with friendship and romantic relationships throughout grade school. Questions in this section inquired about the depth of friendships, experience navigating queerness alongside friends, and involvement with romance throughout elementary, middle, and high school years. Questions in this section were those such as "Did you consciously seek out other queer folks to befriend before or after coming out?" and "How were your friendships affected by the presence of a romantic partner in your life during this period?" This portion of questioning ultimately sought to identify how participants experienced coming into their queer identity, how experiences with friendship were affected by this process, and how participants learnt to balance romantic and platonic relationships.

The second section of the interview guide aimed to identify how participants have practiced intimacy and relationships since starting university as well as how they are currently understanding and conceptualizing love and various forms of relationships. I included lines of questioning such as: "How would you describe the expectations you place on romantic versus platonic connections?" and "How do you think the feeling of love differs

between different forms of relationships?" This allowed for an understanding of not only how participants are practicing and balancing the various relationships in their life but also an understanding of how they are experiencing the feelings and expectations attached to their relationships.

Finally, I inquired about participants' future goals regarding the close relationships and kin they hope to centre their affective lives around. I asked questions such as: "What are your personal goals for the future regarding family and close relationships?" and "Some queer people express affinity towards the idea of chosen family. What does this mean to you, and do you resonate with it?" Identifying my participants kinship-related goals allowed for insights into how participants are conceptualizing alternatives to the hegemonic nuclear family goal.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim through Zoom and were later cleaned and anonymized. NVivo was used to code the data using a flexible coding approach outlined by Deterding and Waters (2021). This method is ideal for this research as I am building off existing theoretical frameworks and therefore taking an abductive approach to analysis. This process began with indexing the transcripts by major themes – predominantly based on questions in the interview guide. Large chunks of text were organized into index codes through this process to allow for maximum flexibility in analysis and allowing me to become familiar with the data I was working with. After this was completed, I applied narrower analytic codes to the text that had been sorted into index codes. As analytic codes were refined, I ended up with three levels of codes. Analytic codes were then organized into five broad themes: navigating tensions, queer socialization, blurry boundaries between relationship spheres, understanding needs and fulfillment, and looking to the future.

RESULTS

Navigating Tensions: Social Norms vs. Practices and Desires

All participants, either explicitly or implicitly, noted some degree of tension between the social norms governing relational practices and their desires in the spheres of both platonic and romantic relationships. Learning these norms, then either internalizing them or finding that they inhibit relational practices and adjusting attitudes accordingly, is a process all participants underwent with outcomes of various levels and forms of tension between norms, practices, and desires.

Anderson, for instance, found that his communication patterns with his friends versus his "monogam-ish" partner varied based on social expectations of how much communication was appropriate for a given relationship status. He described a fear that

If I do that [always communicate personal boundaries] in a friendship, the other person isn't going to be responsive to that because they're like, that's not something that people like usually do in friendships. Like, I feel like there's this idea that you're only that level of sensitive and communicative with your partner.

Despite desiring a higher level of communication and sensitivity with friends, Anderson felt as if this was not socially acceptable due to the social norms around friendship. Elaborating, Anderson stated that "I think we think of like, you have to work harder to maintain those [romantic] relationships, which I don't think is true. But I think that that's the societal expectation." Here, the tension between norms and practices is encapsulated through how Anderson wishes to maintain communication at a more equal level between platonic and romantic relationships but is inhibited by the normative idea that romantic relationships deserve and require more effort.

Others found that the social norms they internalized growing up shifted as they came into their queerness, leading them to subversive practices of friendship which disrupted the

social norms they had originally followed. Andrea, who has a very "flexible" and "open" approach to developing relationships of all kinds, noted that her high school friend groups were "very standard" and all the people in her friend group were girls. The one friendship she developed during this time that subverted this framework was with a queer person. Andrea found that this friendship was "one where there was, I don't know, more physical touch or however, like more expression of our feelings and spending time together even in different ways." After Andrea came into her queer identity moving into university, she said she "really saw a change both in how I perceived myself and consequently how I related to other people." Here, participants are directly linking their navigation of friendship, and the expectations surrounding it, to their experiences with queerness. In this case, queerness allowed for a setting where 'standard' friendships are disrupted in favour of a more expressive and affectionate friendship.

Andrea was not alone in reporting high-school friendship dynamics as being highly gendered. Three (27%) participants explicitly noted the discomfort they felt with the gendered expectations put on friendship, particularly during high school. After moving into a large high school from a small school where "everyone was friends with everyone," L.C. noted confusion over the gender division:

> There was a lot more split, I think maybe because it was big. I remember initially being confused because I was like, this doesn't make any sense. Like, why are you doing this? But I was still friends with like a like a lot of girls and a lot of guys before I came out. So I obviously heard the things that people said, thinking I had crushes on the girls I was hanging out with and that they had crushes on me and I was just like… Friendship exists, you know.

The gendered split in the high school environment is maintained by the notion that boys should only be friends with boys and girls should only be friends with girls. Underlying this

expectation is the idea that cross-gender relationships are inherently imbued with sexual or romantic tension. This presented a conundrum for a couple of my participants who found that their cross-gendered friendships were being called into question as being something different than they were.

The tensions between social norms and navigating friendships lie primarily in the idea that friendships should be *less* communicative and affectionate or that they should be primarily same gender. Participants noted seeking and practicing higher levels of communication and affection with their friends than they thought was typically expected of them. Notably, communication and intimacy were fostered without significant consideration of social norms when it comes to practicing romantic relationships because, as Anderson noted, higher levels of communication are expected of a romantic relationship.

All seven participants who were in romantic relationships noted that there was a social expectation to maintain a high level of open communication, honesty, and overt care with their romantic partner. None, however, sought to disrupt this expectation. Strawberry, for instance, noted that "there's an additional level of like honesty, understanding, and like compassion and support, which is evident within my friendships but like it is…like a necessary expectation" with her romantic partner. Although Strawberry did experience high levels of communication within her friendships, it was something she and her partner explicitly valued in their romantic relationship. Despite disrupting social norms in the level of communication and affection present in platonic relationships, participants reinforced social norms in the level of communication and support expected in romantic relationships. This indicates that friendships are increased in value without diminishing the expectations placed on a serious romantic partner.

