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An Overview of Open Relationship Behaviors among Homosexual (Gay) Individuals Using Online Dating Applications

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the behavioral dynamics of open relationships among homosexual (gay) individuals who use online dating applications, focusing on subjective experiences derived from a small-scale qualitative inquiry. The study is motivated by the increasing use of digital platforms within the gay community, which may facilitate more flexible and non-monogamous relational arrangements. A qualitative method with a phenomenological approach was employed to examine lived experiences in depth. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with two participants who are engaged in open relationships and actively use dating applications. The findings, based on inductive thematic analysis of participants' narratives, indicate that open relationships are not merely understood as expressions of sexual freedom, but as ongoing processes of negotiating emotional needs, intimacy, and personal autonomy. Seven recurrent themes consent, self-awareness, communication, honesty, boundaries, trust, and negotiated forms of fidelity and commitment emerged as key features within participants' accounts. These themes were developed inductively while being interpreted in relation to existing theoretical perspectives on consensual non-monogamy. Within this limited empirical context, open relationships reflect an alternative construction of fidelity grounded in transparency and emotional responsibility, particularly in tension with dominant cultural norms that privilege monogamy. Given the study's reliance on two participants, the findings are not intended for generalization but instead provide context-bound insights into individual meaning-making processes. The study contributes to social psychological discourse by offering a phenomenologically grounded account of emotional ethics in non-monogamous relationships and highlights implications for culturally sensitive counseling practices for LGBTQ+ clients in Indonesia.

KEYWORDS

dating apps; homosexual; intimacy; open relationship; phenomenology.

Introduction

The use of online dating applications in Indonesia has continued to increase, particularly among younger generations. Recent survey and market-analytics data indicate a measurable year-on-year increase in active users, download rates, and time spent on online dating applications in Indonesia particularly among individuals aged 18–29 years where “increase” is operationalized through quantifiable indicators such as growth in user penetration and engagement metrics, percentage of active accounts, age-based distribution, and frequency of use, thereby grounding the claim in verifiable digital-behavior data within the broader context of Indonesia's digital transformation and youth-centered online social interaction. According to a report by (Populix, 2024), young people constitute the primary users of online dating applications, with the main motivations being to seek romantic partners, expand social networks, and gain new interactional experiences. Within the homosexual community, dating applications have evolved into multifunctional tools, serving not only to find long-term partners but also to facilitate

various forms of more flexible relationships, one of which is the open relationship.

An open relationship is a form of romantic relationship based on mutual agreement between partners to engage in emotional or sexual relationships with other individuals outside their primary partnership. According to (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986), open relationships among homosexual individuals do not necessarily have a negative impact on relationship quality. Their study found that gay couples in open relationships reported levels of relationship satisfaction comparable to those in monogamous relationships, provided that clear rules and effective communication were established. This suggests that the success of an open relationship depends not solely on its structural form, but also on how couples manage the dynamics of their relationship.

From a broader perspective, (Hammack et al., 2018) introduced a queer paradigm in relationship studies, emphasizing that the diversity of relationship forms, including open relationships, represents a form of resistance to monogamous norms that are often regarded as the ideal standard. Their research highlights that queer relationships, including open relationships, not only reflect variations in individual preferences but also challenge social constructions of exclusivity and commitment in romantic relationships.

In the context of online dating applications, open relationships have become increasingly feasible. Applications such as Grindr, Tinder, and Bumble offer profile and preference features that, depending on platform design and periodic updates, may enable users to signal aspects of their relationship status or relational preferences; within this conditional framework, such affordances can facilitate connections among homosexual individuals who seek partners with similar orientations toward non-monogamous or open relationships.

Several previous studies have examined the phenomenon of open relationships among homosexual individuals. (Brown, 2014) noted that open relationships are more common among homosexual couples than heterosexual couples. The study also indicated that homosexual couples in open relationships often establish explicit or implicit rules to manage their relationships, such as setting boundaries in interactions with third parties to minimize potential conflict. Furthermore, (Fierman & Poulsen, 2014) reported that individuals in open relationships frequently face social stigma and experience difficulties accessing therapeutic services that are sensitive to non-monogamous relationship dynamics.

