

# Love beyond boundaries: Narrative of individuals in consensual non-monogamous relationships

<sup>1</sup>Christian C. Leoparte & <sup>2</sup>Carol C. Maaliw

## Abstract

This study aimed to explore and describe the lived experiences of individuals engaged in consensual non-monogamous (CNM) relationships in Quezon Province, Philippines, focusing on how they experienced love, commitment, relational dynamics, and societal perceptions within a predominantly monogamous cultural context. Using qualitative phenomenological research design and narrative analysis, the study employed snowball sampling to recruit participants aged 20 years and above who were actively involved in CNM relationships. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Thematic Narrative Analysis guided by Consensual Non-Monogamy Theory, Queer Theory, and Intersectionality Theory. Findings revealed that participants emphasized open communication, honesty, mutual consent, and negotiated boundaries as essential elements in sustaining their relationships. Although they encountered social stigma, prejudice, and misunderstanding from family and community, they demonstrated resilience, emotional growth, self-awareness, and authenticity in navigating multiple partnerships. Participants described CNM not merely as a relational structure but as a space for empowerment and relational freedom grounded in transparency and respect. The study was limited to a small number of participants within Quezon Province and utilized snowball sampling, which may restrict generalizability; however, it contributes to the limited regional literature and offers insights for inclusive psychosocial programs and mental health support services.

**Keywords:** *polyamory, social stigma, emotional well-being, relationship dynamics*

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## About the authors:

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding author. 4<sup>th</sup> Year BS Psychology Student, College of Sciences, Technology and Communications Inc. Email: [20220242@cstc.edu.ph](mailto:20220242@cstc.edu.ph)

<sup>2</sup>4<sup>th</sup> Year BS Psychology Student, College of Sciences, Technology and Communications Inc. Email: [202205341@cstc.edu.ph](mailto:202205341@cstc.edu.ph)



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## 1. Introduction

In a society where monogamy has long been considered the standard for romantic relationships, the conceptualization of love and commitment is undergoing transformation. Traditionally, exclusive partnerships have been viewed as the foundation of stability and security. However, an increasing number of individuals are exploring relational dynamics that extend beyond conventional monogamous norms (Sinigaglia & Montali, 2026). Among these emerging forms is consensual non-monogamy (CNM), a relationship structure in which individuals engage in multiple romantic or sexual partnerships with the full knowledge and consent of everyone involved (Gupta et al., 2024; Scoats & Campbell, 2022). Despite its growing visibility, CNM remains widely misunderstood and stigmatized, particularly in contexts where mononormative beliefs dominate social and cultural expectations. Research indicates that CNM is more common than cultural stereotypes suggest, and individuals in such relationships often report levels of satisfaction, trust, and commitment comparable to those in monogamous relationships (Rodrigues, 2024; Gupta et al., 2024; Garner et al., 2019). Nevertheless, structural and interpersonal stigma including relationship devaluation, exclusion, and moral judgment, continues to affect the emotional well-being and social experiences of CNM practitioners.

Within the Philippines, and particularly in Quezon Province, literature on the lived experiences of individuals engaged in CNM remains limited. Although national and international studies have begun documenting the relational dynamics, communication practices, and stigma experienced by non-monogamous individuals, there is a significant regional gap in understanding how these experiences unfold in culturally conservative environments. Reports highlight that individuals practicing polyamory and other forms of CNM frequently encounter misunderstanding, discrimination, and limited institutional support (Klesse, 2014). Cultural norms that prioritize monogamy often intensify feelings of isolation and compel individuals to conceal their relational structures. This gap in research, especially in provinces where traditional family values remain influential, highlights the necessity of examining CNM experiences within a localized sociocultural framework.

The present study was undertaken to explore and describe the lived experiences of individuals engaged in CNM relationships in Quezon Province. Guided by Consensual Non-Monogamy Theory, Queer Theory, and Intersectionality Theory, the research seeks to understand how participants navigate relational dynamics, negotiate boundaries, construct

meaning, and confront societal stigma. Specifically, the study aims to explore how individuals in CNM relationships experience and make sense of their relational journeys, and examine how they describe love, commitment, and connection with multiple partners. By focusing on narrative accounts and phenomenological inquiry, this research contributes to the limited regional literature on CNM in the Philippines and offers insights that may inform inclusive mental health practices, community awareness initiatives, and culturally sensitive support frameworks.

## **2. Literature Review**

### ***2.1. Theoretical Framework***

This study is anchored in three complementary theoretical perspectives: Consensual Non-Monogamy (CNM) Theory, Queer Theory, and Intersectionality Theory. These frameworks provide a structured and critical lens for examining the relational dynamics and identity formation of individuals in CNM relationships, as well as the processes through which multiple-partner systems are negotiated and sustained.