However, not all participants desired a romantic partner. Two of whom explicitly expressed contempt at the expectation continuously placed on them to do so. Anne found that

she was fulfilled primarily through her relationship with her best friend, but her mom still assumes that she is looking for a romantic partner or that she and her best friend will end up together in a traditional sense. Anne iterated that:

> *I'm just not looking for anyone and I also don't feel the need to be in a romantic relationship and people are like 'oh wow, that's so interesting.' I feel like people just don't accept it, I guess. And I really noticed that. Yeah, everyone just expects you to like look for romantic love all the time.*

Anne expressed disdain for the expectation that she *must* desire romantic partnership because she feels fulfilled by the platonic relationships in her life. Unlike those participants who are fostering both intimate friendships and partnerships, participants such as Anne offered a perspective that disrupts both romantic and platonic social norms by decentring romantic relationships in their affective worlds and instead focused on fostering fulfilling friendships.

The norm-disrupting practices exemplified by my participants, in part, drew on the harm they saw being perpetuated by a hierarchical perspective of relationships. Sirus drew on the relationship hierarchy directly when critiquing how they have witnessed their friends disregard their friendship whenever they enter a romantic relationship. Expressing contempt at friends who push their platonic relationships to the side when they start dating someone, Sirius stated that "I don't get people who get into relationships and then their friendships are just like chopped liver." Further, Sirius highlighted the joy that can be found by fostering intimate friendship, saying,

> *I do not understand why people inherently value romance over other kinds of relationships, it doesn't make any sense to me […] I think people would be happier if they understood that there is no reason that romance should be prioritized.*

Sirius's perception of the relationship hierarchy being unconducive to happiness shaped how they disrupted norms in their relational practices by decentring romantic relationships and instead focusing on fostering friendships.

Three out of four participants, including Sirius, who were not in romantic relationships expressed that they had little to no desire to focus on developing a romantic partnership and instead consciously chose to foster their friendships as the center of their affective lives. This involved deconstructing social norms that privilege romantic partnership by recognizing that platonic relationships are capable of being just as fulfilling. All participants who were in romantic relationships reinforced social norms that their romantic partnership should involve high levels of communication and support, but primarily did this while also maintaining a desire to foster care and affection in their friendships.

The tensions described were rooted in a disconnect between social norms that emphasize how higher levels of communication and physical affection should be reserved for a romantic relationship and participants' desires to foster high levels of communication and affection in *both* romantic and platonic relationships. By navigating tensions through disrupting social norms participants were able to form intimate friendships that transcend social conceptions of what friendship should look like. Additionally, embodying queerness was associated with confusion over the gendered split in the high school social environment. This caused tensions between social expectations to date those of the opposite gender and participants desires to form cross-gender friendships.

Queer Socialization: Learning Relationships from a Queer Perspective

As demonstrated, participants desired fostering friendships to the same degree as romantic relationships and had to navigate social norms governing relationships that devalue platonic relationships to do so. The process of learning to value friendship more than traditionally expected often started in high school when most were coming into their queer

identities and began befriending other queer people. Queer friends were highly significant in identity development and acceptance, leading participants to value the support, love, and care their friends provided for them during this formative period.

When asked how incorporating queer people into their friend group impacted their relationship satisfaction nine out of eleven participants (81%) reported that developing queer friendships significantly increased the depth and quality of their relationships. L.C. discussed how his satisfaction with his friendships is increased with queer friends due to the shared cultural context of queerness. He noted that,

> *When I talk to my straight friends sometimes, I feel like, oh, I don't really know what to talk to you about because I have to explain, like if I'm talking about like, oh, my experience on Grindr or something, then I have to explain so much context. But with other queer people, even if they're not queer in the same way, they still have the cultural context of being queer.*

Sharing similar cultural knowledge allows L.C. to develop stronger connections with other queer people. This shared cultural context allowed L.C. to foster queer friendships that were deeper and more meaningful than those that he had experienced with straight friends.

Echoing a similar experience, Moise explained that her one close friend who is not queer has to adapt to a queer environment. Moise stated that "when she comes into our space, she's coming into a queer space. And we're operating queerly. And she just lives in that." Elaborating on what a queer space means to her, Moise explained that "a queer space is where I don't have to be apologetic or explain. Where people just get things." Both Moise and L.C. explicitly drew on how shared experiences of queerness make social spaces more comfortable. Because of this, participants were largely drawn towards other queer people and the formation of queer spaces rather than integrating into "straight spaces." This offers an

environment where subversive relational practices can be fostered, and strong friendships can be formed.

The development of strong friendships with other queer people were highly influential in participants identity development. After befriending queer people, Strawberry found that she became more open about her sexuality and found a new level of comfort with herself and within her friendships. She reported that having queer friends "really helped shape my sense of self and like my ability to come to terms with like who I was within like not only within my friendships but just like within myself." Similar sentiments were shared to some degree by ten out of eleven (91%) participants. As queer friendships were important to participants learning to understand themselves, their friends became essential supports during the time in their lives, typically during high school, where they began to come out.

In a similar vein, Moise highlighted how learning from other queer people was fundamental to her identity development. She discussed how queer relationships involve learning from each other about what queerness means and how to embody it. She found that her queer friendships allowed her to develop her own queer identity:

> *It's just kind of like stepping away from this like veneer, like unsettled Steven Universe queerness into like a… I'm not a caricature, I'm an adult. And this is my life. You know? And seeing that was powerful. And that's kind of one of the things where we learn from each other.*

Moise's sentiment highlights how embracing and understanding queerness was highly important to participants who found that their queer friends were essential to this process. Finding oneself through the development of queer friendship was a process the majority (81%) of participants went through. In doing so, they developed deep and highly valued friendships with other queer people.

