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Young trans Asian New Zealanders' intersectional experiences of family support

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

Background: Trans Asian New Zealander youth are a multiply marginalised group that report severely low rates of family support. However, their needs are underexplored in research, particularly from intersectional perspectives.

Purpose: This thesis explores what good family support looks like for trans Asian young people in New Zealand, focusing on family support at the intersections of gender, culture, religion, and neurodivergence.

Data and methods: Three trans Asian New Zealander young people aged 17 to 25 and eleven family members drew pictures of their family support experiences, then participated in interviews. Visual and verbal data were analysed using intersectionality theory, multimodal discourse analysis, and the discursive phenomenon of metaphor.

Results: Major findings were identity complications of attachment to multiple cultures, with cultural connection also complicated by neurodivergent needs; extensive neurodivergent-coded family support; complexity within non-religious identities; and religious identity as a modulator of gender identity support.

Conclusion: This thesis recommends that families of trans Asian youth affirm their gender identities, support them holistically, uphold their agency in their identity development, and stand up against transphobia. It urges for improving timely access to gender-affirming care for trans New Zealander youth and suggests that the phenomenon of hybridised Asian New Zealander cultural identities can be applied to culturally appropriate care for trans Asian New Zealander youth.

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1. Introduction

"I lost [my] personality…I think it was being trans, just not being happy with how I held myself, how I looked or sounded, not liking that. But now I do like myself…I have people who will always support me, and I'm not scared to put myself out there nowadays."

– Tsuki, participant

1.1 Trans Asian young people in New Zealand

Trans Asian young people in New Zealand are a highly minoritised group that are underrepresented in the literature.

Intersectional minority identities may be associated with elevated risk for poor mental health (Fleming et al., 2020). New Zealand youth with both ethnic and sexual or gender minority status demonstrate higher risk for poor mental health than cisgender, heterosexual ethnic minorities (Chiang et al., 2017). Moreover, trans youth may be at higher risk for negative mental health and poorer family support than trans queer cisgender youth (Graham, 2014). A positive sense of identity and community is essential to a young person's future health and success (Peiris-John et al., 2025). Distress and other negative mental health outcomes can be reduced by providing support as early as possible for trans youth.

Trans Asian youth in New Zealand report particularly concerning markers for wellbeing and family support. 35% of trans Asian respondents in the Counting Ourselves survey of trans and non-binary New Zealanders reported a very high level of psychological distress and two thirds had been diagnosed with depression (K. K. H. Tan, Yee, et al., 2021). Less than half (44%) said they felt that their family members were supportive (K. K. H. Tan, Yee, et al., 2021). In the Identify survey of LGBTQ+ young people in New Zealand, trans respondents and Asian respondents reported the strongest feelings of being unsafe in their current living situation (Fenaughty et al., 2022). It follows, then, that young people at the intersection of being trans and Asian are particularly

vulnerable to feeling unsafe at home, so research into what good family support looks like for trans Asian youth in New Zealand is essential.

Historical Asian texts suggest that gender diversity beyond cisgender male and female was recognised, normalised, and sometimes revered in pre-colonial Asia, across the regions (Amerasinghe, 2018; Bal, 2024). European colonisers transmitted puritanical beliefs to peoples in Asia, including binary ideas of gender. This contributed to the criminalisation and erasure of gender and sexual diversity (Amerasinghe, 2018; Bal, 2024) and relatively conservative values regarding gender and sexual diversity in Asian families (K. K. H. Tan, Yee, et al., 2021).

This means that many trans Asians in New Zealand come from backgrounds where diversity of gender and sexuality may be spoken about negatively or avoided as a discussion topic altogether (Lee & Mock, 2005a). Due to fear of how families might respond, 69% of rainbow South Asian New Zealanders report they are not out to their extended families (Bal & Divakalala, 2022).

Trans Asians also face potential discrimination outside the home, including in LGBTQ+ spaces, due to the intersection of being trans and Asian (Divakalala & Bal, 2024). They may feel pressure to favour one aspect of their identity based on context (Bal & Divakalala, 2022; Wong & Thomsen, 2023). They may face isolation from identity communities due to their intersectional identities (K. K. H. Tan, Yee, et al., 2021), which is detrimental to wellbeing as it reduces access to protective factors of community support and increases the impact of minority stress (K. K. H. Tan, 2021).

Despite the high minoritisation of trans Asian youth, they are an understudied group. There are deficits in both researcher and participant engagement. The wellbeing of trans Asian diaspora is understudied in contemporary trans health research (K. K. H. Tan, Yee, et al., 2021). The limited available studies often do not distinguish between Asians and other people of colour, and the migration contexts of trans Asians in Western countries complicate their experiences so that research on trans people in Asia does not necessarily transfer adequately (K. K. H. Tan, Yee, et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the Counting Ourselves and Identify surveys acknowledge that Asians are underrepresented in their statistics (Fenaughty et al., 2022; Veale et al., 2019).

Specifically, the proportion of Asian-identified respondents to the trans-specific Counting Ourselves survey was 70% lower than the general Asian-identified population in New Zealand (Veale et al., 2019). This indicates that trans Asians may be less likely to respond to surveys about LGBTQ+ identities. As many LGBTQ+ Asian New Zealanders are not out to their extended families (Bal & Divakalala, 2022), trans Asian New Zealanders may be deterred from engaging with research projects due to fear of being outed to their families.

1.2 Angles this thesis takes

1.2.1 Trans-affirmative

This work affirms the gender identities of all its participants. It does not seek to explain why people are trans, nor does it view being trans as a pathology or a problem to be 'fixed'. Minority stress theory posits social stigma as a key factor in the relatively poor mental health outcomes for sexual and gender minorities compared to cis, heterosexual people (Frost & Meyer, 2023; Meyer, 2003). This thesis views the generally poor wellbeing markers of trans people through the minority stress model, problematising systemic minoritisation and inadequate support rather than trans identities themselves.

1.2.2 Family support

As shown earlier in this introduction, poor family support can be detrimental to the wellbeing of trans Asian youth. However, more research focused on good family support is needed to improve the situation (Puckett et al., 2019). This project takes a strengths-based approach by seeking to discover what good family support does and could look like for trans Asian youth in New Zealand. This study uses an expansive idea of family, challenging the traditional nuclear family model as insufficient in representing the actual structures of non-White families (Bal & Divakalala, 2022; Deane et al., 2019) and queer families (Fish et al., 2024).

Family support, from the family of origin and beyond, is protective for emotional wellbeing (Barras & Jones, 2024; Deane et al., 2019). The family system can be thought of as a 'psychological buffer' for dealing with adversity (Morgan et al., 2023; Westwater

et al., 2019). Different family members can offer different types of support to fill out the roles in a trans young person's ecosystem of support needs (Westwater et al., 2023).

Until now, there have been few studies looking at family support for trans youth that speak to both young people and their families (Westwater et al., 2023), and existing research has heavily focused on parents and the nuclear family (Andrzejewski et al., 2021; Bhattacharya et al., 2021; Westwater et al., 2019). Westwater et al. (2023) identify a family support approach as a research need to help ensure 'wraparound' support for families to help reduce their barriers to supporting their young trans loved one.

Family support is modulated by a multitude of influences, including culture and religion (Bhattacharya et al., 2021; Westwater et al., 2023), which are two foci of this research. These factors can contribute to the provision of *mixed support*, which involves a combination of supportive and rejecting behaviours (Johnson et al., 2020). This may involve offering some types of support (e.g. emotional support) but refusing others (e.g. support for medical transition). It may also involve affirming a trans young person in certain identities, such as sexual orientation or neurodivergence, but not others, such as trans identity (Johnson et al., 2020).

1.2.3 Intersectionality

This is a work of activist scholarship, a blending of academia and activism for the purposes of enacting social change (Lennox & Yıldız, 2020). My work is powered by collaboration with affected communities and self-reflexivity (Hale, 2019; Lennox & Yıldız, 2020). I argue that activist scholarship working with people that inhabit a convergent space – in this case: trans, Asian, young people – necessitates an intersectional perspective that holistically considers their identities and the interlocking axes of oppression that affect them. This works to combat systemic marginalisation and stereotyping in academia and society and helps ensure that the recommendations this work produces are tailored to their needs.

1.2.4 Discourse analysis

This thesis is in applied linguistics. It uses discourse – language as communicative action (Johnstone, 2018) – as a methodological tool for examining constructions of

experience and identity. I examine visual and verbal language as constructions of participants' subjective realities (Castellotti & Moore, 2009; Rose, 2001). I use multimodal discourse analysis to analyse visual and verbal data in participant drawings and transcripts of spoken interviews and explore the discursive strategy of metaphor through both modes.