CNM Theory serves as the primary foundation by emphasizing that multi-partner relationships operate through deliberate structures of communication, boundary-setting, and consent (Sheff, 2023). Rather than treating CNM as a generalized concept of “honesty,” this perspective focuses on the mechanics of relationship maintenance, including how partners negotiate time allocation, manage emotional hierarchies, establish rules regarding sexual and romantic involvement, and resolve conflicts across interconnected relationships. Empirical studies further suggest that stability in CNM relationships is actively constructed through continuous dialogue, renegotiation of agreements, and adaptive coping strategies (Uppot et al., 2024; Klesse & van Hooff, 2025).

Additionally, Queer Theory is applied in a focused manner by examining how dominant social norms position monogamy as the standard and shape the marginalization of alternative relationship structures. Within the context of this study, its relevance is grounded in how stigma, discrimination, and moral expectations are experienced in culturally conservative settings. In the Philippine context, these norms are reinforced by strong adherence to traditional values and religious influences, which shape expectations surrounding exclusivity and socially acceptable forms of relationships. Existing literature highlights that these cultural expectations influence how individuals in CNM relationships navigate

disclosure, acceptance, and social judgment (Valadez et al., 2020; Rodrigues et al., 2024). Additionally, broader discussions on non-normative relationships further support how mononormativity is socially reinforced and contested (Sinigaglia & Montali, 2026; Barros & Doyle, 2025; Ferrer, 2018).

Moreover, Intersectionality Theory further deepens the analysis by recognizing that experiences in CNM are not uniform but shaped by overlapping identities such as gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic status (Rodrigues, 2024). Supporting literature within the study also suggests that these intersecting factors influence individuals' access to support systems, exposure to stigma, and capacity to manage relational dynamics (Killeen, 2022). This highlights that CNM experiences vary depending on one's social positioning rather than representing a singular or universal narrative. Guided by these theoretical perspectives, the study examines how individuals in consensual non-monogamous relationships construct meaning, manage relational dynamics, and respond to societal pressures, providing a comprehensive understanding of diverse relationship experiences.

## ***2.2. Consensual Non-Monogamous Relationships***

CNM refers to an umbrella of relationship structures in which individuals engage in multiple romantic or sexual partnerships with the full knowledge and consent of all involved parties (Morar-Bolba et al., 2025). Unlike infidelity, CNM is grounded in explicit agreements and negotiated relational boundaries. It encompasses various forms such as polyamory, open relationships, swinging, and relationship anarchy, each differing in structure, expectations, and levels of emotional and sexual involvement (Conley et al., 2021; Moors et al., 2025). More specifically, polyamory involves multiple emotionally significant relationships, open relationships typically maintain a primary emotional bond while allowing external sexual connections. On the other hand, swinging focuses on consensual sexual activities often within social contexts, and relationship anarchy rejects fixed relational hierarchies in favor of individually negotiated connections. These distinctions highlight that CNM is not a singular relational model but a range of practices through which individuals organize intimacy, commitment, and connection.

Within these arrangements, key relational constructs such as trust, commitment, and emotional connection are not assumed to operate through exclusivity but are established through negotiated agreements, communication, and shared expectations among partners.

Rather than representing a uniform experience, CNM involves distinct relational processes through which individuals manage multiple partnerships. These include the negotiation of boundaries, coordination of time and emotional investment, and the establishment of mutually agreed rules regarding involvement with other partners.

Empirical findings suggest that individuals in CNM relationships report levels of satisfaction, trust, and commitment comparable to those in monogamous partnerships; however, these outcomes are closely tied to the effectiveness of communication, clarity of agreements, and ongoing negotiation between partners (Uppot et al., 2024; Klesse & van Hooff, 2025). This indicates that relational stability is actively maintained rather than inherently given. Local studies further indicate that Filipino individuals practicing CNM often encounter misunderstanding and social judgment due to prevailing monogamous norms (Castro, 2021). In response, individuals may adopt strategies such as selective disclosure, boundary reinforcement, and careful management of relational expectations within their social environments. While CNM is described as empowering and grounded in consent, honesty, and emotional depth, these experiences are shaped by both relational dynamics and the broader social context in which they are situated.