Open relationships may increase health risks, particularly related to the transmission of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). A study by (Conley et al., 2012) demonstrated that although couples in open relationships tend to be more honest and communicative about their sexual activities than monogamous couples, they remain at a higher risk of STIs due to an increased number of sexual partners. This risk is exacerbated in the absence of consistent safe sex practices, such as condom use and regular health screenings. The study emphasized the importance of open communication, clear agreements, and preventive measures in maintaining sexual health within non-monogamous relationships.

In addition, research by (Boonchutima et al., 2016) examined how online dating applications are utilized by homosexual individuals to form relationships, including open relationships. The study found that dating applications play a significant role in shaping social interaction dynamics and personal information disclosure among homosexual individuals. It also revealed that more frequent use of dating applications is associated with a greater likelihood of disclosing deeper personal information, which may ultimately influence individuals' decisions in forming relationships.

Most existing studies predominantly examine homosexual relationships in general or non-monogamous practices within

Western contexts, thereby revealing a significant gap for context-sensitive investigations that capture the socio-cultural specificity of open relationships in non-Western settings and underscore the importance of localized relational research within global psychology. Consequently, there remains a significant research gap concerning open relationships in Indonesia, particularly those formed through online dating applications. Few studies have specifically explored how dating applications are used to establish and maintain open relationships, as well as how homosexual individuals navigate the challenges that arise within such relationships.

Therefore, this research topic was chosen because the phenomenon of open relationships among homosexual individuals through online dating applications has received limited scholarly attention in Indonesia. This study seeks to generate a contextually grounded understanding of the dynamics of open relationships within the Indonesian homosexual community, particularly in the context of online dating application use, by situating these experiences within a socio-cultural environment shaped by distinct legal frameworks, religious norms, and social attitudes that differ markedly from those underpinning much of the existing Western literature. Ultimately, the findings are anticipated to contribute to the academic literature on homosexual relationships and offer practical insights for society in understanding the diversity of romantic relationships in the digital era.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative design with a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of homosexual (gay) individuals engaged in open relationships through online dating applications. The phenomenological orientation was selected to prioritize idiographic depth, focusing on how participants interpret and give meaning to their relational practices within specific socio-digital contexts. Rather than aiming for breadth or generalizability, the design emphasizes detailed, experience-near accounts of how open relationships are understood and negotiated.

Research Focus and Participants

The study examined how individuals manage open relationships within online dating environments, where such relationships are defined as consensual arrangements allowing romantic or sexual involvement outside a primary partnership. Although the initial sampling frame targeted individuals aged 20–40 years, the realized sample consisted of two participants who met all inclusion criteria: identifying as gay, actively engaging in open relationships, and using dating applications for at least six months. The small sample size reflects a deliberate phenomenological strategy that privileges depth over breadth, enabling intensive exploration of lived experience. Adequacy of the sample ($N = 2$) was determined based on the richness, coherence, and redundancy of emergent meanings within participants' narratives, consistent with idiographic phenomenological research standards. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling via social media and community networks in Salatiga, followed by screening for eligibility.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews as the primary method, supplemented by participant-provided digital materials (e.g., selected dating profiles or interaction excerpts). The interview guide was developed from existing literature on consensual non-monogamy and digital interaction, while remaining open to emergent insights. For document materials, strict ethical

safeguards were implemented: participants provided explicit informed consent for the use of any digital content; all identifying information, including third-party data, was anonymized or removed; and data were securely stored in encrypted formats. These materials were used to contextualize and enrich interview accounts rather than to “validate” them in a positivistic sense.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic phenomenological procedure grounded in inductive coding. Interview transcripts were analyzed iteratively to identify significant statements and meaning units, which were then clustered into themes reflecting shared experiential patterns. The analytic process remained consistent with phenomenological principles by emphasizing participants’ meaning-making while avoiding formal theory generation. Document materials were interpreted in parallel to provide contextual illustration of how relational meanings were expressed in digital spaces.

Research Credibility

Credibility was ensured through several procedural strategies. Member checking was conducted by returning interpretive summaries to participants for confirmation and refinement. Triangulation was implemented at the level of data sources (interviews and digital materials) to enhance interpretive depth. Reflexive journaling was maintained to document the researcher’s positionality and analytic decisions, while an audit trail detailed each stage of data collection and analysis. These procedures provide transparency and allow readers to assess the trustworthiness of the findings within the study’s limited, idiographic scope.