1.3 Research objective

The research objective is to find out what good family support looks like for trans Asian New Zealander young people,

1) from a strengths-based, youth-centred, intersectional perspective,
2) using multimodal discourse analysis with the aid of verbal and visual metaphors,
3) using interviews with and drawings by trans Asian New Zealander young people and their families.

1.4 Research questions

My overall research question is: What does good family support look like for trans Asian young people in New Zealand?

My sub-questions are:

- What identity categories are most salient to trans Asian young people in New Zealand?
- How do trans Asian New Zealander young people experience family support in these identity categories?
- How do trans Asian New Zealander young people experience family support at the intersections of these identity categories?

1.5 Project Village

My research is situated within a wider project called Project Village[1], funded by the Royal Society Te Apārangi through the Marsden Fund. Project Village grew from a

[1] Comprehensive information about Project Village is available at this URL: https://www.projectvillageaotearoa.com/

research project devised by the Project Village Principal Investigator, Associate Professor Julia de Bres, and ia Morrison-Young, a Project Village team member. That project asked parents of trans children in New Zealand to draw and discuss their experiences of supporting their child in their gender. The researchers planned Project Village to explore stories of family support for trans youth from the young people's perspectives, and to explore the cultural frameworks that impact family support (Project Village, 2026). The name 'Project Village' is based on the idea that it 'takes a village to raise a (trans) child': "everyone in their family has a role to play in supporting them to grow and thrive" (Project Village, 2026). The Project Village team consists of:

Principal Investigator: Associate Professor Julia de Bres

Associate Investigator: Dr. Jaimie Veale

Research Associate: Jack Byrne

Pacific Research Mentor: Dr. Penni Wolfgramm

Master's students: me (Asian perspectives), ia Morrison-Young (Māori perspectives)

Research assistant: Violet Ekeroma (Pacific perspectives)

The Project is guided by an advisory group of experts in various components of the Project (e.g. trans health and wellbeing, Asian rainbow studies).

1.6 My activism and research background

I have been passionate about LGBTQ+ rights since childhood. In Year 9, I presented a speech in school pushing for the legalisation of same-sex marriage. In Year 13, I founded and led an LGBTQ+ support group at school and organised for my school to send a condolences card to the victims of the Pulse nightclub shooting. When I moved to Wellington for postgraduate study, I got involved in trans rights protests and LGBTQ+ meetup groups, where I made some great friends, a couple of whom kindly lent their time to this project.

During my undergraduate study in linguistics, I gravitated towards discourse analysis, partly for its capacity to reveal the impact of power structures on language. I took several undergraduate linguistics courses with Julia de Bres, who encouraged me to

apply for one of the master's scholarship positions for Project Village. I was hesitant about applying as a cisgender person, as I did not want to take away an opportunity from a trans person. However, while I am not trans, I comfortably fit the other applicant criteria of being connected to the LGBTQ+ community, identifying as Asian (or Pasifika), having a passion for the wellbeing of trans young people in Aotearoa, and having a background of achievement in discourse analysis and wanting to pursue the area further. I discussed my apprehensions about my positionality with the project lead, who allayed my concerns, noting the benefits of diversity with the project and the support I would receive from the majority trans team. I was offered the position and accepted.

1.7 My thesis's contribution to the literature

My research design addresses gaps in the research areas of trans and LGBTQ+ Asian youth wellbeing, queer ethnic diaspora, and neurodivergence.

The literature about trans and LGBTQ+ Asian youth wellbeing calls for more qualitative methods (Koh et al., 2024; Peiris-John et al., 2025), a focus on diasporic populations (K. K. H. Tan et al., 2023), exploration of varying types of protective support (Koh et al., 2024), and implementation of intersectionality frameworks (Peiris-John et al., 2025; K. K. H. Tan, Yee, et al., 2021). My research addresses these goals with a qualitative, intersectionality-informed study of diasporic trans Asian youth that explores types of family support modulated by identity categories.

Continuing gaps in queer ethnic diasporic research include distinguishing trans Asian participants from other ethnic trans participants (K. K. H. Tan, Yee, et al., 2021), which my work inherently addresses, and the experiences of second-generation LGBTQ+ South Asian diaspora (Divakalala & Bal, 2024), which I address with my work with a South Asian trans young person and her family.

I contribute to neurodivergence studies by answering calls to approach neurodivergence as a neurological difference rather than a deficit (Kourti & MacLeod, 2019; Munday, 2024), working with neurodivergent people directly rather than just their neurotypical loved ones (Jackson-Perry, 2024), and working with trans neurodivergent people, whose experiences are marginalised in the neurodivergence literature due to its historic focus on cisgender males (Cooper, 2024).

Previous research has inadequately considered the intersection of gender identity and neurodivergence (Hillier et al., 2019; Miller, 2018) and has failed to employ a truly intersectional approach to LGBTQ+ neurodivergent populations (Hillier et al., 2019; Toft, 2024), issues that I address in Chapter 5: Neurodivergence.

1.8 Definitions of key terms

Gender and LGBTQ+ terms:

- Transgender or trans: a person who does not (wholly) identify with the sex they were assigned at birth.[2]
- Non-binary: a person who identifies as neither wholly male nor wholly female. They may identify with multiple genders or none.
- Cisgender or cis: a person who identifies with the sex they were assigned at birth.
- AFAB/AMAB: assigned female at birth/assigned male at birth.
- LGBTQ+: an umbrella term standing for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and plus. The plus encompasses all other non-cisgender and non-heterosexual/heteroromantic identities. Some who do not fall under the first four letters of the acronym feel represented by 'queer', but others do not, hence the plus. Identities covered by the plus include non-binary identities (for the non-binary people who do not identify as trans), intersex, asexual, aromantic, and pansexual.
- Queer: non-heterosexual/heteroromantic and/or non-cisgender.
- Rainbow (person): another term for LGBTQ+, often used in New Zealand.

Culture terms:

- Culture: a collective identity based around ethnicity, nationality, race, practices, or ideas; typically, a combination of these. For a more detailed discussion, see *3.1.1: What is culture?*
- Asian person: a person with ancestry from the continent of Asia.

[2] With the modifier "wholly", I acknowledge that some people identify partially with the sex they were assigned at birth (e.g. demiboy and demigirl) and/or identify with multiple genders, including this gender (e.g. bigender, pangender).

- White: an in-group categorisation of race, historically dynamic in definition but typically describing people with European ancestry (DiTomaso, 2024).[3]
- Aotearoa/New Zealand: Aotearoa is used as the te reo Māori (Māori language) term for the land that makes up the nation state of New Zealand. In this country, Aotearoa and New Zealand are typically used interchangeably, or as one phrase ("Aotearoa New Zealand").
- Māori people: the indigenous people of New Zealand.
- Pasifika: a collective term for the indigenous peoples of the Pacific islands.
- Pākehā: New Zealander of European origin (Matthewman, 2017).
- *The West/Western countries*: a nebulous term often left undefined in the literature, but I use it to refer to White-majority countries such as New Zealand, Australia, the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

Additional culture terms will be defined in *3.1.2: Culture key terms*.

Other terms:

- Young person: in this study, people aged 16 to 25.
- Neurodivergence/neurodivergent: discussed in *5.1.1: What is neurodivergence?*

1.9 How the thesis will be structured

This thesis is based around three thematic chapters: culture, religion, and neurodivergence. Each of these chapters integrate the relevant literature, analysis and discussion pertaining to each theme. As the literature is explored in these chapters and the introduction, there is no separate literature review chapter.

In Chapter 1 (Introduction) I discuss the societal and research contexts for my research and how this project will contribute to existing research. I introduce the key communities with which the research engages and the aims and objectives of the research.

[3] I capitalise 'White' and 'Black' in accordance with the APA style guide (7th ed.).

In Chapter 2 (Methodology) I explain how I approached research epistemology and theoretical perspectives; recruitment; and data collection, processing, and analysis. I also reflect on my researcher positionality and insider identities.

In Chapter 3 (Culture) I first review literature about Asian ideas of family, first- and second-generation Asian immigrant acculturation experiences, and trans Asian youth experiences. This chapter is where I focus on my participants as trans, second-generation Asian New Zealanders, looking at issues of cultural orientation; nation, race, cultural identity performance and interests as bases of cultural identity; and the unique challenges of being mixed race Asian-Pākehā.

In Chapter 4 (Religion), I open by exploring literature about trans people's positive and negative relationships with religion. I focus my analysis on how religion influences the trans young people's experiences of family support, paying attention to various aspects of religion such as spirituality vs organised religion, religion-based beliefs about gender, and prayer as a type of support.

In Chapter 5 (Neurodivergence), I first critically examine the literature on the relationships between neurodivergence and gender and/or being LGBTQ+. I then explore strengths-based literature on this topic, discussing neurodivergent people's experiences of gender and family and community support. I then discuss how neurodivergence interacts with my participants' experiences of gender and family support, interplays of neurodivergence with culture, and types of neurodivergent-coded support.