### ***2.3. Social Stigma and Structural Challenges***

Despite increasing academic attention, individuals in CNM relationships continue to experience stigma, discrimination, and marginalization. Research indicates that they are often perceived as morally deviant or emotionally unstable due to entrenched mononormative beliefs that privilege exclusivity as the standard for intimate relationships (Fullgrabe & Smith, 2023). In the Philippine context, cultural conservatism and religious influences further intensify these perceptions, reinforcing expectations of monogamy and shaping how CNM individuals are evaluated within their social environments (Rodrigues, 2024). These social pressures influence not only public perception but also personal decisions related to disclosure, relationship management, and social participation.

Beyond interpersonal stigma, structural challenges are also evident. Existing studies show that non-monogamous unions lack formal recognition within legal and institutional systems, limiting access to rights and protections such as healthcare decision-making, inheritance, and broader social legitimacy (Anderson et al., 2025; Cardoso & Klesse, 2025). These constraints illustrate how stigma operates across multiple levels, extending from societal

attitudes to institutional practices. Furthermore, stigma has been associated with increased psychological distress and internalized prejudice among individuals engaged in CNM relationships (Gupta et al., 2023; Moors et al., 2025). However, responses to these challenges are not uniform. Individuals employ various strategies, including emotional negotiation, selective disclosure, and reliance on supportive networks, to navigate stigma and maintain relational stability. These dynamics highlight that experiences of marginalization are actively managed rather than passively experienced.

#### ***2.4. Resilience, Communication, and Emotional Regulation***

Research highlights the central role of communication and emotional regulation in sustaining CNM relationships. Transparent and ongoing discussions regarding jealousy, boundaries, and expectations contribute to relational security and trust (Rubel & Bogaert, 2022; Séguin et al., 2023). Rather than being static, these processes involve continuous negotiation, where individuals actively reassess agreements and address emerging concerns across multiple partnerships.

Emotional regulation is equally critical, particularly in managing complex responses that arise within multi-partner dynamics. Individuals engage in reflective dialogue and deliberate communication practices to maintain balance and coherence in their relationships. These processes demonstrate that relational stability in CNM is actively maintained through effort and coordination rather than assumed.

Community-building and advocacy also function as protective mechanisms against stigma (Castillo et al., 2019). Support networks provide spaces for validation, shared understanding, and the exchange of strategies for managing relational and social challenges, thereby reducing isolation. In addition, Moors et al. (2025) emphasize the importance of integrating CNM-informed perspectives into psychological practice to support inclusive and responsive mental health services.

While CNM relationships challenge traditional relational norms, they are structured around negotiated principles of consent, communication, and responsibility. These insights align with the objectives of the present study, which seeks to examine the lived experiences of individuals in Quezon Province and contribute to a more contextually grounded understanding of CNM within a culturally conservative setting.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design utilizing narrative analysis to explore the lived experiences of individuals engaged in CNM relationships in Quezon Province. Specifically, the design focused on understanding and interpreting how participants make meaning of their relational choices, emotional experiences, relationship dynamics, and societal perceptions. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, a participant-centered and trauma-informed approach guided all stages of the research to ensure psychological safety and ethical rigor.

#### 3.2. Participants of the Study

The study involved four (4) participants aged 20 years and above who are actively engaged in CNM relationships and are willing to share their lived experiences. A snowball sampling technique was utilized to reach participants from a relatively private and less visible population.

Participants were approached respectfully and without pressure. They were given sufficient time to review the study details, ask questions, and decide voluntarily on their participation. They were also informed that they were not required to label their relationships and could describe their experiences in their own terms. The sample size was deemed appropriate for a phenomenological study, allowing in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives, meanings, and emotional experiences.

**Table 1**

*Profile summary of individuals in consensual non-monogamous relationships*

Participant (Pseudonym)	Age	Family and Personal Background	CNM Type / Arrangement	CNM Relationship Context
KEN	26	A 26-year-old transgender individual from Lucena City. Raised in a traditional and religious household by parents from the Bicol Region. His background is rooted in Nursing, which influenced his caregiving nature.	Open relationship (partner involved with another person; negotiated openness)	Entered a relationship where the partner was involved with another person. His CNM experience focused on honesty and negotiated openness, though it eventually ended due to emotional strain and breaches of trust.

Participant (Pseudonym)	Age	Family and Personal Background	CNM Type / Arrangement	CNM Relationship Context
LAW	22	A gay individual from Tayabas City and the middle child of five siblings. Raised in a close-knit, supportive family environment that fostered confidence and strong emotional bonds despite living separately.	Open / casual non-exclusive relational structure (emotionally nurturing, no formal exclusivity)	Maintains emotionally nurturing, non-exclusive connections. He favors open and casual relational structures that provide companionship and autonomy without the guilt of secrecy or traditional exclusivity.
JOH	28	A young adult male and Psychology major from a traditional Filipino household. His early views were shaped by a family history of multiple marriages, leading him to initially value strict monogamy.	Open relationship (mutual agreement with partner)	Transitioned his first romantic partnership into an open relationship through mutual consent. He views CNM as an expression of maturity, relying on transparency and clear boundary negotiation to foster trust.
ERO	24	A male respondent raised in a conservative household primarily by his grandmother. His upbringing instilled discipline and modesty, with limited family discussions regarding love and sexuality.	Triadic relationship (involvement with a couple; emotionally open dynamic)	Experienced a triadic relational structure with a couple. What began as a friendship evolved into a mutually open dynamic of shared care and emotional transparency, eventually transitioning back into friendship.