This process and these experiences took place during high school and early university years, a period where participants also began to explore romantic and sexual relationships. Because of the importance of their friendships at this point in their lives, the romantic relationships my participants developed were always either secondary to or equal to (in terms of commitment and priority) their platonic friendships. David, for instance, found that her friendship dynamics were not altered at all by the experience of dating in high school. She said that

> *My friendships were never altered. In fact, I vividly remember like making my boyfriend sit in the backseat and my friends would be in the front seat, like, you know, like if we would go to hang out, like I would bring my friends to my boyfriend's house.*

Romantic partners and friends were often integrated with minimal separation between those roles. Friends remained primary in participants' social worlds even when they began romantic relationships, indicating the importance placed on the friendships participants were fostering.

The queer friendships participants developed during adolescence were highly formative in their development of their queer identities and heavily influenced how they conceptualized and understood the role of friendship. Because close queer friends and the formation of queer spaces enabled personal learning and feelings of safety, participants learnt to highly value the role their friends played in their lives. This allowed for highly important friendships to be fostered to the same degree that is typically expected of romantic relationships.

Blurry Boundaries: Fluidity in Relationship Spheres

The emphasis on fostering intimate and important friendships is reflected in how all participants experienced at least some degree of emotional fluidity between relationship spheres. Many emphasized that they have experienced deep and meaningful friendships that blur the boundaries between how they understand romantic and platonic relationships.

Participants reported varying levels of blurring in the intimate, sexual, and emotional aspects of their platonic and romantic relationships.

The blurring of platonic and romantic feelings was associated with intense friendships that went beyond what was traditionally expected of friendship. Anne reported that her relationship with her best friend "feels like in between a relationship and a friendship. Yeah, just having that is really important to me, but also really made me look at friendship in a different way." This kind of "special and deep" friendship Anne experiences encapsulates how feelings and roles associated with friendship versus romance can become blurred. While she considers her best friend to be a friend rather than her girlfriend, Anne does note that the intensity of the relationship causes the line between the two roles to become blurred. This friendship, Anne noted, was different from the other friendships she has experienced because it is so much deeper. Developing this strong platonic bond led Anne to value friendship to the same extent, if not more than, romantic partnership, as she views her best friend as the most important person in her life and doesn't feel much of a desire to develop a romantic relationship because of that.

Moise, who has also experienced a highly intimate friendship explained that she believes that she was only able to experience that because of their queer identities. Moise stated that:

> *I have definitely had some very intimate queer friendships, intimate queer friendship in the past. And I think that would not be possible, for me… outside the context it existed in. Like it was an interesting relationship where, I'm not going to say lines were blurred, but it was like a level of intimacy I'd never reached with like a friend before. But I was still very secure in the fact that they were a friend. And I think that was only really allowed to happen because of our queer identities.*

Although Moise clarified that she did not think the lines were blurred, because she was very confident that this was a platonic relationship, she emphasized that she did not know intimacy could be experienced to this extent in a platonic context, as it is typically associated with romance. Notably, she attributes this intimacy to their shared queer identities as this offered a level of comfort which facilitated a deeper intimate connection. In this way, queerness did allow for the blurring of boundaries, not so much between platonic and romantic feelings (as in Anne's case), but in the level of intimacy typically attributed to each sphere of relationship. Queering intimacy in this manner allows for platonic relationships to reach a depth typically only allotted to romantic relationships.

This blurring of boundaries also extends to the activities associated with types of relationships. Referring to his friends, Anderson expressed that

I'm never like, we can't do this thing together because you're not my partner. Like I'll sleep with my friends and stuff or we'll like, have a nice dinner kind of thing. So, I don't know. I don't see a super clear delineation of those roles.

In Anderson's case, the actions permitted in his relationships are not associated with the relationships' romantic or platonic label, and he is instead relatively open to flexibility in these roles. By incorporating sexual intimacy and activities (such as nice dinners) usually associated with a romantic context into his friendships, Anderson allows for the roles of his friends and his partner to become blurred, leading to a wider breadth of deep and fulfilling relationships outside of his "monogamish" relationship.

Those in more strictly monogamous relationships also reported that they had more flexible boundaries of what is acceptable in a platonic relationship than they expect most people do. David reported that

I would say I have a bit of a different mindset when it comes to like how close you can be with friends and stuff than like maybe some other people in monogamous relationships.

Elaborating, she said that her closeness with her friends caused some tension with her girlfriend at the start of their relationship because she is very open with her friends, "like we'll just change on FaceTime, like tits out. Because it's just like, it's very like to me, non-sexual, but I guess other people see it differently." Unlike Anderson, David does not explicitly incorporate sexuality into her platonic relationships, but instead, she considers behaviour that could be considered sexual as non-sexual. Conceptualizing nudity as non-sexual blurs the boundaries of what is considered appropriate behaviour with friends while in a monogamous relationship.

The high levels of platonic intimacy reported by my participants involved blurry boundaries between platonic, romantic, and sexual emotions, behaviours, and roles where everyone conceptualized the meaning of their relationships and the content that they consist of differently. These experiences led participants to, or perhaps resulted from, a conception of love as an emotion that is unique to every individual in their life rather than differentiated based on relationship sphere.

Two participants explicitly separated the feeling of butterflies they get with a romantic partner from the feeling of love. Anderson attributed the butterflies to a physiological response separate from the feeling of love itself, whereas Andrea described butterflies as a temporary feeling that develops into love. Seven participants (64%), including Anderson and Andrea, described love as something that differs based on the individual person it is attached to, rather than the romantic, platonic, or familial label ascribed to the relationship. Elaborating on her conception of love, Andrea stated, "Like I love you for the person you are, and there are specific characteristics that make me feel this particular kind of

affection for you." The feeling of love for my participants differed based on the qualities of the person they loved rather than the particular role they played in their life. This meant that participants did not distinguish between romantic, platonic, and familial love - which are the categories love is commonly assumed to fall into. This equalizes love forms as romantic love cannot be valued inherently more than platonic love if love cannot even be distinguished in that way.