In Chapter 6 (Discussion & Conclusion), I bring the three themes together in a 'big picture' discussion of intersectionality in my participants' family support experiences, discussing how good family support for Asian trans young people considers all aspects of their identity. I reflect on the strengths, limitations, and implications of my work and make recommendations for future intersectional research on trans wellbeing.

2 Methodology

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will describe the methodology I used for my research. I will first describe the training and education I gained prior to starting data collection. I will then describe the theories that underpin my work: intersectionality theory, interpretivism, and social constructionism. I will then discuss my approaches, including a tricultural approach that incorporates methodologies from Asian, Māori and Pākehā perspectives; a neuro-affirming approach; and a culturally and religiously sensitive approach. I will then discuss my methods for recruitment and data collection. I describe interview and interviewee details in the following two sections. I will then describe my data processing methods, followed by discussion of my analytical frameworks and tools of intersectionality, multimodal discourse analysis, and metaphor. I end the Methodology chapter by discussing the analytical process, including its collaborative component, the processes of identifying and extracting themes and metaphors, and the use of creative methodologies and case studies as tools of both analysis and presentation of findings.

2.2 Pre-data collection training and education

Before starting my thesis, I attended a multi-day retreat with other members of Project Village where we held an intensive interview training workshop, led by Principal Investigator Dr Julia de Bres ("the PI") and Associate Investigator Dr Jamie Veale. We also had a training session with psychologists Rebekah Anna and Ilana Seager van Dyk about safety protocols in the event of psychological distress among ourselves or our participants. Sidney Gig-Jan Wong was recruited to be my cultural advisor. He was available throughout the research process for advice with working with people from different Asian cultures and writing sensitively about cultural differences. He also introduced me to Vinod Bal, a co-founder of Adhikaar Aotearoa. Adhikaar Aotearoa's work was instrumental in my understanding of South Asian LGBTQ+ New Zealanders' experiences, and it was valuable to discuss their and my work with Vinod. I then participated in proofreading Adhikaar Aotearoa's publication, "Our Histories Our

Queer", which enlightened me to LGBTQ+ identities that existed in pre-colonial South Asia.

An ethics and safety plan was written by the research team with advice from the Project advisory group, and I versed myself in it. I studied the principles of Project Village, Kaupapa Māori research, and Mana Taiohi youth development.

2.3 Theoretical framework

2.3.1 Intersectionality (as a theory/approach)

Definition(s)

Intersectionality has been described as many things: an analytic sensibility (Abrams et al., 2020; Cho et al., 2013), a heuristic (Anthias, 2013), an analytical tool or framework (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Divakalala, 2023), and a theoretical framework (Amerasinghe, 2018). Patricia Hill Collins, one of intersectionality's pioneering scholars, simply describes it as "particular forms of intersecting oppressions" in one work (Collins, 2002, p. 18). Collins and Bilge (2020) make cases for all the above definitions and affirm Cho et al.'s (2013) assertion that the heart of intersectionality is what it "does" rather than what it "is" (Cho et al., 2013, p. 795; Collins & Bilge, 2020, p. 4). Intersectionality is not simply a synonym for diversity (Romero, 2017), and it is important that intersectional analysis view identities as entwined rather than additive (Yang, 2024).

In the context of this research, I use intersectionality to mean a holistic view of the social categories that modulate a person's experiences of discrimination, support, and identity construction.

Origins

Intersectionality came from Black feminist criticism (Crenshaw, 1989). Black feminist activists like Anna J Cooper were using the concept as early as the late 19th century (Divakalala, 2023), and the term "intersectionality" itself was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 (Crenshaw, 1989). Essentially, Crenshaw originally addressed the issue that Black women who claimed workplace discrimination could only argue either sexism or racism, but their oppression relied on a combination of both, as neither White

women nor Black men experienced the same kind of discrimination as them (Crenshaw, 1989; Romero, 2017). From Black feminism's origins of examining how patriarchal and racist structures interact, we can expand to examining the interaction of these with additional oppressive structures, including transphobia, heterosexism, and ableism.

Goals of intersectionality

While intersectionality is useful for exploring how individuals make sense of their multiple identities (Min, 2025), its efficacy is maximised by looking outward to systemic oppression (Grzanka, 2020). Indeed, the primary objective of intersectionality is social justice (Miller, 2018). The experiences of social groups with multiple marginalisations are too often obscured by single-axis studies (Crenshaw, 1989). For trans Asians, this often includes absorption into predominantly European studies of trans people, and studies that do acknowledge ethnicity can amalgamate Asians with other ethnic minorities, which overlooks the specific needs of trans Asians (K. K. H. Tan, Yee, et al., 2021).

2.3.2 Interpretivism

Interpretivism emerged as the response of the social sciences to the "allegedly value-free, detached observation" characteristic of positivist work in the natural sciences (Crotty, 2020, p. 67). Interpretivism views reality as socially constructed, knowledge as context-dependent, and researcher-participant relationships as interactive and cooperative (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988). Interpretative approaches, like intersectional approaches, embrace human complexity (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013; G. R. Mehrotra, 2023). Questioning the positivist value of researcher objectivity (Crotty, 2020), interpretivist researchers are encouraged to bring their knowledge and biases to their work, particularly when they have an insider identity, as shared cultural knowledge of researcher and participant can benefit understanding (Divakalala, 2023; Milton & Sims, 2016). This is true to my approach in this research, where I had much in common with the participants.

An interpretivist approach requires that evidence be contextualised within an entire dataset to arrive at a nuanced meaning (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). To that end, Hollway & Jefferson (2013) warn against overly fragmenting data. For example, in my

data, one participant described an unpleasant trip to South Asia, where she says she "just didn't appreciate the culture" because she is "too much of a Kiwi kid". For someone with no familial connection to the area, it could be simply read as an unfortunate holiday. However, considering her being a New Zealand-born, second-generation South Asian New Zealander, the anecdote helps paint a picture of her cultural identity as nationality-focused rather than heritage-focused.

Hollway & Jefferson (2013) continue that contextualising evidence against the rest of the data can reveal contradictions. I will often focus on points of tension in my analysis – family members who are described as "supportive" but do not support all aspects of a trans young person's identity; identifying as Asian but not with 'Asian-ness'; or being hurt by religion but finding comfort in spirituality. For example, one participant said both the following quotes at different times of her interview: "[Mom] is a very supportive person in general" and "Mom is probably the least supportive person in my life". These quotes reflect the participant's complex support experience with her mother, who essentially supports the participant in everything except her trans identity. Using one of these quotes in isolation would severely over-generalise the participant's experience of maternal support.

2.3.3 Social constructionism

Both intersectionality and interpretivism are social constructionist approaches (Amerasinghe, 2018; Windsong, 2018). A foundational assumption of my work is that gender and culture are socially constructed rather than biologically based. The social constructionist approach posits that these categories, along with others such as sexuality, class, and (dis)ability are socially transmitted (Windsong, 2018). Social constructionist approaches demand a critical stance that acknowledges reality as subjective (Burr, 2015). Indeed, I would expect that all my participants experience gender and culture in different ways from each other, and from me; both might be described as spectra with as many nuances as there are wavelengths of light. Social constructionism also acknowledges personal agency in constructing one's own identities, and one significant tool for doing so is discourse (Burr, 2015, p. 56): the focus of Discourse Analysis, the academic field that houses my study.

2.4 Approach

2.4.1 Tricultural approach

My work takes a tricultural approach. Expanding on the principle of biculturality in New Zealand, often reduced to relationships between Māori and Pākehā, I sought to integrate the values and epistemologies of Asians, Māori, and Pākehā in my work as much as possible. Western knowledge systems are woven into the fabric of formal academic work in New Zealand; it would have been impossible to conduct this research without referring to Western-based concepts, theories and methods. It is a more conscious effort to incorporate Māori and Asian knowledge systems. Some of the ways I did this were recognising Asian New Zealanders as Tangata Tiriti, finding commonalities between Māori and Asian value systems, considering decolonising approaches, and understanding and applying principles of Mana Taiohi.

Asian New Zealanders as Tangata Tiriti

Asian New Zealanders are *Tangata Tiriti*, or People of *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* (in English: The Treaty of Waitangi). As Tangata Tiriti, Asian New Zealanders inhabit a tricultural space, shaped by Asian, Western, and Māori cultural influences. As Tangata Tiriti, Asian New Zealanders have responsibilities to honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi, including implementing its principles and addressing inequities facing Māori (K. K. H. Tan, 2023, p. 3).