The profiles in Table 1 demonstrate that navigating unconventional love is a journey of identity and resilience, affecting individuals across various gender identities and family backgrounds. Despite varied personal histories, ranging from traditional religious upbringings to family legacies of multiple partners, each participant manages multiple emotional connections while navigating the deep-seated mononormative expectations of their community. This suggests that relational maturity in CNM is a continuous process of balancing personal autonomy with honesty and mutual consent, regardless of the specific relationship structure or social standing.

### ***3.3. Instrumentation and Data Gathering Process***

Following participant selection, data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Prior to data collection, formal approval was obtained from the School of Psychology and Human Services, the research adviser, and the institutional research ethics and review committee. Ethical clearance was granted following the submission of a structured

protocol addressing psychological risks, including trauma-informed procedures, confidentiality safeguards, and risk management strategies.

Before each interview, participants were provided with informed consent forms, confidentiality agreements, and proof of ethical approval. The purpose, scope, and sensitive nature of the study were clearly explained, including the possibility of emotional discomfort. At this stage, it was emphasized that participation was voluntary, non-therapeutic, and that participants could control the depth of their disclosures. Written consent, including permission for audio recording, was obtained prior to participation. In addition, participants were informed of their rights, including the right to refuse any question, pause or stop the interview, and withdraw their participation or data at any time. They were allowed to choose their preferred schedule and private setting to ensure comfort and safety.

During the interview proper, a trauma-informed and non-judgmental approach was strictly observed. The researchers remained attentive to verbal and non-verbal cues and allowed participants to proceed at their own pace. Whenever signs of discomfort were observed, interviews were paused, and participants were given the option to continue or withdraw. Basic grounding techniques were applied when necessary, and in cases of distress, referrals to appropriate psychological support services were provided. A research companion was present solely for logistical support and was bound by confidentiality. After data collection, all interviews were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

### ***3.4. Data Analysis***

The study utilized Thematic Narrative Analysis. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, and identifying information was removed to ensure confidentiality. Transcripts were read multiple times to identify patterns and recurring meanings.

Coding focused on significant aspects of participants' lived experiences, including communication practices, emotional regulation, social stigma, and identity negotiation. Codes were developed inductively and interpreted using Consensual Non-Monogamy Theory, Queer Theory, and Intersectionality Theory. These were then organized into broader themes such as motivations for CNM engagement, relationship management strategies, identity construction, and societal challenges.

Themes were reviewed and refined to ensure alignment with participants' narratives. Intercoder validation and consultation with specialist informants were conducted to ensure accuracy, consistency, and credibility of the analysis. Throughout the process, ethical reflexivity was practiced to ensure that participants' narratives were represented with care, respect, and integrity.

### ***3.5. Research Ethics***

The study adhered to established ethical principles, including respect for persons, beneficence, and confidentiality. Approval was secured from the institutional research ethics and review committee prior to data collection. Prior to participation, informed consent was obtained from all participants. A structured psychological briefing was conducted to explain the study, including its sensitive nature and potential emotional risks. Participants were informed of their rights to refuse questions, pause, withdraw, and control their level of disclosure. Throughout the research process, a trauma-informed and participant-centered approach was maintained. During interviews, participants' well-being was prioritized by monitoring emotional responses and allowing breaks or withdrawal when needed. Following each interview, a structured psychological debriefing was conducted, including an emotional check-in to ensure participants were in stable condition. Referrals to professional psychological support services were provided when necessary.

In terms of data protection, confidentiality was strictly maintained through the use of pseudonyms and removal of identifying details. All data were stored in password-protected files accessible only to the researchers and will be securely deleted after the required retention period. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw their data after participation. Finally, a small, non-coercive token of appreciation was provided as a gesture of gratitude.

## **4. Findings and Discussion**

This section presents the findings of the study based on in-depth interviews exploring the lived experiences of individuals engaged in CNM relationships. It highlights their relational journeys, meaning-making processes, and the challenges and dynamics they encounter, with the aim of providing a deeper understanding of love, commitment, and connection beyond traditional monogamous structures. To ensure confidentiality and protect the identity of the participants, pseudonyms are used, and identifying details have been modified or omitted.