For Richard, understanding how emotional fulfillment can come from a multitude of people in different forms framed how he thought about his relationships. He explained that he is polyamorous because "I also understand that like different people have different things they bring to the table, sometimes different people like fulfill different stuff for other people." This plays into how most participants are conceptualizing love, even if they are in monogamous relationships, they understand love as something different based on the individual relationship due to inherent differences in the people they are interacting with.

The people who reported that love varied by person rather than sphere of life similarly explained how the expectations they place on their close friends versus romantic partners are very similar. Explaining that the expectations placed on his boyfriend were "pretty similar" to the expectations placed on his close friends, Anderson explained that:

I feel like my needs could just as easily be filled by friends as a partner. Like, if me and my boyfriend broke up, obviously I'd be devastated but not really because I'd be thinking, like the role he plays in my life can only be filled by a romantic partner, it's more like, that's a bunch of stuff that a friend can also do, but I'm not getting it from that person anymore.

As Anderson doesn't place many limits on the behaviour appropriate to a romantic versus platonic relationship and understands love forms to vary by the person rather than the sphere, he feels that his needs can be filled by platonic or romantic relationships. This, of course,

does not stop him from loving and appreciating his boyfriend, but rather allows him flexibility in his relationship practices and allows his needs to be fulfilled by a wider range of relationships.

The four (36%) participants who understood love in a more conventional sense (as in: separated into romantic, platonic, and familial forms) and experienced less blurring between relationship spheres still learnt to value their platonic and romantic relationships fairly equally. For example, Moise describes her love towards her girlfriend as

> *It's like imagining losing someone would be like ripping your heart out. I feel like if I lost [her girlfriend] I would just collapse. I would cease to exist. I know I wouldn't, but like… that's what it feels like.*

Whereas she describes her love for her friends as "like I love you. I appreciate you. I have love for you in my heart. And I would be sad if you were gone. But I'm not about to like have an existential crisis over it." Of all participants, Moise described the most significant difference between romantic love versus platonic love. However, Moise recognizes how stilted her life would be if not for her friends who, like her, are "leftist queer Jews" that she feels a necessary affinity and solidarity within contending with homophobia and antisemitism. Participants like Moise learned to highly value friendship for its different social functions rather than significantly blurring the boundaries between love forms and roles.

The blurring of boundaries between romantic and platonic spheres was an essential mechanism in equalizing friendship and romance within affective worlds. This blurring occurred in practical spheres by allowing intimacy and other activities typically associated with romance to exist within the sphere of friendship. Blurring also occurred in emotional spheres as the lines between love forms were not distinct. Blurring these boundaries led participants to foster platonic relationships to the same degree as romantic ones as fulfilment

could be easily achieved by allowing platonic relationships the same depth and breadth as romantic ones.

Full Glasses: Fulfilling needs and desires

The blurring of roles and emotions across relationship spheres appears to allow the majority of participants to develop platonic relationships that are capable of fulfilling their emotional and social needs to the same degree as romantic relationships. Participants currently in romantic relationships largely reported experiencing complete and satisfying emotional and social lives before entering into their relationship, often considering romance as something enjoyable but not necessary to experience fulfillment. Notably, all 7 participants currently in romantic relationships identified as monogamous (one as "monogamish"), whereas the 4 participants considered single (in the traditional sense) identified with some degree of polyamory or flexibility in how they practice romantic relationships. Interestingly, 6 out of 7 monogamous participants and all 4 polyamorous participants reported that romantic relationships were not strictly necessary for their fulfillment.

One monogamous participant, Strawberry, discussed how before entering into a romantic relationship with her girlfriend, her "glass was full" from the "meaningful deep relationships without like, the romantic aspect." Expanding, Strawberry noted that her emotional and social needs were fulfilled by her friends,

> *very similarly to my romantic partner. In the sense that like, we would spend a lot of time together. We would do things together. A lot of people were like oh you're like 'attached at the hip' with like so-and-so because we like spent so much time together and like I just didn't feel like that was an issue.*

Because she spent so much time with her friends and was able to develop such deep and meaningful relationships with them, Strawberry did not feel that there was a gap in her life that needed to be filled by a romantic partner. Although Strawberry's girlfriend is now an

important part of her life, she describes this relationship as "like a very strong friendship," drawing on both how fulfilling her friendships can be and the blurring of relationship spheres.

Similarly, L.C. reported that his social and emotional needs were "pretty much fulfilled with just my platonic relationships." He began looking for a romantic partner, not because he felt like he needed one but because he wanted that experience. L.C. directly attributed his fulfillment by just his platonic relationships to his queerness, stating that:

Like for straight men, it's often that their partner is their only confidant and emotional support, and that's why they seek out relationships to fill that dynamic. But like for me, it was never like that. It was always that, like, if I have a romantic relationship or if I don't, I'm still fine because I have my friends to rely on. And I can tell them everything and we can meet up often. So it's like all my needs were met.

Because his queerness enabled him to develop deep and reliable friendships, L.C. felt as though he was emotionally and socially fulfilled without a romantic relationship. He also noted that these friendships gave him a "stable foundation" and "safety net" to then begin looking for romantic intimacy but did not need to rely on a romantic partner for "absolutely everything." Again, L.C. describes his current romantic relationship as something that is now important to him, but he never felt the *need* to find a romantic partner because he was able to rely on his platonic relationships. Participants such as Strawberry and L.C. were able to develop meaningful romantic relationships that they enjoyed while also experiencing complete fulfillment within their platonic relationships.