K. K. H. Tan (2023) applied C.J. Kim's concept of "racial triangulation" to ethnic groups in New Zealand, suggesting that Asian New Zealanders are categorised by their relationship to Pākehā and Māori. Tan posited that a dominant racial discourse in New Zealand is that of ethnic Asians as "immutably foreign" (K. K. H. Tan, 2023, p. 2), which suggests a dominant attitude that Māori and Pākehā are native New Zealanders and Asians cannot be due to their ethnicity. Simultaneous discourses paint Asians as 'model minorities', relatively valorised over other ethnic minorities due to perceptions of higher productivity and similarity to Pākehā (C. J. Kim, 1999), hence a triangular racial structure of Pākehā as 'superior insiders', Māori as 'inferior insiders', and Asians as

'somewhat inferior foreigners'[4]. This triangular racial discourse can pit Asians and Māori against each other for the benefit of keeping both groups from challenging the system that keeps them both subordinate (K. K. H. Tan, 2023, p. 2). However, as research indicates, we have more common traditional values than we may realise.

Commonalities between Māori and Asian value systems

Māori and Asian cultural value systems and philosophies have many parallels, as discussed by Dam (2022). These include belief in an interconnection of all things, a non-linear sense of time, responsibility to others, and the similar concepts of face/*izzat* and *mana*. Divakalala & Bal (2024) also argue that the Māori principles of *whanaungatanga* (relationships), *manaakitanga* (hospitality and kindness), and *kaitiakitanga* (guardianship of the environment) deeply resonate for second-generation LGBTQ+ South Asian New Zealanders due to our intersectional position. Due to our multiple marginalised identities, we may form extended support networks to fill the varying needs that arise from our multiple identities; manaakitanga-informed interactions can help us bridge cultural divides; and as colonised peoples now living on another culture's indigenous land we can carry a sense of responsibility for the guardianship of both lands (Divakalala & Bal, 2024, p. 7).

Decolonising research

Research undertaken in Aotearoa New Zealand should prioritise decolonisation (Divakalala & Bal, 2024) by being critical of how Western knowledge has overpowered indigenous knowledge to become 'standard' in our research despite the bicultural foundation of our country (Smith, 2021). Before contacting potential participants, the Project Team considered how we would approach relationships with participants. We critiqued traditional social science advice of keeping professional distance, aiming to remain as objective as possible, and limiting relationships with participants to the data collection process. In my efforts to incorporate non-Western knowledge systems in my work, I decided to embrace principles from *Kaupapa Māori* (Māori principles and

[4] C.J. Kim (1999) demonstrated this structure using "Whites, Blacks, and Asian Americans" in the United States (p. 108); K. K. H. Tan's work and my work apply this structure to the New Zealand context.

practices) in my research approach. I used Mana Taiohi as my main theoretical framework for this.

Mana Taiohi principles

Ara Taiohi is a youth development organisation in New Zealand. Ara Taiohi developed Mana Taiohi, "a principle-based framework that informs a way to work with young people in Aotearoa" (Ara Taiohi, n.d.).

Table 1: Definitions of mana taiohi principles (adapted from Ara Taiohi, n.d.)

Principle	**Definition**	**Implementations in youth development work**
Mauri o te taiohi	The life spark inherent in all young people, including their values, beliefs, skills, and talents.	Fuelling that life spark means young people are seen, recognised and valued for who they are. Young people are supported to follow their interests and passions and to actively construct their own identity.
Whakapapa taiohi	The genealogies and stories of descendants and their connection to *whenua* (land) for all cultures. It acknowledges our shared histories and the impact of colonisation.	Acknowledging the whakapapa of young people means, in their own way and in their own time, exploring how these histories influence their lives right now.
Hononga taiohi	Joining and connection. Linked to whakapapa, it is about connection to people, land/whenua, resources, spirituality, the digital world and the environment.	Recognising all the connected relationships in a young person's world (whānau, peers, school, the community), and the places and spaces that support these. Young people are supported to identify and strengthen these connections.
Te ao taiohi	The bigger picture influences on young people, including social and economic	Awareness of Te Ao Taiohi ensures actions are judged with an understanding of

	contexts and dominant cultural values. It includes Te Tiriti o Waitangi, the effects of colonisation in Aotearoa, local, national and international legislation and policy that impacts young people.	systemic influences that affect young people. Young people are supported to engage with the dynamics in their changing world.
Whanaungatanga	Whanaungatanga is about relationship(s), kinship and a sense of family connection. It relates to all relationships in a young person's life, including those in the digital space.	When we prioritise whanaungatanga we invest in high trust relationships that are reciprocal, genuine, authentic intentional and mana enhancing. Young people are supported, with a strong foundation of belonging.
Manaakitanga	Manaakitanga is expressing kindness and respect for others, emphasising responsibility and reciprocity. It creates accountability for those who care for young people, relationally or systemically.	When we uphold and extend manaakitanga from a distance, safeguarding collective wellbeing includes adequate resources and training for people who work with young people.
Whai wāhitanga	Participation, agency, self-determination, empowered citizenship and authentic learning, that flows from *mana* (birth-inherited authority).	Young people are supported to choose their level of engagement in decisions that affect them.
Mātauranga	Mātauranga refers to knowledge, wisdom, understanding and skill. It includes research, individual experience, customary and cultural knowledge, and the beliefs and ideals held by young people and their whānau.	We can strengthen mātauranga by weaving together these different forms of knowledge and making them relevant to the decisions facing young people and their whānau.

Applied Mana Taiohi principles

I will now describe how each Mana Taiohi principle was applied to this research.

Mauri o te taiohi is involved in the essence of the Project, as the voices of the trans young people are centred and valued.

Acknowledging whakapapa taiohi involved understanding pre-colonial trans Asian histories and the impact of colonisation on how trans people are viewed in modern Asian societies, which in turn impacts how trans Asian youth feel about their own identities. I thank Adhikaar Aotearoa for providing much of this knowledge.

Recognising hononga taiohi included expanding the definition of family beyond the family of origin and recognising that support can come from friends, partners, school, and communities.

Awareness of Te Ao Taiohi included awareness of the multiple cultural influences on young trans Asian New Zealanders, including their heritage culture(s), New Zealand's Pākehā and Māori cultures, broader Western cultures, and additional cultures that they may connect to. It included acknowledging the anti-trans policies and discourses that impact them so I can work to help dismantle them.

Whanaungatanga, relationship building, was integrated before, during, and after data collection. I shared aspects of my own experience when I thought it could make the participants feel more comfortable and understood, and less 'weird', e.g. when a participant brought their teddy bear to the interview for comfort, I told them about my own comfort items. I also aimed to show participants that I valued them beyond their contributions to my research.

Manaakitanga involved care for the wellbeing of the participants, especially the young people. An example of this was that sometimes, a family member would misgender them (use the wrong pronouns) or deadname them (call a trans person by an old name that they no longer use). Misgendering and deadnaming are hurtful to trans people, whether on purpose or not, so I changed those in the transcript to the young person's correct name and pronouns.

Whai wāhitanga was reflected in participant involvement and control over their own data. This included the right to edit their transcripts and add notes as they wished, which also helped me clarify details. As the young people are the centre of Project Village's study, we prioritised their voices by letting them approve their family's transcripts before we used them. Participants were also involved in my analysis, which will be discussed later in this chapter in *2.11.1: Collaborative analysis with* participants. Giving agency to the participants honoured their contribution of their emotional effort to the research.

I aimed to reduce the impact of Western bias in my research by cultivating *Mātauranga Āhia* (Asian knowledge) regarding trans and queer identities and ways of doing family support. As well as reading academic literature, I read community-produced reports, attended talks by rainbow Asian people, spoke to experts in relevant fields, and drew on my first-hand knowledge of being raised in an Asian family. Developing Mātauranga Āhia involved understanding that Asian queer and trans histories have been erased by colonisation, that some Asian people use Asian gender terms rather than Western ones (and that these do not always correspond one-to-one to Western terms), and that Asian families can show support in different ways to Western families.

2.4.2 Neuro-affirming approach

Research indicates a correlation between trans and gender non-conforming identities and neurodivergence (Strang et al., 2014). Before interviewing, I knew that at least three participants were neurodivergent and did not know the neurology of the other participants, so I made my research design as flexible as I could to accommodate the needs and preferences of neurodivergent and neurotypical interviewees.

Neuro-affirming practices included interview mode flexibility (offer of in-person, Zoom, or text message; drawing before or during interview; and drawing silently or while talking), structural adaptability (one primary participant preferred a very structured question and answer style, and the other two liked to tell long stories). Drawing during the interview meant less need for eye contact. Participants were told at the start that they could take a break at any time and asked an hour into the interview if they would like a break at that time. An interviewee who had pets was told they could play with their

pets as we talked if they wished. I also recalled a participant saying that they liked to 'stim', so I told them they were free to stim during the interview. I brought food to some interviews to allow for mini breaks where participants could eat while thinking of a response.