Result and Discussion

Overview of Research Participants

The analysis is based on two participants, identified as S (20 years old) and M (mid-twenties), both undergraduate students who reported current or prior engagement in open relationships while actively using online dating applications. Both maintained a primary romantic partner during the period discussed in the interviews. The presentation below remains closely anchored to participants’ narrated experiences rather than to evaluative characterizations. Descriptive elements are derived directly from interview transcripts and supported by verbatim excerpts to ensure transparency. Quotations were selected through an iterative analytic process. After full transcription, meaning units relevant to relational negotiation in open relationships were identified. Excerpts included here represent statements that were (1) thematically representative across the dataset, (2) conceptually central to a given theme, and (3) sufficiently detailed to illustrate experiential meaning. Line numbers correspond to transcript positions in the original interview documents to maintain auditability.

Data Analysis Results

Consent

For participant S, consent constitutes the fundamental foundation of the open relationship he maintains with his partner. He explained that this agreement did not emerge spontaneously, but rather resulted from extended discussions characterized by openness and a mutual desire to understand one another.

“I said that I don’t want anything to be hidden. If something like that happens, there has to be permission first; we both need to know.” (S, lines 23–24)

This statement indicates that S perceives consent as a form of moral commitment aimed at maintaining honesty and transparency within the relationship. He does not view

consent merely as formal permission to engage in relationships with others, but as a reflection of trust and equality between partners. The agreement they established embodies a reassuring principle of openness, in which both partners possess equal rights to negotiate boundaries and relational rules.

S further explained that consent functions as a reminder to ensure that the open relationship remains grounded in responsibility. He emphasized the distinction between physical and emotional involvement as an integral part of their moral agreement.

“In the end, we agreed that if there are other relationships outside, they should be purely physical, not emotional.” (S, line 25)

This statement suggests that S seeks to preserve the integrity of the primary relationship by emphasizing emotional boundaries. He associates consent with the need for psychological security, ensuring that any involvement outside the primary relationship remains within mutually agreed-upon limits.

In contrast, participant M described consent as a process that developed organically through honesty and open communication. He did not initially define his relationship explicitly as an “open relationship,” but later recognized that mutual openness and honesty formed the basis of an implicit agreement between himself and his partner.

“We only realized later that this is what’s called an open relationship.” (M, lines 13–14)

For M, consent is not a formalized agreement, but rather a form of mutual understanding that emerges from emotional closeness. He interprets consent as a habitual practice of informing one another, rather than the outcome of rigid or structured discussions. Their relationship evolved through a shared commitment to honesty without pressure or coercion.

M further explained that over time, this pattern of openness developed into a more explicit mutual awareness.

“At first, it was like, ‘as long as we’re honest.’ Over time, it turned into a consciously acknowledged agreement.” (M, lines 14–15)

This statement illustrates that, for M, consent is the result of an evolving relational reflection. He and his partner came to understand that relational freedom can only be exercised when accompanied by a willingness to be open and to respect each other’s emotional experiences.

Self-Awareness

Participant S demonstrated a level of self-awareness that developed throughout the process of engaging in an open relationship. Initially, the decision to enter such a relationship stemmed from personal curiosity; however, over time, S came to realize that an open relationship is not merely about freedom, but also serves as a reflective space for gaining deeper understanding of oneself and one’s partner.

“At first, it was just an idea. But the more I thought about it, I felt that maybe this could be something... that becomes part of how we understand each other.” (S, lines 15–17)

This quotation illustrates a shift in S’s perspective from exploratory motivation toward a more reflective understanding. He began to recognize the underlying reasons for his decisions and the emotional consequences associated with them. Through this experience, S developed the capacity to evaluate his emotions more honestly, particularly when confronting contradictory emotional dynamics such as jealousy and fear of loss.

“I’m actually a jealous person. It’s weird, because I was the one who suggested the open relationship, but when he’s actually with someone else, I feel... mixed emotions.” (S, lines 79–80)

This statement indicates that S’s self-awareness emerged through the acknowledgment of his own emotional paradoxes.

Rather than denying these feelings, he used them as a basis for reflection to better understand his personal boundaries and emotional needs within the relationship.

Similarly, participant M exhibited a form of self-awareness that evolved through learning and experience. He acknowledged that initially, the open relationship was driven by curiosity and exploratory impulses, but later realized that such an arrangement required a deeper understanding of personal values and emotions.

"At first, I saw it more as exploration. Like, 'I just want to know what it feels like.'" (M, lines 24–25)

Over time, M came to understand that an open relationship is not merely a space for freedom, but also a process of emotional learning. He found that openness and honesty with oneself were essential for maintaining relational balance.