Fostering fulfilling platonic relationships often led to participants going long periods without dating or seeking out romance in any capacity. David and Adam reported this phenomenon the most explicitly. When I asked Adam whether he felt that he needed a romantic partner to be happy or feel fulfilled, he responded:

No, not really. I mean, I like my romantic partner. But I don't know I mean, I'll go very long stretches of time without dating people. Like, I think… between my first serious romantic relationship and my second, there was a gap of about two years… And at the later end of that gap, I would like download and then delete Hinge a few times but I never, I don't know, starting dating is like horrible. Like Why? No, I don't want to do that. I don't want to text people on this horrible app. I'm deleting it now. So no, I do not feel…no. I'm close with my friends.

Considering using dating apps and beginning new relationships to feel "horrible," Adam exemplified how being close to his friends allowed him to go through long stretches of time without needing to engage in dating. Even though he is now in a happy romantic relationship, he continues to understand this as not necessary for his fulfillment because that lies more heavily in his friendships.

Continuous with Adam's experience, David reported being "single for like three years and like really didn't have like any kind of sex or like romantic interactions with anyone." Despite this, she always "felt super fulfilled, like socially, emotionally, I was busy all the time. I was really never bored." However, David did report that despite feeling completely fulfilled she did feel like she was missing a romantic connection with somebody, a role that her girlfriend now fills. Although David never felt "bored" or "lonely" in the absence of a romantic partner, she did maintain the desire to foster a romantic relationship when she was single. In this case, strong friendships were primary sources of fulfillment, and the desire to experience romance remained, but to a significantly decreased extent due to David's strong social network.

Participants with more flexible or polyamorous relationship orientations also largely reported that they enjoyed romance, but it was ultimately unnecessary for their fulfillment. However, this was expressed to a more significant degree than those who were in

monogamous romantic relationships. Anne, for instance, found that her desire to date people has significantly decreased since developing her relationship with her best friend, someone whom she considers her (platonic) partner in life. She reported that the only aspect of romantic relationships that friends cannot provide is "the physical connection you have more quickly in a romantic relationship," but she elaborated by saying that,

> *just hugging someone or like physical touch in general in friendships is really important to me. It doesn't even have to be sexual, that makes sex in a relationship way less important, to me at least.*

Because Anne was able to develop physically intimate and meaningful relationships with her friends, particularly her best friend, her desire to develop any sort of romantic relationship was significantly decreased. This suggests that explicitly romantic relationships are unnecessary for achieving social and emotional fulfillment when platonic relationships are fostered to a higher degree.

The single participant who explicitly discussed romance being essential to her fulfillment, Moise, acknowledged that her girlfriend "physically cannot give me everything" and therefore deliberately continues to foster her friendships outside of her relationship. Moise recognized that demanding more from her girlfriend "would just inhibit her" because "she's a fucking firecracker," referring to how her girlfriend is very socially inclined and has many important connections. Instead, Moise calls up her friends who have "stuck with me and gotten me through some hard times." It is for this reason that Moise has concluded that maintaining both platonic and romantic relationships is essential to both her and her girlfriend's well-being. Although Moise was unique in determining that romantic relationships were unequivocally essential to her life, her case demonstrates why maintaining strong platonic relationships on top of a romantic partnership is important to emotional and social fulfillment, even when the romantic partner remains the center of the affective world.

Fostering strong friendships that fulfilled emotional and social needs before entering romantic relationships allowed participants to recognize how intimacy can be achieved through platonic relationships alone. Thus, friendships were not devalued when romantic relationships were eventually pursued, allowing affective networks to develop that incorporate a range of deep relationships. The intimate friendships fostered by participants significantly reduced desires to enter romantic relationships because emotional and social fulfilment was able to be achieved through friendship alone. This highlights how friendship is not an inherently lesser form of intimate relationship as when platonic relationships are nurtured, little is missing from the affective world.

Looking to the Future: Combating the Anti-Sociality of the Nuclear Family

The fulfilment achieved through friendship is heavily echoed in participant's goals for their futures as they all saw their close friends as critically important to their ongoing well-being. When asked to contemplate how they wished to structure their affective future, participants offered a range of responses from desiring monogamous marriage and children to building a communal house with their friends. All, however, challenged the anti-social nature of the traditional nuclear family to some degree by aiming to foster wide affective communities, regardless of whether they saw themselves centring a singular romantic relationship in their lives or not.

Ten out of eleven participants (91%) sought to foster their friendships as primary relationships that are equally or more important than romantic partners in their futures. Anderson, for instance, expects that his friends will continue playing a similar role as they do now as he moves into middle age. He noted that:

> *That's who I spend most of my time with, who I do things with, who I make decisions around. And I'll continue to do that. I don't know. I don't want to be one of those old people with no friends. I think that's so lonely and sad.*

Drawing on a desire to continue fostering friendships at the center of his affective world, Anderson explicitly expressed a desire to avoid the deterioration of friendships that he sees occurring amongst people as they age. Instead, Anderson stated that "I have literally never considered a world where I don't still have super close friends, that is just like incomprehensible to me." Anderson heavily fosters his friendships in the present and expects to continue to do so into the future, a sentiment that was heavily reflected in the experiences of all other participants.

David reported a similar sentiment as because she has also always been very close to her friends, she desires to live close to them. She expressed that "I've never really been interested in like, you know, you start your family and that's like your main priority." Both David and Anderson explicitly drew on their experiences witnessing people enter into nuclear family units as they age and then neglecting their friendships, a pattern they desire avoiding as much as possible by remaining physically and emotionally close with their friends.

Two other participants, Sirius and Adam, reported the desire to live in a big house with all their friends. Although both noted that they felt this was more optimistic than realistic, Sirius because their friends live scattered across the world and Adam because of the state of the housing market means that buying a house is more of a fantasy "unless we were in butt-fuck-nowhere Saskatchewan." The desire to develop a friendship-oriented affective life is reflected in the desire to live with friends rather than a partner, even if participants noted that this felt unachievable.