2.4.3 Cultural and religious sensitivities

Cultural sensitivity included being aware that the young people may be sensitive about their cultural identity, including the extent to which they feel connected to it and whether they feel shame about not feeling connected to it or not 'performing' their culture.

Engaging with older Asian people involved more formality and deference on my part until those participants broke that formality – this is customary in high power distance cultures (Budhwar et al., 2008). I observed other cultural customs when possible, including offering the South Asian family mithai as a gift when first entering their home, having tea with the South Asian family during each visit, and removing my shoes in the homes I visited. Observing cultural customs was less available with the older family members of the East Asian and South-East Asian family, as they were overseas and communication was digital.

Religious sensitivity involved being aware that the young people may have been hurt by religion and have negative attitudes towards it. I was also aware that, given the cultural diversity of the families, they could follow several different religions, not just Christianity. Religious sensitivity also involved strategic discussion of my religious identity when participants discussed having a positive relationship to religion, as it served as a connection for us. I felt that telling religious participants that I am also religious helped them feel comfortable telling me about their spirituality more deeply.

2.5 Recruitment

2.5.1 Primary participants

It was determined that Project Village would seek three trans young people from each cultural group (Asian, Māori, Pasifika, and Pākehā) as the primary participants and interview up to five of their supportive family members. The criteria for the primary

participants were self-identified trans people aged 16 to 25 with Asian heritage who grew up in New Zealand *and* have experienced support from at least some of their family, in line with the strengths-based approach of the project.

In participant selection, I carefully considered diversity of heritage, gender, age, and where in New Zealand they were raised to represent as wide a range of experiences as possible within the small sample size.

The criteria changed slightly from its initial formulation. The age range was initially 16 to 24, but the maximum age was raised to 25 to accommodate an otherwise excellent candidate. An initial criterion was having been born in New Zealand, but I requested that this be expanded to include those who immigrated to New Zealand in early childhood. This is because children who move to a host country before the age of 7 develop similar cultural identities to those born in the host country, i.e. a second-generation immigrant cultural identity (Berry et al., 2022).

I aimed to recruit trans young people with heritages from three different regions of Asia. I was particularly interested in recruiting a South Asian young person due to my own South Asian heritage; however, finding a suitable South Asian participant was difficult. I was able to recruit the East Asian and South-East Asian participants through my existing relationships, having met one interviewee at a trans rights rally and the other in an academic setting. The South Asian participant was recruited last, and it took great time and effort to find someone who fit the criteria (particularly the age criterion) and who was interested and available. The team and I queried formal and informal networks, including my cultural advisor, the Project advisory group, members of Adhikaar Aotearoa and Rainbow Youth, and social media; and multiple interested people unfortunately did not meet the criteria or were unavailable during the data collection period. Finally, a member of the Professional Association for Transgender Health Aotearoa (PATHA) referred us to someone who was successfully recruited.

Potential primary participants were told about the Project and informally assessed against the criteria, and, if they were interested in potentially participating, I provided them with the Information and Consent Form (Youth) (see Appendix C) and the Getting Support sheet (see Appendix G). The Information and Consent Form formally outlines

the Project; participant criteria; what participants would be asked to do; protocols for data collection, use, anonymisation and storage; ability to withdraw from participation; and contact information for further questions. Once participants signed the Information and Consent Form indicating that they understood and agreed to it, they were considered recruited. They then received Drawing Instructions (Youth) (see Appendix E), and we arranged a time and place to meet for the interview.

2.5.2 Family members

The primary participants were asked to identify up to five of their family members who supported them. Participants often initially only named nuclear family members, but after being told about the Project's expansive definition of family (i.e. family is whatever that means to participants), they included partners, best friends, grandparents, and family friends. This contributes to the point that the nuclear idea of family does not adequately represent the diversity of queer and non-White families, and that potentially valuable data is lost by only considering the nuclear family.

The process for recruiting family members was that the primary participant asked their family members' permission for us to contact them and then passed along their contact information (usually an email address, but sometimes a social media handle for younger participants). The family member was then contacted with reference to the referral and Project and sent the Information and Consent Form (Family Member) (see Appendix D). The process after this was akin to that for the primary participants.

2.6 Data collection

2.6.1 Reflective drawing

This study asked participants to engage in reflective drawing (i.e. drawing for the purposes of reflecting). French sociolinguists innovated reflective drawing ("*dessin réflexif*") as an academic tool for eliciting multilingual and multicultural identity construction by children and adolescents (Molinié, 2009). Participant drawing is a useful medium for working with young people as drawing is typically a familiar activity to them (Castellotti & Moore, 2009), and it helps bypass speaking anxiety and verbal difficulties (Castellotti & Moore, 2009; Greenwood, 2019), which can also make it useful

for working with neurodivergent participants. Drawing can be a tool for participants to process past experiences and make mental connections (Parikh, 2020).

Art-making may be seen as a decolonising research tool as it challenges Western discourses of what constitutes knowledge (Greenwood, 2012, 2019). This method has been previously used by Project Village team members working with parents of trans children in Aotearoa, including Asian parents (de Bres & Morrison-Young, 2023, 2024).

Participants were advised early that their participation involved both an interview and drawing a picture. Each interviewee created at least one image with either the prompt "draw your experience of family support in your gender" for the young people (see Appendix E) or "draw your experience of supporting X in their gender" for the family members (see Appendix F). The instructions were deliberately broad to encourage creativity.

Participants had a choice of drawing before or during the interview, except for those interviewed online, who, due to technical limitations, were asked to bring the drawing to the interview or send it to me beforehand. Participants who drew during the interview engaged in a mixture of drawing silently or talking while they drew. In-person interviewees were provided with coloured and standard writing pencils, felt-tip coloured pens, and a pad of paper. Those who chose to use their own materials used a mixture of digital and traditional art, drawn in a mixture of colour or greyscale. Two participants produced mostly text-based works, and one created a digital meme. Many participants drew depictions of their families, usually in human form; though one participant drew her granddaughter as a bird, and another drew his partner and himself as beans. Though only one drawing was requested, two participants created two artistic works.

The primary participants drew rich tapestries of their support networks, making visual connections between parts of their support systems. Two of three depicted both positive and negative support; the other only depicted positive support. Two depicted themselves explicitly in the middle of the picture, while the other person was less explicit (when asked if they were in the picture, they said "I think when I was drawing it I kind of meant myself to be the purple figure on the swings"). Many of the family members drew themselves and/or the primary participant. Those who did not do this

drew symbols; no family members drew additional members of the family, though one religious parent drew Jesus, who may be viewed as a psychological family member (Okrey Anderson & McGuire, 2021).

The participants were then encouraged to reflect on their artistic choices in the interview, using the prompt 'can you tell me about your drawing?', a stage which took up much of the interview time in some cases due to stimulating life narratives.

2.6.2 Interview structure

Interviews were semi-structured, based around a schedule and adapted to how participants answered the questions. See Appendices H and I for sample interview schedules.

Primary participant interviews followed this structure: preamble (e.g. small talk, any questions they had before starting, reminders of how the data would be used), background questions (e.g. hometown, heritage, gender, disability, neurodivergence, religion, and how they chose their name), questions about their drawing, which family members have supported them the most in their gender and how, challenges in family support and what further support they desire, and ending (anything else they would like to share, gaining their permission to reach out to their supportive family members, asking how to contact them, the next steps of the research and reiterating confidentiality).

Family members' interviews followed this structure: preamble (as above, plus reference to the young person and how they had indicated the family member as a key support person), background questions, questions about their drawing, what it was like when the young person came out to them as trans and how things have changed over time, how they believe they support the young person, whether the young person's transition has affected their family relationships, social messages they have observed about trans people, good parts and challenges of supporting the young person, advice they would give others in their situation (e.g. other parents, partners, or friends of trans young people), and ending (anything else they would like to share, the next steps of the research and reiterating confidentiality).

All interviews began by asking the participant how they were feeling and whether they would like to discuss the Information and Consent forms. I then reminded them of the data ethics policy (discussed later in this chapter in *2.9.1: Data ethics*). Primary participants were encouraged to choose their own pseudonym, which ensured that it was sensitive to their gender and cultural identities. The participants were advised that they could take a break at any time and asked if they had any further questions before starting. At this time, the primary participant not previously known to me was asked if she would like to know anything about me, as I hoped this would make her more comfortable.

I went into the interviews with the intention of examining participants' experiences of family support and being trans, and their relationship to their heritage culture(s). I intended to focus the other parts of my analysis on the most prominent aspects of identity that the participants described. Questions probing about other potential aspects of identity were prepared, including questions about whether they identified as queer, disabled, or neurodivergent, or were raised to be religious, with follow-up questions for the identity aspects that they did identify with. This aligned with my intersectional approach as I moulded my analysis to the identities most relevant and salient to my participants, rather than what I assumed would be relevant.