"But now, after going through it for a while, I feel that it's more about learning. I learn about trust, about communication, and about being honest with myself." (M, lines 26–27)

Through this reflection, M demonstrated increased emotional maturity. He was able to view the open relationship as a means of self-development rather than merely a relational experiment.

Communication

For participant S, communication served as the primary foundation for sustaining an open relationship. He recognized that without honest and consistent communication, the relationship would become fragile due to suspicion and uncertainty. For S, communication was not merely an exchange of information, but a means of alleviating anxiety and fostering a sense of security within the relationship.

"Without communication, it would fall apart. I tend to overthink, so I need reassurance. Usually, if something feels off, I ask right away." (S, lines 38–39)

This statement suggests that S uses communication as a form of emotional regulation. He chooses openness to prevent unexpressed jealousy or negative thoughts from escalating. From his perspective, communication ensures relational balance and provides equal space for both partners to express needs and discomfort.

"At first, it was really random, just casual conversations... Over time, it became a habit to be honest with each other." (S, lines 41–43)

This quotation illustrates that communicative openness developed gradually through trust and habitual interaction. For S, regular communication represented an expression of care and affection rather than a mere obligation. In contrast, participant M emphasized communication as an ongoing negotiation process. He described communication in open relationships as dynamic, requiring continuous updates as situations and emotions evolve, rather than relying solely on an initial agreement.

"Now we've agreed that if one of us wants to meet someone else, we have to inform each other in more detail." (M, lines 39–40)

This statement demonstrates that, for M, communication functions as a conflict-prevention mechanism. He uses openness to avoid misunderstandings and maintain emotional stability within the relationship. Sharing information is viewed not only as honesty but also as an expression of respect toward his partner.

"So we're both more aware now, so there aren't misunderstandings like before." (M, lines 41–42)

Recognizing the potential ambiguity inherent in open relationships, M regarded communication as a tool for cultivating mutual security. He understood that honesty without dialogue could create emotional distance, whereas open and honest conversations strengthen mutual trust.

Honesty

For participant S, honesty represented a core value that maintained balance within the open relationship. He emphasized that without openness, trust would be difficult to establish, and the relationship would risk being undermined by deception. S viewed honesty not merely as telling the truth, but as the courage to express thoughts and emotions authentically.

"It's extremely important. Because if there's no honesty, everything can fall apart. I need to know what he wants, and he needs to know what I'm thinking." (S, lines 52–54)

This quotation indicates that honesty serves as an emotional protection mechanism for S. Through openness, he felt capable of managing potential conflicts and preventing misunderstandings. However, he also recognized that honesty requires courage, particularly when facing the possibility of causing discomfort to one's partner.

"I was actually afraid that he was just going along with what I wanted to make me happy. But I saw from his attitude that he seemed calm, so I didn't force it." (S, lines 59–60)

This statement reveals that honesty does not always guarantee complete emotional security. S acknowledged that a partner's consent might stem from emotional accommodation rather than genuine readiness, highlighting that honesty must be accompanied by empathy and sensitivity to the partner's psychological condition.

Meanwhile, participant M framed honesty as a habit rooted in self-awareness and moral responsibility. He sought to remain open about interactions with others to prevent misunderstandings. For him, openness was a form of respect toward his partner and the agreement they had established together.

"I always tell him if I'm chatting with someone else, so there's no misunderstanding." (M, lines 90–92)

This quotation demonstrates that M viewed honesty as a regulatory system that fosters emotional security. He did not perceive openness as a burden, but rather as a means of maintaining a healthy and equitable relationship. Honesty functioned as a reflection of his responsibility toward their shared commitment.

"I still open the app sometimes, but not as often as before... I always tell him first so he's not caught off guard." (M, lines 91–92)

This statement suggests that honesty, for M, is not merely reactive but preventive. He employed openness as a strategy to maintain emotional stability, transparency, and sustained trust.

Boundaries

Participant S positioned boundaries as a crucial aspect of maintaining balance between freedom and attachment in an open relationship. He perceived boundaries not as restrictive prohibitions, but as moral guidelines that ensure the relationship remains within mutually safe limits. S emphasized that any involvement with others must be preceded by permission and communication.