#### *4.1. Awakening of Curiosity and Openness Leading to Self-Discovery and Exploration*

Participants described that their journeys into CNM, understood as a range of relational structures rather than a singular experience, began with curiosity as an inner questioning that urged them to explore beyond traditional monogamous norms. This curiosity did not emerge as impulsive or purely physical, but was shaped through relational processes such as communication, trust-building, and shared emotional understanding with their partners. Within this context, participants' accounts reflect that notions of love and commitment were not confined to exclusivity but were gradually redefined through negotiated agreements and evolving relational expectations across multiple connections. This process of exploration became a foundation for self-awareness, allowing participants to engage with different forms of relationships and to interpret intimacy and connection in ways that align with their lived experiences.

**Table 2**

*Participant narratives on curiosity and openness*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Verbatim Statements</b>
ERO	<i>“and dumating sa time naaa..... dahil nga sa curiosity naming pareho., tinry namin so ang nangyari, yung una nag .. nag kiss kami yung babae so yun..” (“And then the time came... because of our shared curiosity, we tried it. So what happened was, at first we... we kissed, the girl, so that was it...”)</i>
KEN	<i>“we can explore together naman, at sabi nya life is short, we only lives once... .kaya siguro let's try to things that will spark our curiosity.” (“We can explore together anyway, and he said life is short, we only live once... so maybe let's try things that will spark our curiosity.”)</i>

Through curiosity, participants opened spaces for conversation that allowed honesty and trust to develop across their relationships. Their reflections revealed that engaging in CNM was not a random choice but a deliberate response to their desire for emotional honesty and relational growth within varied relational structures. In this process, curiosity functioned as an entry point for examining how love and commitment could be expressed through communication, negotiated agreements, and shared expectations rather than exclusivity. It became an act of awareness that guided them toward a deeper understanding of their needs and values. This observation is consistent with the findings of Moors and Matsick (2022), who

emphasized that curiosity and self-reflective dialogue often mark the initial stage of exploring CNM.

#### ***4.2. Emotional Negotiation and Boundary Communication in Sustaining Connection***

Participants emphasized that sustaining multiple relationships relies on deliberate emotional negotiation and clear boundary communication. Beyond love, they identified honesty, trust, patience, and emotional regulation as essential foundations. Open and transparent communication served as both a moral guide and practical strategy, enabling them to manage complex feelings, maintain trust, and preserve relational stability, as illustrated in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Participant narratives on sustaining connection*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Verbatim Statements</b>
KEN	<i>“For being honest for each other about things we do, sa lahat ng bagay walang secret na tinatago so is not that considered cheating... pareho kami ng perspective, pareho kami ng pananaw, pareho kami ng standing point” (“For being honest with each other about the things we do—there are no secrets being hidden—so it’s not considered cheating... we share the same perspective, the same viewpoint, the same standing point.”)</i>
LAW	<i>“Sinasabi ko sa kanya honestly... Lagi naming sinasabi sa isa’t isa na kung may dumating man na tao, mag-uusap palagi at tingnan namin kung papasok sa relationship namin... hindi kami ang magbe-break.” (“I tell him honestly... we always say to each other that if someone else comes along, we will always talk about it and see if they can fit into our relationship... we won’t be the ones to break up.”)</i>

The findings align with existing literature emphasizing that transparent communication and emotional regulation are central to sustaining connection across different forms of CNM relationships. Consistent with Rubel and Bogaert (2022), participants’ deliberate handling of jealousy and insecurity through trust, openness, and negotiated understanding contributed to greater relational satisfaction and stability. Similarly, Séguin et al. (2023) support that honest discussions of boundaries and emotions reduce jealousy and enhance relational security. These parallels reinforce that emotional negotiation and clear boundary-setting function as key mechanisms through which trust, commitment, and balance are maintained across multiple relational connections.

### 4.3. Empowerment and Authenticity through Relational Freedom

Participants experienced CNM as a pathway to self-discovery, emotional strength, and authentic connection within diverse relational structures. By prioritizing autonomy, mutual respect, and trust over exclusivity, they developed a deeper awareness of how love and commitment are expressed through negotiated agreements and shared expectations. This process enabled participants to cultivate self-awareness, empowerment, and a more grounded understanding of themselves and their relationships.