2.7 Interview details

2.7.1 Summary

There were fourteen interviews. Details of the interviews, including length, mode, and location, are included in the following table (overleaf). The primary participants are **bolded**. Interviewees created their drawings either before or during the interview. Interview time indicated below excludes drawing time if they chose to draw silently during the interview, as during this time I paused the recording and engaged in something else (e.g. reading) to reduce potential feelings of being 'watched' which might impede creativity.

Table 2: Interview details summary

Name	Length (mins)	Mode	Location
René	**202**	**Zoom**	**Participant overseas**
Margaret	93	Zoom	Participant overseas
Timothy	98	Zoom	Participant overseas
Annalise	117	In-person	Participant's home
Regina	**126**	**In-person**	**Participant's home**
Bartholomew	33	In-person	Participant's home
Ayah[5]	54	Zoom	Participant overseas
Leah	47	Zoom	Participant overseas
Jordan	134	In-person	Massey University
Tsuki	**116**	**In-person**	**Participant's home**
Ajit	65	In-person	Participant's home
Manjula	46	In-person	Participant's home
Aaliyah	41	In-person	Participant's home
May	151	Discord message	Participant overseas

2.7.2 Interview length

The average (mean) interview length among all the participants was 94.5 minutes. The average interview length for the trans young people was 148 minutes, which is almost twice as long as the average interview length for the family members (80 minutes).

The average interview length with younger people (≤30s, which includes the trans young people, their friends, and their partners) was 122 minutes. The average interview length

[5] Regina uses a word from her heritage language that means 'Dad'. To protect Regina's anonymity, I replaced the word she used with the equivalent term from my own heritage language, Malay.

with older people (≥40s, which includes parents and grandparents) was 58 minutes. This means that interviews with the younger participants were, on average, twice as long as those with the older participants.

2.7.3 Interview location

Where possible, interviews were conducted in person, and at the participant's home if they were comfortable with this. All New Zealand-based participants were interviewed in-person. Participants who were overseas were interviewed via Zoom, except for May, who preferred synchronous text message.

Most domestic interviewees were happy to invite me into their home. These interviews were located in the living rooms of the homes, except for Regina's interview. Regina wished to talk while drawing her picture on her desktop computer, which was in her bedroom, and was comfortable inviting me to sit in her bedroom with her as we had an existing friendship.

2.7.4 Interview/recording mode

I had to consider what interview/recording modes would provide a happy medium between providing the maximum relevant data while also keeping participants comfortable. In-person interviews were recorded with audio only on a small audio recorder, and Zoom interviews were recorded with audio and video via Zoom's recording function. Audio-only was a successful recording mode as it meant that participants were not self-conscious about how they visually appeared in the recording, and the audio recorder could be forgotten about after some time so that the conversation was more natural.

The idea of a face-to-face interview was challenging for some people. While face-to-face was preferable for the researchers (in-person for New Zealand residents and via Zoom if the participant was overseas), alternative interview formats were offered to accommodate neurodivergence and mental health. This included offering the use of Zoom for New Zealand residents, Zoom interviews with camera off, and, if someone was uncomfortable with all the above options, text message. One participant, a supportive family member living overseas, availed of the latter option. Unfortunately, the alternative interview formats did not work for everyone, as one person identified as a

supportive family member declined to be interviewed due to anxiety. In this case, details of their support were gained from the primary participant.

2.7.5 PI-conducted interviews

The PI (and my supervisor), Dr de Bres, conducted three of the interviews: two with fathers and one with a mother. There were several reasons for this, including potential hostility, identity connection, and cultural sensitivity.

Dr de Bres has a wealth of experience working with parents of trans children, through her previous research in her project Storm Clouds and Rainbows (de Bres & Morrison-Young, 2023). She recognises that parents' feelings about their children's gender identities are complex, and not always entirely positive. Her experience was valuable for navigating the sensitive nature of parental interviews and protecting the emotional wellbeing of the master's students on the project from potentially hostile attitudes towards trans people, which was an element of our ethics and safety plan.

The data collection plan for the wider Project Village study was that interviewers should be able to connect to their interviewees via at least one axis of identity, e.g. age, gender, or ethnic background. Dr de Bres believed that she could connect to parent interviewees through shared experience of raising a trans child, as well as their shared age group, while I did not have as much in common with these participants.

I was raised with the understanding that it is inappropriate in my culture for a young woman to be alone with an older man outside of her family. I was thus uncomfortable interviewing the fathers one-on-one and was aware of the possibility that the Asian fathers would be uncomfortable being alone with me, as well. Therefore, Dr de Bres interviewed both fathers in my study.

2.7.6 Interviewee details

Key features of the interviewees are included in the following table (overleaf). The names in **bold** are the primary participants.

Table 3: Interviewee details summary

Family	Name	Family role	Gender	Pronouns	Ethnicity	Age
1	**René**	**Young person**	**Non-binary, transmasculine**	**They/them**	**East Asian**	**Mid 20s**
	Timothy	Partner	Cis male	He/him	Pākehā and South Asian	Mid 20s
	Margaret	Mother	Cis female	She/her	East Asian	~50s
	Annalise	Family friend	Cis female	She/her	Mixed race (not Asian)	Early 30s
2	**Regina**	**Young person**	**Trans female**	**She/her**	**South-East Asian and Pākehā**	**Early 20s**
	Bartholomew	Brother	Cis male	He/him	South-East Asian and Pākehā	Mid 20s
	Jordan	Best friend, sexual partner	Genderfluid, transfeminine	She/they	South Asian	Mid 20s
	Leah	Mother	Cis female	She/her	Pākehā	~60s
	Ayah	Father	Cis male	He/him	South-East Asian	~60s
3	**Tsuki**	**Young person**	**Trans female**	**She/her**	**Anglo-South Asian**	**Late teens**
	Aaliyah	Grandmother	Cis female	She/her	Anglo-South Asian	70s
	Ajit	Father	Cis male	He/him	Anglo-South Asian	~40s
	Manjula	Mother	Cis male	She/her	South Asian	~40s
	May/Humayra	Best friend	Non-binary, transfeminine	She/they	African American	Late teens

2.8 Researcher positionality and reflexivity

Recognising researcher positionality is a part of intersectional and interpretivist research (Amerasinghe, 2018). As objectivity is nigh impossible in qualitative research, interpretivist researchers are encouraged to recognise their positionality and stance (Creswell, 2007), with intersectional researchers asked to reflect on their privilege and power as academics as well as in society at large (G. R. Mehrotra, 2023). This is my statement of my positionality:

I am a New Zealand citizen, born in New Zealand to a South Indian father born in India and a South Indian/European mother born in Malaysia. I identify as an Indian Malaysian New Zealander. I am a queer, cisgender (cis) woman. I have Crohn's Disease and I am disabled; I also believe I am on the autism spectrum and wish to pursue a diagnosis. I am in my mid-twenties and a Christian. I was raised in a middle-class, Christian family in the North Shore of Auckland that valued tertiary education.

Researcher reflexivity is a necessary component of intersectionality research (Min, 2025) and critical queer or feminist approaches (G. R. Mehrotra, 2023). Before data collection, the research team engaged in reflective drawing and mock interviews to increase empathy for our participants. G. R. Mehrotra (2023) encourages such activities as a reflexive practice and to disrupt the researcher/participant binary (p. 562). The PI also created comics based on interviews with the research team where we reflected on our definitions of family and family support. I reflected on the many aspects of identity in this interview and by completing Jacobson & Mustafa's (2019) 'social identity map' at a pre-thesis workshop. As Crenshaw (1989) points out, humans tend to acknowledge identities only when they are marginalised, and privileged identities are made invisible. Thus, it is important in the trans research space to acknowledge my positionality as a cis person, and the bias and limitations that come with that.

2.8.1 Insider research and my connections to interviewees

'Insider/outsider research' refers to the positionality of the researcher in relation to their participants. Insider researchers have shared experience and knowledge, and typically one or more identity categories in common with participants, but they need not share

all identities; researchers with some privileged identities can still meaningfully connect with participants (Bhopal, 2010; Kauffman, 1994).

The insider status of a researcher can make participants feel more at ease and able to share their true opinions, but the researcher risks taking knowledge for granted (Bhopal, 2010). Participants, particularly younger ones, used in-group terminology in the interviews. This terminology spanned several groups of which I and my participants are part, including the LGBTQ+ community (e.g. “egg”, “detransitioner”, “rennie”), neurodivergent and disabled communities (e.g. “stimming”, “spoons”, “special interest”), Gen Z (“vibe/vibing”, “go off”, ”tea”), Asians (“a very Asian/White person”, “henna”, terms for mixed-race Asian groups) and Christians/Christian-raised people (“baptism”, “confirmation”, “catechism”). There was also jargon from specific types of media that I understood (“headcanon”, “yuri”, “Discord friends”). Sometimes I remembered to ask interviewees to clarify what a term meant to them, but my insider status meant that I did not always mentally flag these as in-group terms, which proved frustrating later as it was difficult to find formal definitions for some terms.