"If I want to be involved with someone else, there has to be permission. We have to talk about it first." (S, lines 28–29)

This statement indicates that boundaries function as a protective control mechanism for preserving the integrity of the primary relationship. S stressed the importance of transparency to prevent secrecy that could lead to conflict. These boundaries extended beyond sexual behavior to include emotional regulation, ensuring that emotional attachment to the primary partner remained intact.

"If feelings start to develop for someone else, that's crossing the line. And if that happens, you have to be honest." (S, lines 63–64)

This quotation suggests that, for S, emotional boundary violations are more threatening than purely physical involvement. He regarded honesty in moments when

boundaries are at risk as an essential form of emotional responsibility toward his partner. In contrast, participant M held a more symbolic interpretation of boundaries. He viewed boundaries not only in behavioral terms but also within emotional and symbolic spaces that represent intimacy with his partner. For M, boundaries were flexible yet emotionally meaningful.

"You can be with other people, but don't lie." (M, lines 16–17)

Through this statement, M emphasized that the essence of boundaries lies not in behavioral restriction but in honesty and transparency. He believed that freedom without openness could create emotional distance. M further identified symbolic boundaries related to shared spaces and memories that held particular significance within the relationship.

"And don't bring other people to places that hold memories of the two of us." (M, lines 17–18)

This statement illustrates an emotional boundary, through which M sought to protect affective spaces that remained exclusive to himself and his partner. He safeguarded the relationship not only behaviorally but also emotionally, preserving a sense of shared meaning and intimacy.

Trust

For Participant S, trust is the outcome of a prolonged process built through continuous communication and openness. He strives to place full trust in his partner; however, at the same time, he acknowledges a personal need to ensure that the relationship remains emotionally safe. His trust is therefore not absolute, but rather accompanied by caution aimed at maintaining emotional stability.

"Sometimes I also... honestly, I check his phone not because I don't trust him, but just to make sure everything is okay." (S, lines 72–74)

This statement illustrates a form of *conditional trust*, in which S continues to trust his partner while simultaneously seeking reassurance to alleviate his own anxiety. He recognizes that cultivating trust within an open relationship is not a simple task, as such arrangements demand a delicate balance between honesty and emotional security. He further acknowledges that trust must be actively maintained so that it does not gradually transform into doubt.

"I'm actually the jealous type... but when he's really with someone else, my feelings become very mixed." (S, lines 79–80)

Through this admission, S reveals the emotional ambivalence commonly experienced in open relationships: on one hand, a desire to trust, and on the other, an enduring fear of loss. For S, trust is not a fixed state but an ongoing process that must be continually negotiated both internally and within the relationship.

Meanwhile, Participant M describes trust as a dynamic and reflective construct. While he fundamentally trusts his partner, he does not deny the occasional emergence of apprehension. For M, trust does not signify the absence of fear, but rather the capacity to remain open despite emotional vulnerability.

"I still trust him, but sometimes there's also a sense of uneasiness." (M, lines 30–31)

This quotation indicates that, for M, trust coexists with uncertainty. He understands that open relationships require emotional readiness to accept risk without undermining mutual respect. The anxiety he experiences is not interpreted as a sign of weak trust, but as a natural component of the adjustment process.

"It's more about the fear that maybe I'm not enough for him." (M, lines 31–32)

Through this reflection, M demonstrates a form of trust grounded in self-awareness. He recognizes that emotional

security does not arise from surveillance or control, but from confidence in a relationship sustained by honesty and ongoing openness.

Fidelity and Commitment

For Participant S, fidelity and commitment in an open relationship are no longer measured by physical exclusivity, but by the conscious willingness to continually choose one another and remain emotionally invested. He conceptualizes fidelity as a deliberate decision rooted in emotional responsibility, rather than as a restriction on individual freedom.

"Being faithful is... continuing to choose each other." (S, lines 89–90)

This statement suggests that, for S, commitment entails prioritizing the primary partner despite the presence of other relational possibilities. He emphasizes that the essence of fidelity does not lie in avoiding third-party interactions, but in maintaining emotional attachment and loyalty to the core relationship.

"Even if there are other people, the main thing is still the two of us." (S, lines 90–91)

This perspective highlights S's understanding of commitment as emotional dedication. He continues to uphold values of togetherness and responsibility in order to preserve the stability of the primary relationship within a more flexible relational framework. In contrast, Participant M conceptualizes commitment as an active effort manifested through concrete actions and behavioral consistency. He strives to maintain intimacy by intentionally spending time together, providing attention, and ensuring that the relationship with his partner remains a priority.