**Table 4**

*Participant narratives on relational freedom*

Participant	Verbatim Statements
LAW	<i>“Hindi naman kailangan ng label para masabing totoo ang nararamdaman. Ang mahalaga, may respeto at may katapatan.” (“There’s no need for a label to prove that what we feel is real. What matters is that there is respect and honesty.”)</i>

Based on the participant's experience, it simply shows that CNM fosters self-awareness, authenticity, and empowerment through honesty, respect, and emotional openness. Consistent with Mogilski et al. (2020), Moors et al. (2025), Rubel and Bogaert (2022), and Séguin et al. (2023), transparent communication, boundary-setting, and ethical engagement strengthen trust, relational satisfaction, and personal growth. CNM thus enables meaningful connections guided by authenticity rather than exclusivity.

### 4.4. Love as Giving and Shared Emotional Energy

Participants defined love within CNM relationships as a dynamic and renewable relational process rather than a fixed or possessive state. Instead of being confined to exclusivity, love was expressed through continuous emotional exchange, where individuals actively give, receive, and regulate emotional energy across multiple partners. This involves sustained practices of honesty, empathy, attentiveness, and boundary-setting, requiring individuals to balance emotional availability with personal limits to maintain relational stability.

It was expressed that love functions as an ongoing, negotiated process shaped by communication and ethical responsibility rather than assumption. Participants emphasized that maintaining multiple connections requires deliberate emotional awareness, where care is not

automatically given but intentionally distributed based on mutual understanding and agreed expectations. This reflects how emotional depth and connection are actively constructed through relational effort rather than inherent in the relationship structure itself.

**Table 5**

*Participant narratives on love*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Verbatim Statements</b>
LAW	<i>“Love is like a glass; it is about filling another person’s cup while making sure your own is not empty.” (“Love is like a glass; it is about filling another person’s cup while making sure your own is not empty.”)</i>
KEN	<i>“Parang baso, pag nilagyan mo ng tubig... habang nagbibigay ako, hindi ko namamalayan na ako na pala ang nauubos... kahit alam kong walang bumabalik sakin, bigay lang ako nang bigay kasi kaya ko naman i-handle ang sarili ko.” (“It’s like a glass—when you fill it with water... as I keep giving, I don’t realize that I’m already being emptied... even though I know nothing is coming back to me, I just keep giving because I can handle myself anyway.”)</i>
JOH	<i>“Parang ganun namin pinapakita yung love, yung andyan lang kami para sa isa’t isa kahit walang demand.” (“That’s how we show love—we’re just there for each other, even without any demands.”)</i>

These perspectives align with Sheff (2023), who highlights love in CNM as inclusive and grounded in trust, and Rodrigues (2024), who describe it as relational, ethical, and rooted in equality and authenticity. The findings indicate that CNM reframes love as a sustained and mindful practice of giving, one that deepens connection through continuous negotiation while recognizing both individual autonomy and shared relational responsibility.

#### ***4.5. Commitment as a Conscious Practice of Fairness and Responsibility***

Building on the participants’ understanding of love as a negotiated and shared relational process, commitment emerges as a parallel practice that sustains and organizes these connections across multiple partners. Commitment within CNM relationships was framed by participants as an ongoing and intentional relational practice grounded in fairness, responsibility, and care. Rather than being defined by exclusivity or ownership, commitment was expressed through consistent communication, emotional presence, and accountability across multiple relational connections. This required individuals to actively sustain agreements, respond to partners’ needs, and uphold reliability within a network of relationships.

**Table 6***Participant narratives on commitment*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Verbatim Statements</b>
JOH	<i>“Lagi naming pinaguusapan ...and sasabihin niya na hindi kailangan ipilit ang mga bagay bagay...magusap ng masinsinan, eventually overnight so yun hindi na namin pinapatagal yung isang away within no more than 24 hours...dapat na namin ginagawa as partners na paguusapan namin yun...ganon namin napag uusapan namin yung type of problems.” (“We always talk things through... and she says that there’s no need to force things... we have deep conversations, sometimes even overnight, so we don’t let a conflict last more than 24 hours... as partners, we make sure to discuss it... that’s how we deal with our problems.”)</i>
LAW	<i>“Commitment yung ano yung pagtupad sa mga bagay na napagkasunduan...kailangan pa rin ng respeto sa oras at sa usapan. Doon namin nararamdaman na may tiwala.” (“Commitment is fulfilling the things we’ve agreed upon... there still needs to be respect for each other’s time and for what’s been agreed on. That’s where we feel trust.”)</i>

Participants’ accounts show that commitment operates as a negotiated and evolving process, where responsibilities are continuously clarified and maintained through dialogue and mutual understanding. It involves deliberate efforts to ensure fairness in emotional investment, time allocation, and relational expectations, reinforcing stability not through restriction but through shared responsibility and respect. In this sense, commitment is not assumed but enacted through everyday relational practices. This aligns with Balzarini et al. (2017), who highlight commitment as emerging through negotiation and active listening, and Schmitt and Bisson (2021), who link relational satisfaction to fairness, respect, and dependability. Overall, the findings indicate that commitment in CNM is a sustained and ethical practice that maintains connection through honesty, accountability, and ongoing relational engagement.