In line with Mehrotra (2023), as a person working with people from some of my own communities, my role disrupts the traditional researcher/participant and insider/outsider binaries (p. 562). That is to say that I was not wholly either insider or outsider. My cis identity positioned me as an outsider in some respects but could have sometimes been a positive as family members who indicated mixed support for their family member’s trans identity may have felt more comfortable telling a cis person about their hesitations than a trans person.

I will now discuss some connections to interviewees: existing relationships, our age range, our Asian New Zealander identities, and/or (Anglo) South Asian ethnicity. As well as reflexivity, this discussion aids in transparency, acknowledging my existing relationships with interviewees, and demonstrates how I enacted cultural sensitivity.

Existing relationships

I knew a few interviewees before the Project began. From Family 1, I had met René a few times and attended their going-away party when they moved overseas, which is where I met their partner, Timothy. From Family 2, I was/am friends with Regina and Jordan and

had met Regina's brother and mother when visiting Regina's house. I had no prior connection with anyone in Family 3.

Age

I was 25 years old at the time of data collection. Six of the interviewees were close in age to me (within five years' difference). There was a felt age difference between me and Tsuki and May, who were teenagers. I used more informal language with them, including slang and informal structures. In the text conversation with May, I typed as I would normally do on social media, avoiding capitalisation and periods. Conversely, I erred on the side of formality with older interviewees, unless or until I detected them speaking informally. This formality was amplified in my initial engagements with older people born in Asia, as power distance between older and younger people is typically greater in Asian cultures such as my own. In actuality, these older participants always reduced the proverbial 'distance' (e.g. speaking candidly about sexuality; telling me I did not have to remove my shoes in their home).

Asian New Zealander identity

I connected to all three Asian young people (plus Jordan) through our shared experience of being ethnically Asian and growing up in New Zealand. For Tsuki, who I had never met before, I felt that I performed an emphasised New Zealander cultural identity to help her feel more comfortable with me. The first time I asked Tsuki about her culture, I noticed her physically tense up. I attributed this to a mental discomfort experienced by Asian New Zealanders who feel disconnected from their Asian cultural identities but feel pressured to perform cultural talk with others, particularly with members of the cultural group who were raised in the home country. Regina articulated this discomfort in her interview, and Tsuki and Jordan also touched on it.

(Anglo) South Asian ethnicity

I connected to Tsuki's parents and grandmother through our (Anglo) South Asian ethnicity. Though our connections largely hinged on the 'South Asian' aspect, Tsuki's father appeared pleased when he learnt of my mother's Anglo-Indian ethnicity.

I visited Tsuki's family's home three times, and each time her father plied me with tea. On the first visit, I brought a box of mithai, which are traditional sweets from the Indian subcontinent. In my culture, it is a sign of respect to present a host with a box of mithai on arrival. Though I intended to present the gift to the grandmother as the eldest member of the family, she was not there at my first visit, and I presented it to Tsuki's father, Ajit. He was pleased by the gift and repeatedly said "you didn't have to". To mitigate his feelings of imposition on me, I said "according to my mum, I have to". He laughed and said, "I think we have the same mum". This exchange felt like a bonding exercise for us as South Asian New Zealanders: engaging in a part of our culture while also relegating it to the customs of older generations (my mother and his mother).

At the end of the interviews with Tsuki's family, Tsuki's mother, Manjula, insisted that I share the mithai with her and Ajit. We sampled them while talking about South Asian food. We were all disappointed when my taxi arrived, and we had to cut the conversation short. I felt welcomed by this family and was sad to say goodbye to them.

2.9 Data processing

2.9.1 Data ethics

Participants were advised in the Information and Consent Form that their interviews would be recorded. This was via audio (in-person) or via audio and video (on Zoom). Participants were shown when the voice recorders were started and stopped (in-person) or given a pop-up message that the meeting was about to be recorded (on Zoom). Recordings were uploaded to a secure digital folder only accessible to the research team. Once transcripts were created, they were sent to the corresponding participant, who was able to correct or remove anything they wished. Aligning with the principles of mauri o te taiohi (centring of the trans young people) and whai wāhitanga principle (participant involvement and control over their data), the primary participants reviewed their family members' transcripts (after the family members were advised of this). The effect of this is that the primary participants had the final word on how events transpired, e.g. if two people disagreed on the order of events, the primary participant's recollection was used. They also had the chance to clarify ambiguities and provide further context around their family's stories if they wished.

All participants and anyone else named in an interview were given pseudonyms, and identifying information was anonymised as much as possible. This included generalising ethnicities to the Asian region (with myself as an example, I would be described as South Asian and South-East Asian rather than Indian and Malaysian). This reduced my ability to discuss the nuances of, and tailor the literature review to, each culture. However, it was deemed necessary to protect the identities of the participants, particularly as some ethnic groups are more sparsely represented in New Zealand than others, and multiple axes of participants' identity were discussed, making them more vulnerable to identification.

2.9.2 Transcription

Recordings were put through the transcription software Otter AI, then I carefully edited the transcripts against the recording. All interviews were transcribed in full, then edited to remove extraneous and sensitive material, including material that might identify or embarrass the participant, or that they asked to be removed. Transcripts were only used for analysis once they were approved by the participants. One participant sent two voice messages with additional thoughts they had after their interview. These were transcribed and affixed to their transcript as addenda.

2.9.3 AI disclosure

Otter AI transcription software was the only AI tool used in this research, and I manually checked its outputs.

2.10 Analytical frameworks/tools

2.10.1 Intersectionality (as an analytical tool/sensibility)

Intersectionality can be used as both a theoretical framework (as discussed earlier) and as an analytical tool (Collins & Bilge, 2020) or sensibility: "a way of thinking about and conducting analyses" (Cho et al., 2013, p. 795). I employed intersectionality in my analysis by taking care to identify interplays of identity, e.g. religion and trans identity; culture and neurodivergence. I recognised that the participants were experiencing family support and discrimination from family; LGBTQ+, cultural, and religious communities; and wider society. They experienced this support and discrimination not

simply as trans people, but as young, trans, neurodivergent, second-generation Asian New Zealanders with Christian upbringings. Though the neurodivergent identities and Christian upbringings were not recruitment criteria, part of my intersectional approach was moulding my analysis to the identities that most heavily impacted my participants' experiences of family support and discrimination. For example, participants reported discrimination from religious family members and institutions based on their trans and/or neurodivergent identities. Reporting on the complexity of these situations was essential to an intersectional approach as it acknowledged the many social categories that play into individuals' experiences of family support and discrimination. Research with trans populations that fails to employ an intersectional approach risks continuing to marginalise some of its most minoritised members.

2.10.2 Multimodal discourse analysis

Multimodal discourse analysis is a way of looking at data through multiple modes (methods of communication), compared to traditional discourse analysis, which typically only analyses verbal communication (Machin, 2013). It fits well with arts-based research (described in Section *2.11.5: Creative* methodologies), as both appreciate means of communication beyond lexical meaning, including metaphor, colour, space, symbols, and patterns (Greenwood, 2019). My participants' drawings and words were analysed intertextually: in relation to each other and to wider texts (Fairclough, 2003). Analysing texts in relation to each other strengthened understanding of all the texts. This was particularly useful in the exploration of metaphor, as participants constructed complex metaphors through both their words and drawings. Analysing texts vis-à-vis wider texts meant noting stylistic references to media types such as anime and memes, and references to specific texts such as certain TV shows.

2.10.3 Metaphor

Contemporary metaphor research defines a metaphor as "a cross-domain mapping in the conceptual system" (Lakoff, 2006, p. 186). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argued that our conceptual systems are fundamentally metaphorical – we make sense of the world through metaphor, through mapping what we experience to familiar concepts. We can use language as evidence of how people process their experiences. Metaphorical

thinking starts in the brain, then is realised through language in discursive constructions. Under Conceptual Metaphor theory, metaphorical expressions can be made in any mode of communication, including visual and verbal (Ritchie, 2017). Analysis of metaphor became a key focus of my analysis, given the prominence of metaphors in my data.

2.11 Analytical process

2.11.1 Collaborative analysis with participants

Analysis was incorporated into the interview itself, as participants discussed their drawings with me. I used Castellotti & Moore's (2009) strategy of 'shared interpretation' (*"interprétation conjointe";* pp. 45-46*)* to confirm what symbols were intended to be drawn and participants' ideas of the meanings of those symbols, and to test my interpretations against the participants' intentions.