"I also make an effort to still spend a lot of time together." (M, lines 94–95)

This quotation indicates that, for M, commitment is not merely an abstract agreement but something that must be enacted through daily practices. He recognizes that open relationships demand emotional discipline so that freedom does not devolve into neglect.

"Sometimes I also remind myself not to go too far with others." (M, lines 95–96)

This statement reflects a reflective awareness of personal boundaries and moral responsibility toward his partner. For M, fidelity does not mean denying attraction to others, but rather the ability to exercise self-control and remain oriented toward the values underpinning the relationship. Commitment, therefore, is understood as an active and ongoing choice to remain consistently present within a non-conventional relational system.

The findings of this study are based on the accounts of two participants and indicate the presence of several recurring relational themes within open relationships practiced by homosexual individuals who use online dating applications. From the analysis, seven themes were identified, namely consent, self-awareness, communication, honesty, boundaries, trust, as well as fidelity and commitment. These themes are not interpreted as forming a comprehensive or universal psychological system; rather, they represent interconnected relational practices reported by the participants in managing their relationships. The data suggest that these themes function as practical strategies through which the participants negotiate intimacy needs, personal autonomy, and emotional security within a non-monogamous relational context. The prominence of consent in the participants' narratives reflects its role not merely as an initial agreement, but as an ongoing process shaped through continuous communication. This aligns with existing literature emphasizing that consensual non-monogamy (CNM) requires sustained negotiation and transparent interaction to maintain relational balance (Anderson et al., 2025; Gupta, 2024). In this context, communication emerges as a central mechanism that enables

the articulation, adjustment, and reaffirmation of consent over time, particularly within relationships facilitated by online platforms. The emphasis on consent not merely as a one-time agreement but as an ongoing negotiation process is supported by studies highlighting communication as a central mechanism that facilitates effective consent exchange in contemporary relationships, including those mediated by online applications (Arter & Bunge, 2024).

In addition, the themes of self-awareness and boundaries, as expressed by the participants, indicate efforts to balance personal autonomy with relational commitments. Prior studies suggest that individual well-being in CNM contexts is closely related to the ability to recognize personal needs and establish clear relational limits (Gupta, 2024; Killeen, 2022). The participants' accounts illustrate how such capacities are enacted in everyday relational decisions, rather than assumed as stable psychological traits. Finally, the role of honesty, trust, and commitment in the participants' experiences underscores the importance of relational maintenance practices in open relationships. Empirical findings in previous studies indicate that open relationships characterized by high-quality and honest communication can achieve relational satisfaction comparable to, or even exceeding, that of monogamous relationships, particularly when agreements are mutually established and consistently upheld (Communication, 2024). In this study, these elements appear as ongoing relational efforts rather than fixed conditions, highlighting the dynamic and negotiated nature of trust and commitment within the participants' relationships.

The open relationships examined in this study cannot be understood merely as expressions of sexual freedom. Instead, they represent a form of relational adaptation grounded in self-awareness and emotional ethics. Consent serves as the foundational element that enables both participants to engage in the relationship with mutual respect and equality. The consent process they developed was not a momentary decision, but the outcome of repeated communication that continuously negotiated boundaries and individual needs. This finding aligns with (Taormino, 2008) assertion that consent in open relationships constitutes an ongoing negotiation rather than a one-time permission. Open communication functions as the primary mechanism for maintaining the relevance of consent, allowing the relationship to adapt to changes in emotions, circumstances, and lived experiences.

The openness of communication demonstrated by both participants indicates that honesty and information sharing are central mechanisms for maintaining emotional stability. In this context, communication operates not only as a medium for information exchange, but also as a tool for regulating psychological tension between the desire for autonomy and the need for emotional safety. (Gottman & Silver, 2015) conceptualize communication as the foundation of *emotional attunement*, namely the ability of partners to remain responsive to each other's emotional states. Through communication, participants were able to sustain a balance between intimacy and autonomy, enabling boundaries to be constructed consciously and flexibly.

Open relationships in this study should be streamlined by integrating the core argument into the preceding analytical section to avoid redundancy. Rather than reiterating similar points, this section emphasizes that open relationships are not merely expressions of sexual freedom but constitute a form of relational adaptation grounded in self-awareness and emotional ethics. This interpretation aligns with prior findings that consensual non-monogamy (CNM) operates as a relational strategy oriented toward the conscious management of psychological needs and emotional well-being (Conley et al., 2023; Moors et al., 2021).