#### ***4.6. Connection Sustained through Emotional Honesty and Understanding***

Sustaining connections in CNM requires intentional honesty, empathy, and emotional awareness. Open dialogue, transparency about feelings, and attentiveness to each partner’s needs foster trust, prevent misunderstandings, and maintain emotional balance across relationships.

It simply shows that sustaining connections in CNM relies on intentional communication, emotional honesty, empathy, and accountability. Connection is strengthened through listening, recognizing each partner’s needs, and resolving conflicts with patience and transparency. This aligns with Ambrosini and Biolcati (2025), who found that open communication and emotional regulation enhance long-term satisfaction and stability in CNM relationships, and Mogilski et al. (2020), who emphasized that trust and transparency foster

resilience and reduce emotional strain in multi-partner partnerships. It simply means that CNM relationships thrive not through unrestricted freedom but through deliberate ethical and emotional engagement, where love, commitment, and connection are expanded through honesty, fairness, and mutual care.

**Table 7**

*Participant narratives on connection*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Verbatim Statements</b>
KEN	<i>“Strength namin as partners ay pagiging honest talaga... Very open kami sa isa’t isa, no secret will be hidden... Kaya lagi kaming transparent, like I said, no secret are hidden.” (“Our strength as partners is really our honesty... we are very open with each other, no secrets are hidden... that’s why we are always transparent, like I said, no secrets are hidden.”)</i>
LAW	<i>“Pag may gusto akong sabihin o may nararamdaman ako, sinasabi ko agad sa kanya... Mas maganda yung ganun kasi wala kaming tinatago... kahit may selos o tampuhan, napag-uusapan.” (“When there’s something I want to say or something I’m feeling, I tell him right away... it’s better that way because we don’t hide anything... even jealousy or misunderstandings, we talk about them.”)</i>
JOH	<i>“Pag may hindi pagkakaintindihan, hindi kami nagtatagal na galit... inuuna namin yung pag-uusap at pag-intindi sa isa’t isa.” (“When there’s a misunderstanding, we don’t stay mad for long... we prioritize talking and understanding each other.”)</i>

#### **4.7. Awareness and Open-Minded Understanding**

The participants highlighted that acceptance of CNM relationships relies on empathy, awareness, and open-mindedness. Overcoming prejudice requires understanding that these relationships are grounded in trust, consent, and love, rather than judgment, stereotypes, or assumptions of immorality.

**Table 8**

*Participant narratives on understanding*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Verbatim Statements</b>
ERO	<i>“Kailangan muna na maunawaan ng tao...kailangan lang ng open mindedness knowing na your process of learning and learning is a long process din...natutunan ko rin, at naibahagi ko sa iba...malaki sya na pwede tayong maka discover ng mga possibilities this spectrum ng relationships.” (“People need first to understand... people just need open-mindedness, knowing that your process of learning is a long process as well... I also learned it, and I was able to share it with others... it has a big role in helping us discover possibilities in this spectrum of relationships.”)</i>
LAW	<i>“Understanding kasi nga...hindi naman lahat okay sa ganon na type na relationships...not everyone are...educated, that’s actually understands the things like I experience before” (“Understanding, because not everyone is okay with that type of relationship... not everyone is... educated, that actually understands things like what I experienced before.”)</i>
KEN	<i>“Stop judging them, as long as you’re not hurting anybody, as long as your principle doesn’t not hurt you or harm you...so yun lang naman ang masasabi ko.” (“Stop judging them, as long as you’re not hurting anybody, as long as your principle doesn’t hurt you or harm you... that’s all I can say.”)</i>

Emphasis on open-mindedness reflects a need for social recognition and acceptance, where awareness fosters empathy and reduces judgment toward CNM relationships. This aligns with Schechinger and Moors (2022), who found that awareness-building decreases prejudice through accurate information and empathetic dialogue, and Séguin et al. (2023), who highlighted that open discussions about CNM improve relational literacy and reduce stigma. With these findings, it simply shows that education and storytelling can promote understanding, acceptance, and inclusivity for individuals in non-traditional relationships.

#### ***4.8. Education and Normalization through Learning Platforms***

By emphasizing that social acceptance of CNM requires deliberate education and structured dialogue. Learning platforms serve as tools to normalize these relationships by fostering understanding, reducing stigma, and promoting informed, respectful discussions.