Others, such as Andrea, pictured themselves immersed in a community rather than a traditional family. Andrea reported,

> see[ing] myself more in a community of people that share values or compatibilities and that kind of stuff. [..] I like to imagine being very fluid and yeah not like the monogamous relationship, the partner, or whatever.

This desire for fluidity and community rested in maintaining friendships as a big role in her life, particularly because Andrea feels that her close friendships are not heavily distinguished from romantic relationships either. The blurring of relationship spheres aids in the imagination of an affective future that does not revolve around a singular romantic partner, rather, participants such as Andrea picture themselves surrounded by intimate relationships that take a variety of forms.

Five out of eleven (45%) participants acknowledged that they had very few concrete desires for their future and rather sought emotional fulfillment and joy in whatever form that may take. Instead of developing clearly defined goals for future affective relationships, this group did not particularly care what form their relationships took as long as they were able to maintain their important friendships and their personal happiness. Richard best encapsulated this shared sentiment by saying:

> *My goals are just to live life and to continue to not hurt other people and try to do the best I can do. I have a problem with overthinking things and it negatively affects stuff, so I try not to overthink relationships and stuff like that because the future is the future. You never know what's in store. So I don't know. My goals are just to continue doing what I'm doing. If I happen to meet somebody that I want a monogamous relationship with maybe that's what will happen. But as of now, I think it's more free love, baby.*

Much like the other four participants in this group, Richard expresses a desire to just keep taking life day by day and fostering the relationships that are currently important to him rather than seeking out anything specific. This attitude draws on the equal status most participants attributed to their relationships regardless of whether they were platonic or romantic. By equally valuing relationships regardless of their content, participants can find

satisfaction and joy in whatever relationships they find themselves in at a moment in time rather than purposefully seeking out a monogamous romantic partner to dedicate their life to.

In contrast, those who did explicitly desire fostering a monogamous romantic relationship sought to do so as part of a broader community of friends. Often drawing on the notion of 'it takes a village,' people in this category saw their friends playing a supportive, but critical, role in raising their children and expanding their affective community. Moise, for instance, pictures herself marrying her current girlfriend and that they will:

> *live in a little house together and have children. But even when I imagine that future, my friends are there. Like my friend Mia, I want her to be around. I want her to be a part of my family's life. She doesn't want any kids so she says all the time, like, oh my god, when you guys have babies, I'm going to spoil them rotten. And I want that. I want the whole image you know. All the people that are around me right now, I wouldn't feel comfortable losing. I need them. I want them to be with me for the long run.*

Despite Moise desiring the most conventional family structure of all participants, she still highlights the critically important support her close friends will provide at this stage of her life. By heavily incorporating friends into the family sphere, Moise expects she will be able to access support in both raising her children and maintain the depth of her friendships despite simultaneously starting a more traditional family.

The desires of participants who did not desire kids or a traditional family structure highly complemented the desires of those who did. Participants who did not want their own children were often excited to help raise the children of their friends, once again drawing on the 'it takes a village' sentiment. Strawberry expressed that she doesn't see herself having kids but would love to be a not-blood-related 'aunt' to her friend's children. She said that she desires "that sense of like kinship and care, like I would love to have that." Desiring a similar

role to the friend Moise was discussing, participants in this group saw themselves taking on child-rearing responsibilities and kin-like roles in their friends' family lives. In doing so, they wanted to both help raise the next generation, without having "to be around them when they're disgusting," as Anderson put it, support their friends in their parenting responsibilities, and maintain close ties with friends who desired more family-oriented lives.

Many participants directly attributed this desire to develop overlapping friendship and familial relationships with the concept of the chosen family. As Richard put it, "I think, yeah, chosen family is really important because… you didn't choose to be born and choose to exist, and somebody else had unprotected sex and forced you to exist." Shifting importance away from the biological family and into friends and personal communities was an essential aspect of my participants' desires for the future. Even when participants who were drawn towards chosen family valued relationships with their biological family members, it was because they chose to foster that relationship, rather than adhering to social expectations to maintain them because of a shared blood relation. L.C. noted that:

> *I don't talk to most of my sort of actual family. So chosen family is really big for me. I'd say even out of my blood relatives, the people who I talk to are the people I have chosen. So even though they're my actual family, they're still part of my chosen family and a lot of my friends are my chosen family.*

By shifting importance away from blood relations, the idea of chosen family allowed my participants to place further emphasis on fostering their friendships by attributing to them the value that is usually reserved for familial relationships, hence the use of the term family to describe their communities.

However, the use of the term chosen family was not universal across my sample. Five participants (45%) noted that they do not resonate with the term chosen family and instead foster their friendships as equally important to familial ones without ascribing the 'family'

label to them because they appreciated them for what they are: friends. Anderson stated that "they don't need to be my family for them to be really important to me [...] and like, some of my family I don't even like, why would I want my friends to be like that?" This group understood the idea of family as something that was not necessary to upkeep by repurposing the label to describe their friendships. These participants valued friendships wholly and equally but chose to move away from the term 'family' because they wanted to avoid upholding the family as an institution.

Another reason participants did not resonate with the idea of chosen family is simply because they have maintained strong relationships with their origin families. Because chosen family is associated "with a loss or disconnect with the family that you were given," as Moise put it, participants who maintained strong relationships with their origin families felt a significantly lesser need to develop 'chosen families' than those who experienced some degree of rejection based on their queerness from their origin families.

Despite differences in desires for children and romantic partnership, the perceived queer futures of my participants revolved around upholding community-oriented values and seeking fulfilment by fostering important relationships in a wide variety of forms. Importantly, the differing desires of this sample complement each other well where some seek to start a family and have children with the support of their friends while others are excited to take on that supportive role and become honorary aunts and uncles. Regardless of whether participants utilize the terminology of 'chosen family' or not, they all desired fostering strong friendships and community connections.