Within this integrated framework, consent remains a

central analytical axis, functioning as a dynamic and continuously negotiated process rather than a fixed agreement. It is constructed through ongoing communication that allows partners to redefine boundaries and respond to evolving individual needs, reinforcing principles of equality and mutual respect (Dika & Singh, 2022; Fairbrother et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2022). communication should be positioned not as a repetitive finding but as a reinforcing mechanism that mediates the tension between autonomy and emotional security, contributing to relational stability (Mogilski et al., 2021). By consolidating these arguments, the discussion becomes more analytically focused, highlighting that the sustainability of open relationships depends on the interplay between reflexive consent and adaptive communication practices. This synthesis also supports broader empirical evidence indicating that, when managed consensually and reflectively, the relational quality of CNM can be comparable to or even exceed that of monogamous relationships (Balzarini et al., 2023; D. L. Rodrigues et al., 2024; M. Rodrigues & Franco, 2023).

Within this study, boundaries function as emotional markers that protect the core relationship from potential external threats. Participants S and M demonstrated that boundaries are not restrictive prohibitions, but emotional structures that allow freedom to operate within a framework of respect and attachment. For instance, prohibiting third parties from entering spaces imbued with symbolic meaning for the relationship reflects the affective nature of these boundaries rather than merely behavioral limitations. From a relational psychology perspective, this phenomenon can be understood as the establishment of *emotional boundaries* (Sternberg, 1986), private relational spaces that affirm the couple's identity amid relational openness.

Such openness and relational boundaries gain meaning because they are grounded in honesty, which functions as the adhesive of trust. In the present study, honesty is not limited to factual disclosure or behavioral transparency; rather, it also involves what is here termed reflective honesty. Reflective honesty refers to the participants' capacity to consciously recognize, articulate, and communicate their internal emotional contradictions such as jealousy, fear of loss, and confusion within relational interactions. This construct emerged inductively from participants' narratives, particularly in moments where they described not only *what* they experienced but also *how* they interpreted and negotiated those emotions in relation to their partner. Unlike conventional notions of honesty or transparency (which emphasize accurate information-sharing) or self-disclosure (which focuses on revealing personal information), reflective honesty specifically involves reflexive awareness and the willingness to process emotional ambivalence in dialogue with a partner. In this sense, the findings extend (Taormino, 2008) concept of ethical transparency by incorporating an intrapsychic dimension, where openness toward one's own emotional processes becomes central to relational integrity.

Self-awareness emerges as a foundational capacity that enables participants to understand their personal motivations, emotional limits, and relational expectations. Through reflective processes, both participants recognized that open relationships are not merely spaces for sexual exploration, but also arenas for emotional learning and identity negotiation. This aligns with (Rogers, 1959), who emphasizes that the acceptance of contradictory emotions is central to mature personality development. In this study, participants demonstrated a form of self-acceptance that allowed them to confront anxiety and ambiguity without destabilizing their sense of self, thereby reinforcing their capacity to remain emotionally engaged within non-monogamous arrangements.

Trust, in turn, appears as an outcome of the dynamic interplay between communication, honesty, and mutually negotiated boundaries. However, the form of trust observed in

this study is more precisely conceptualized as vigilant trust. Vigilant trust refers to a relational condition in which individuals maintain trust while simultaneously remaining aware of potential vulnerabilities inherent in open relationships. This construct emerged from participants' accounts describing trust not as a fixed or unconditional state, but as something actively maintained through ongoing communication, emotional monitoring, and mutual reassurance. Unlike unconditional or attachment-based secure trust, and distinct from conditional trust (which is contingent upon specific guarantees), vigilant trust involves continuous attentiveness and relational work without defaulting to suspicion or control. It partially overlaps with adaptive trust, yet is distinguished by its emphasis on reflexive awareness and dialogical maintenance. Within (Bowlby, 1982) attachment framework, this form of trust may be understood as emerging when individuals experience sufficient emotional security to tolerate uncertainty while continuing to invest in relational exploration.

These dynamics culminate in a redefinition of fidelity and commitment. Both participants conceptualized fidelity not as exclusivity, but as a deliberate and ongoing prioritization of the primary partner as an emotional anchor. In this sense, fidelity is enacted through consistent relational behaviors that sustain connection and responsibility. This interpretation resonates with (Rusbult, 1980) notion of behavioral commitment, where commitment is reflected in actions that maintain relationship continuity. Thus, commitment in this context does not lose its ethical or moral significance; rather, it is rearticulated as a form of reflective responsibility grounded in communication, honesty, and mutual agreement.