**Table 9**

*Participant narratives on social acceptance*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Verbatim Statements</b>
KEN	<p><i>“Awareness na lahat okay sa ganon na type na relationships... not everyone are...educated, that’s actually understands the things like I experience before...mas maganda yung symposium type para mas malaki yung sakop nya...still hoping pa rin na pagdating sa government yung mga ganong symposium type lalo na yung awareness pwede talaga sya maiapply dun.”</i></p> <p><i>(“Awareness that not everyone is okay with that type of relationship... not everyone is... educated, that actually understands things like what I experienced before... it would be better if it were in a symposium type so it could reach a wider audience... I am still hoping that when it comes to the government, those kinds of symposium-type, especially awareness campaigns, can really be applied there.”)</i></p>

The participant's narrative viewed seminars, workshops, and symposiums as transformative tools to address stigma and promote understanding of CNM relationships. Education was seen as a catalyst for empathy, emotional literacy, and social acceptance. This aligns with Moors and Matsick (2021), who found that integrating CNM topics in educational programs reduces stereotypes and increases tolerance; Conley et al. (2018), who emphasized that community education on relational ethics improves social harmony and well-being; and Deveau and Moors (2024), who highlighted that dialogue-based learning strengthens interpersonal understanding and reduces moral rigidity. These studies support the participants’ view that structured education can normalize CNM and foster inclusive, informed, and compassionate perspectives.

#### 4.9. Safe and Supportive Communities for Relational Growth

Supportive communities offering empathy, acceptance, and understanding are essential for CNM individuals. Such networks reduce emotional strain from societal judgment, empower members, and foster relational growth by providing validation and safe spaces for sharing experiences.

**Table 9**

*Participant narratives on community support*

Participant	Verbatim Statements
KEN	<i>“Ang sinasabi lang saakin ng mga kaibigan ko you deserve better... over time may proper understanding.” (“What my friends tell me is, you deserve better... over time, there will be proper understanding.”)</i>

The participant's statement also highlights that supportive communities provide psychological safety, reduce stigma, and foster empowerment, self-esteem, and relational confidence for CNM individuals. These networks such as peer groups, counseling circles, and mentorship programs, transform isolated experiences into shared narratives of resilience. This aligns with Balzarini et al. (2017), who found that CNM individuals engaged in peer and counseling support reported lower distress and higher relational satisfaction; Acoba (2024), who highlighted that affirming mental health support enhances individual and relational well-being; and Mogilski et al. (2021), who noted that community engagement mitigates social isolation and fosters belonging. The literature supports the participants' view that psychosocial programs integrating awareness, education, and support can normalize CNM, strengthen coping skills, and promote inclusive, empathetic communities.

## 5. Conclusion

This study examined the lived experiences of individuals engaged in consensual non-monogamous (CNM) relationships, focusing on their relational processes, meanings of love and commitment, and the challenges they encounter within and outside their relationships. Across participant narratives, CNM relationships were consistently described as being sustained not by exclusivity, but by continuous relational negotiation grounded in honesty, transparency, communication, and agreed boundaries. Rather than functioning as fixed structures, relationships were maintained through ongoing dialogue and mutual adjustment, particularly in addressing jealousy, misunderstandings, and relational expectations. Relational

stability was therefore understood as the capacity to manage and resolve conflict through timely communication rather than the absence of it.

The findings further show that love and commitment were constructed in non-ownership-based terms. Love was consistently associated with respect, fairness, and openness, while commitment was expressed through consistency, accountability, and adherence to mutual agreements. These recurring patterns across participants indicate a shared relational framework grounded in ethical agreement rather than exclusivity. Beyond relational processes, participants' experiences were shaped by stigma, misunderstanding, and social judgment, which influenced disclosure and interpersonal management. This external context demonstrates that CNM relationships are negotiated not only internally between partners but also in response to broader social perceptions.

This study provides a contextual understanding of CNM relationships as relational systems defined by negotiated meanings, communicative maintenance, and socially situated challenges. The findings are limited to a small, self-selected group and are interpreted as in-depth lived experiences rather than a generalized relational model.

### Disclosure statement

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to this study.

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### Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines set by the institution. The conduct of this study has been approved and given relative clearance by the Research Ethics Review Committee.

### AI Declaration

The author declares the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the writing of this paper. Specifically, the author utilized QuillBot, Grammarly, and Gemini to assist in grammar checking, paraphrasing, and improving sentence structure to ensure clarity and coherence. The author takes full responsibility for the proper review, accuracy, and integrity of all content generated with the aid of these tools.

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