DISCUSSION

Using 11 semi-structured interviews, this research investigated how queer university students are conceptualizing and practicing platonic and romantic relationships, love, and

intimacy in relation to hegemonic mononormative expectations that privilege the romantic partner over other relational forms. Participants shared details on how they have practiced relationships (platonic, romantic, and familial) throughout their life course, how they understand the expectations they place on these relationships, and how they plan to structure their affective network as they move into later stages of life. Central themes included having to navigate tensions between social norms governing relational practices and actual practices and desires, queer friendship being significant to identity development, experiences of fluidity between the boundaries of relationship spheres which allowed participants to experience fulfilment in the absence of romance, and emphasizing desires to develop affective communities into adulthood rather than fostering a more traditional nuclear family structure. The centrality of highly intimate platonic relationships in queer lives results in affective networks rooted in a range of deep relationships that have their importance dictated by factors independent of their romantic, sexual, or platonic content. Allowing relationship boundaries to blur and flex is a practice of queering intimacy that enables participants to largely let go of social expectations to center a single romantic partner, as they were able to develop a wider range of fulfilling intimate relationships.

The relational practices and goals demonstrated in my findings lend empirical support to the theoretical framework of queering intimacy. As Elia (2003) discussed, queering intimacy involves the construction of relationship paradigms that unseat dominant relationship hierarchies and schema. Actively resisting and problematizing the traditional model of relationships was determined to be critical to this process. Elia (2003) imagined queering intimacy to involve the development of fluid, blurry, and unrestricted by labels to disrupt the hierarchy of relationships and mononormative expectations.

My findings demonstrate how practices of queering intimacy manifest in real-world practices and understandings of relationships. Participants practice queering intimacy by

intentionally fostering their close platonic relationships to the same or similar degrees as traditionally expected of romantic relationships. The degree to which participants rejected dominant relationship schema varied from entirely and purposefully rejecting hierarchies and labels attached to relationships to maintaining a valued monogamous relationship that existed simultaneously with intimate and deep friendships. By identifying the manner in which queering intimacy is actively practiced, my findings offer insight into how queer people are navigating and disrupting mononormative expectations through their affective practices.

Consistent with the empirical literature on queering intimacy in the context of the chosen family, my findings support the notion that the development and maintenance of intimate queer friendship is critical in identity development and acceptance. As Boyd (2023) discussed, queer university students developed deep and meaningful platonic relationships that were considered akin to family. My findings affirm that queer friendship is uniquely meaningful and impactful but diverge in the sense that the majority of my participants developed these intimate friendships in the high-school context and typically did not explicitly place them into the sphere of family. The prevalence of intimate queer friendships in adolescence shaped how participants learnt to understand the role of friendship in their affective world as they continue to center their intimate friendships into adulthood. The early development of such intimate friendships allowed for reprieve from the gender divide predominant in the high school social world, facilitated high levels of communication and affection, and allowed participants to feel affirmed in their queerness at an early age.

Although all participants attributed great significance to the importance of their platonic relationships, considering them relatively equal to romantic or familial relationships (which are typically given a greater status), only about half felt that they would describe their friendships as a chosen family. These findings demonstrate how the idea of the chosen family cannot be considered the epitome of queering intimacy, despite the concept being the near

entirety of empirical research on queering intimacy. As discussed originally by Weston (1991), the chosen family exists as a replacement of an origin family, providing kin-like structural and emotional support when queer people face rejection from their origin families. As many of my participants did not experience rejection by their origin families, many did not feel the same affinity towards the idea of chosen family. Those who did experience a degree of rejection and some who were accepted by their origin families did utilize the terminology of chosen family when referring to their friends and future goals. This narrative largely affirms already established ideas that the idea of the chosen family queers intimacy by equalizing and asserting the importance various forms of relationships by describing them with the family label (Andreassen, 2023; Anthony, 2015; Boyd & Wei, 2023; Roseneil, 2004; Weston, 1991). The chosen family descriptor remained accurate and relevant for this part of the sample.

However, those who rejected the label of chosen family did so by critiquing the family as an institution that they see as being upheld by narratives of chosen family. Vasallo's (2019) critique of the family echoes similar sentiments to those expressed by participants. The family is considered a repressive force that inherently maintains systems of patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism. By purposefully not utilizing the terminology of chosen family, this minority of participants sought to reject the notion that family is inherently more important because they viewed it as a repressive force. Instead, this group valued friendship as something inherently important rather than something that needs to be made important by ascribing the familial label to those attachments. Thus, while the chosen family remains relevant to many of my participants, it needs to be reconceptualized to something that can exist simultaneously to an accepting origin family and potentially warrants interrogation regarding how it upholds a hierarchy that places increased value on

familial over platonic relationships. Deep, intimate friendships developed by participants were highly important to them, regardless of whether they were described as chosen family.

The development and appreciation of intimate friendships during adolescence and into university involved navigating tensions between the importance and affection tied to intimate friendships and social norms that dictate what certain relationships should look like. As Gómez (2018) and The Thinking Aro (2013) discuss in the context of the relationship hierarchy, romantic relationships are given precedence over platonic relationships in the sense that a romantic connection is expected to involve higher levels of communication, affection, and prioritization than friendships. My findings demonstrate that my participants were cognisant of these expectations and experienced tensions with them as they sought to establish high levels of communication and physical intimacy with their friends but were aware that others may not reciprocate this desire or were conflicted over how to define their platonic relationships because they contained a level of intimacy not considered possible outside of romance. These novel findings demonstrate how the norms inherent to the system of mononormativity and hierarchical relationship expectations manifest to produce tensions in queer lives.