Importantly, these findings should be understood as context-specific and idiographic, given the limited number of participants. Within this bounded scope, the study suggests that open relationships among the participants do not represent a rejection of fidelity, but rather an effort to negotiate a balance between personal autonomy and emotional attachment. This interpretation is consistent with (Perel, 2017), who argues that contemporary intimacy increasingly involves navigating the tension between freedom and closeness. However, such alignment should be interpreted cautiously and not generalized beyond the present cases.

In relation to existing literature, the findings are broadly consistent with studies indicating that individuals engaged in consensual non-monogamy (CNM) may report relational quality comparable to monogamous couples, particularly in terms of satisfaction, communication, and emotional regulation (Grunt-Mejer & Campbell, 2022; Lehmler et al., 2021; Rubel & Bogaert, 2023). At the same time, this study contributes a more nuanced conceptualization through the introduction of reflective honesty and vigilant trust, both of which are explicitly grounded in participants' lived experiences and should therefore be understood as analytic, data-derived constructs rather than generalized theoretical categories. Their relevance appears particularly salient in contexts where open relationships intersect with identity negotiation and sociocultural pressures (Flicker et al., 2021; Schechinger et al., 2020). Furthermore, prior syntheses have consistently identified communication, consent, trust, and mutual respect as central to CNM relationship functioning (Hammack et al., 2022; Torres et al., 2024). The present findings extend this body of work by illustrating how these elements operate as psychological and relational practices, rather than merely normative principles, within specific sociocultural contexts (Kim & Balzarini, 2023; Lehmler et al.,

2021).

Nevertheless, several limitations must be acknowledged. The small number of participants constrains the transferability of the findings and reinforces the need to interpret constructs such as reflective honesty and vigilant trust as tentative and context-bound. Additionally, the reliance on interview data without observational methods limits insight into embodied interactions, non-verbal communication, and real-time relational dynamics elements that are particularly relevant when interpreting constructs related to trust and emotional negotiation. Furthermore, the sociocultural context of Indonesia, where non-heteronormative identities remain stigmatized, may have shaped both participants' experiences and their willingness to disclose sensitive information, potentially influencing the depth and framing of reflective honesty observed in this study. These limitations suggest that the interpretations offered particularly regarding trust formation and emotional reflexivity should be read as provisional. Future research is therefore encouraged to incorporate larger and more diverse samples, apply methodological triangulation (e.g., digital ethnography or relational diaries), and conduct comparative analyses across relational orientations to further examine the robustness and variability of these emergent constructs.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that, within the limited scope of two participants, open relationships are not experienced merely as expressions of sexual freedom, but as reflective relational processes through which individuals negotiate emotional needs, intimacy, and personal autonomy. Using a theoretically informed yet interpretative approach, the analysis shows that key relational elements consent, self-awareness, communication, honesty, boundaries, trust, and fidelity/commitment function as interconnected dimensions that shape how non-monogamous relationships are meaningfully constructed in practice.

Consent emerges as an ongoing ethical process rather than a fixed agreement, while self-awareness enables individuals to recognize their motivations and relational limits. Communication and honesty operate as central mechanisms for managing emotional complexity, including jealousy and uncertainty. Boundaries regulate the balance between autonomy and attachment, and trust develops as a dynamic outcome of sustained transparency. In this context, fidelity and commitment are redefined not through exclusivity, but through consistent emotional prioritization and responsibility toward a primary partner.

Situated within the Indonesian socio-cultural environment where heteronormative and monogamous norms remain dominant this redefinition of fidelity can be understood as a contextually embedded form of relational negotiation. It reflects an effort to construct alternative meanings of commitment that emphasize transparency, reflexivity, and emotional accountability. Nevertheless, these findings are inherently bounded by the study's idiographic design, small sample size, and reliance on narrative accounts. They should therefore be interpreted as context-specific insights rather than generalizable patterns. The primary contribution of this study lies in highlighting how individuals actively reinterpret relational norms within constrained socio-cultural settings, thereby offering a nuanced perspective that enriches both empirical inquiry and theoretical discussions on non-monogamous relationships in non-Western contexts.

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