Also affirmed by the affective practices of my participants is Rosa's (1994) proposition that love is not inherently different based on its romantic, platonic, or familial label. Although not originally supported by empirical evidence, this suggested that the division of love into various spheres was culturally produced rather than inherent. My findings empirically support this idea as 64% of participants stated that there were no differences between love forms solely based on the sphere. Rather, participants attributed differential feelings of love to the different personalities of those it was attached to regardless of the romantic, sexual, familial, or platonic content of the relationship. This phenomenon suggests, as Gómez (2018), Klesse (2018), and Schippers (2019) have posited, that dominant

cultural conceptions of love function to maintain the relationship hierarchy by creating a false division of love forms that frames monogamous romantic love as the key to happiness and well-being.

Because participants in this study developed such deep and meaningful queer friendships early in life, it appears as though they came to understand how valuable platonic love can be and therefore often avoided feeling the need to center monogamous romance in their lives. As many experienced social and emotional fulfillment before ever getting into a romantic relationship, their deep platonic ties largely became the center of their affective worlds. As discussed, multiple participants reported going years without any romantic or sexual intimacy and did not feel as if they were missing anything important. This unseats the idea, perpetuated by the relationship hierarchy, that emotional fulfillment comes from romantic intimacy. As demonstrated by my findings, emotional and social fulfillment can be achieved to a high extent by fostering platonic relationships to the same degree as romantic relationships.

The fulfillment and high levels of well-being participants reported align with Perlman et al.'s (2015) discussion of how strong friendships and wide social networks are highly conducive to personal happiness and reduced stress. Although I do not have the data to determine causality, my participants did report that their strong friendships allowed them happiness, stability, and feelings of safety throughout both their university and school-aged years. Because of the happiness and fulfillment directly attributed to their platonic relationships, participants were confident in asserting that they would maintain their friendships to a similar degree throughout adulthood. This contrasts with previous findings that demonstrate how platonic relationships decrease in value and significance as people move into middle age and spend most of their time with a single partner (Anthony, 2005; McPherson et al., 2001; Perlman et al., 2015; Roseneil, 2004). The goals of my participants

heavily contrast with expectations and patterns rooted in mononormativity and the relationship hierarchy, as instead of aiming to foster a singular romantic relationship, they aim to maintain a strong network of various relationships, whether this includes a romantic partner or not.

The increased well-being attributed to the development of strong friendships and a variety of deep affectual ties provides empirical support to both Klesse's (2018) and Rosa's (1994) claims that queering intimacy through the construction of communities based in diverse relationships offers an anti-patriarchal and anti-mononormative approach to fulfilling relationships. The free choice and flexible relationships associated with this anti-monogamous approach were assumed by Klesse (2018) and Rosa (1994) to produce a network of relationships that are not centered around a romantic partner. The fulfillment felt by participants because of their strong platonic ties led them to foster a network reminiscent of those discussed in this anti-monogamous theoretical framework, even if participants were in monogamous relationships. By practicing flexibility and embracing blurriness in relationship spheres, participants in this study affirmed previously theoretical assumptions that developing a wider and deeper affective network allows for more fulfilling relationships that simultaneously disrupt mononormative expectations by relinquishing the need to center a single romantic partner.

The development of deep affective networks by participants will likely allow them to avoid falling into the anti-social family, as discussed by Weeks (2023). Participants imagined a range of possible futures but all incorporated strong and deep friendships that existed simultaneously to or in the absence of a romantic partnership. Participants' expectations of their futures adhere to the theoretical paradigm of queering intimacy as they avoid solely centring a single romantic partner, allowing for the maintenance of a network of diverse relationships. Participants expected that structuring their lives around an affective network

instead of a partner would allow them to access community support in raising children - a job that is allocated solely to the mother in the anti-social family (Weeks, 2023) - and maintain the platonic relationships that are important to them rather than allowing them to diminish in quality as they move into middle age. Because participants largely understood that developing a traditional family results in a decline in friendships, they are purposefully choosing to reject the expectation that they develop one, instead choosing to practice queering intimacy and aim to maintain their diverse affective network throughout the life course.

Despite these contributions to understanding how queering intimacy is enacted, this research has several limitations. The demographic similarity of participants likely influenced how this group is practicing queering intimacy. As this sample is highly educated, largely in the social sciences, this has likely shaped how they engage with deconstructing relationship norms and expectations. For example, participants' accounts drew on their knowledge regarding how institutions surrounding the family reinforce heteropatriarchy. The general population is likely less familiar with these perspectives. Furthermore, this research is situated in a Western context, with a sample drawing on Western social norms. Hence, cultural differences in relationship practices were not able to be considered. Future research should explore how queering intimacy exists in a variety of cultural contexts, as religious and ethnic differences will likely influence how diverse groups experience and understand affective practices. Moreover, the age range of my sample meant that future kinship structures were assessed solely by the goals of participants rather than active practices. Future research should also consider exploring how practices of queering intimacy change throughout the life course and identify the barriers people face in furthering these practices within a mononormative social context that only allocates structural protections to the monogamous romantic partner.

CONCLUSION

This research ultimately identifies that participants deliberately disrupt the relationship hierarchy by allowing boundaries to blur between relationship spheres, deconstructing the inherent importance ascribed to romantic relationships by equalizing love forms and emphasizing the desire to foster a wide range of affective practices as they move through the life course. This newfound understanding of how queering intimacy is actively practiced offers legitimacy to the existing theoretical paradigm as these results demonstrate how queering intimacy can lead to a wide breadth of deep and fulfilling relationships. This contrasts with and disrupts mononormative ideologies that frame the monogamous romantic partner as the only legitimate route to happiness and well-being. Queering intimacy through equalizing and blurring relationship spheres enables the development of affective networks that are significantly more fulfilling than the traditional nuclear family which is associated with social isolation. Through the development of queer intimate friendships, participants unseat the romantic partner as the ideological epitome of fulfilment. This is critical to disrupting patriarchal kinship structures as the decentring of the romantic partner disrupts the foundation of the nuclear family. By allowing for flexibility in and equalizing various forms of relationships, participants actively practiced queering intimacy in ways that disrupted the relationship hierarchy and allowed for intimate friendships to be fostered in both the presence and absence of a romantic partner.

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