My participants and I physically looked at the drawing together, or if it was on Zoom, we screen-shared the picture. First, I broadly asked "tell me about your drawing". I then asked about all the elements I could see, e.g. "did you use this colour for a reason?", and "you've drawn a few people, is one of them you?" I also asked, "is there anything you wanted to draw but you weren't able to?" Interestingly, most people responded affirmatively to the latter question, e.g. one person drew herself standing behind her child with her arms outspread and said she would have drawn herself and her child hugging, but she "just didn't have the artistic skills". While some researcher interpretation is necessary in discourse analysis, the interpretation of art is especially subjective. I believe that dialoguing about the drawings produced more accurate descriptions of the participants' intentions. An example of the usefulness of this strategy is the drawing of a participant who drew himself and his partner using blue and red, respectively. My initial interpretation was that this colour choice may have represented their genders. However, when I asked why he chose those colours, he said simply that his favourite colour is green and his partner's favourite colour is orange, but he did not have the colours he wanted to use. The hugging and colour examples show the importance of considering what could limit a participant's self-expression in their drawing.

2.11.2 Collaborative field notes with PI

As soon as possible after each interview, the PI and I listened to the recording, discussed the interview, and made field notes. For primary participants, notes included descriptions of the participant's identities, personal and family history, support network, their drawing, observations (e.g. the participant and I bonded over a shared identity; the participant sometimes misgendered the trans young person and did or did not self-correct) and information around the interview (e.g. if we ate together, were interrupted, or had a conversation afterwards). Notes for family members included the ways the family member supported the trans young person. Discussing the interviews promptly and with another project member was useful for capturing initial descriptions and reflections.

2.11.3 Identifying the most salient themes

After immersing myself in the data numerous times from listening to the audio and preparing the transcripts, I reflected on the identity categories discussed in the primary participant data. Participant commentary about cultural identity was extensive, as I expected. As I am disabled, I hoped that there would be some data about disability that I could explore; however, none of the participants said they identified as disabled. I was not expecting the high extent to which participants identified as neurodivergent, nor did I anticipate participants' complex discussions of the ways their neurodivergence interacted with their trans identities. All of the trans young people mentioned being non-heterosexual, which was discussed but not to great depth. Participant discussion of family support of sexuality was often grouped with family support of gender, so it did not offer significant intersectional insight. Religious identity and the reconciliation of this with trans identity was also of interest to me as a queer Christian. I expected to see the influence of varying religions on families from different Asian regions but found that all families had wholly or partially Christian backgrounds. Discussion of religion was extensive across participants, with participants reporting different attitudes towards religion from one another.

Based on these observations, I decided that my three foci for analysis would be culture, religion, and neurodivergence.



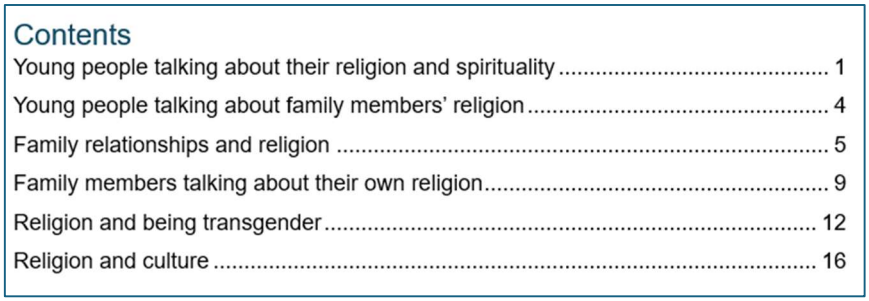
Margaret 33
Journey and searching 33
Proximity and touch 35
Colour, brightness, and spectrum 36
In between-ness 37
Hobbies represent René's passionate personality 37
Exploration and experimentation 38
Openness and closedness 38
Tribes and circles, connection and division 39
Pieces and whole 39
Pain/war/battles 40
Different genders as different people 40
Evolution 40
Growth 41
Hearts as love 41
Smiling as comfort 41
The divine 41
Vibe 41
Worlds and spaces 41

Figure 1: An excerpt from Family 1's 'metaphor' document: metaphor categories identified in Margaret's transcript

2.11.4 Extracting themes and metaphors

I started extracting metaphors by highlighting metaphorical language in each transcript. The PI reviewed this and advised on any metaphors that I had missed, based on her reading of the transcripts. I grouped like metaphors together for each participant into categories such as "journey", "colour and spectrum", and "walls/barriers" (see Figure 1 for an example). I grouped a family's metaphors into one document for ease of comparison.

I then created thematic documents focusing on culture, religion, and neurodivergence respectively. I reread each transcript and copied any sections relating to these



Contents
Young people talking about their religion and spirituality 1
Young people talking about family members' religion 4
Family relationships and religion 5
Family members talking about their own religion 9
Religion and being transgender 12
Religion and culture 16

Figure 2: The contents page of the 'religion' analysis document

themes into the appropriate document. I made comments about the quotes, grouped the quotes into sub-themes (see Figure 2 for an example), and summarised each sub-theme. The 'culture' analysis document was reviewed by Kyle K. H. Tan, who advised on cultural sensitivity when discussing the findings, and recommended relevant literature.

I started describing the data by comparing the experiences of the trans young people, e.g. comparing the extent to which the young people connected to their cultures. This proved to be less analytically rich than describing the participants' experiences individually and deeply, so I modified my approach to developing case studies.

2.11.5 Creative methodologies

Creative methodologies can help produce "new and innovative intersectional queer research" (G. R. Mehrotra, 2023). Arts-based methods of data collection can help participants explore experiences and feelings that are sensitive, emotional, subjective, and abstract (Greenwood, 2019). Arts-based research appreciates means of communication beyond lexical meaning, including metaphor, colour, space, symbols, and patterns (Greenwood, 2019).

Multiple creative methodologies were employed in this research, including reflective drawing (discussed in *2.6.1: Reflective drawing*), creation of illustrated family portraits of each family who participated in the research, and creation of a data poem, the latter two of which were created during the analytical process.

The illustrated family portraits, which we call "Village Portraits"[6], present quotes from each family in a narrative format, with the young person presenting their salient identities and how each of their selected family members has supported them, followed by quotes from the family members expressing their perspective on supporting the trans young person and family support advice they would give others with a trans family member. The Village Portraits for the Asian families were devised and illustrated by Dr de Bres and designed by ia Morrison-Young, with advice from me, and published on the Project website once the primary participants approved them. As one participant has a special interest in video games, I used my skills with digital generators to depict the

[6] The Village Portraits can be viewed at: https://www.projectvillageaotearoa.com/village-portraits-map

family as video game avatars. In line with our policy of participant feedback and participation, the trans young people advised on and approved their depictions before publishing. The Village Portraits served to draw connections between the primary participants' and the family members' perspectives of family support and summarise large datasets. They were also an early-stage research output and a way to engage with the community.

Finally, I created a data poem (see Appendix J) as a way of engaging with and analysing the data, as part of an exercise at an arts-based research workshop I attended during my research. This was comprised of direct quotes from one participant discussing their drawing. Poetry in academic writing taps into the personal and the critical (Fitzpatrick, 2012). It can be more advantageous than prose in representing language and prosodic features such as rhythm, repetition, and natural pauses (Lahman, 2025; Richardson, 1993). Creating the data poem revealed significant repetition of words and phrases and was a way of viewing the data multimodally by comparing the participant's words and drawing.

2.11.6 Case studies

I present my results primarily in the form of case studies. A case study presents a topic through an in-depth analysis of a single setting or context (Creswell et al., 2007). In this thesis, each case study illustrates a key finding through extended examples of discursive constructions of tension and/or metaphor from one trans young person and their family. The three thematic chapters will each present one or two case studies. I will now proceed with the first of these thematic chapters: *Culture*.

3 Culture

3.1 Chapter introduction

This chapter is about culture. I will start by discussing the meaning of 'culture' and other key terms for this chapter. I will then explore literature about relationships between culture and trans identity in trans Asian young people's experiences of family support, including academic models for Asian conceptions of family, differences in Asian and Western models of coming out and being 'in the closet', and trans Asians' senses of belonging in ethnic versus rainbow communities.

I will then present two case studies to explore some of my major findings. In the case of Tsuki and her family, I will explore her family's intergenerational narratives about their culture, then Tsuki's cultural orientation away from her heritage culture and towards New Zealand and Japanese cultures. In the case of Regina, I will explore Regina's negotiation of her mixed-race identity, including her leaning into her White identity and her feeling of having to 'perform' Asian culture. I will also discuss anime influences in the art of Regina and her brother, Bartholomew.

After the case studies, I will discuss patterns in the data, including points of connection to heritage culture across the three trans young people, where I will bring René's story into the picture. In the discussion section, I explore my findings in relation to the literature, noting contradictions between academic models of trans acceptance in Asian families and my own findings. I will compare the stories of the trans young people, exploring the influence of intergenerational narratives, Western conception of gender, and connection to Japanese culture. I will then discuss the implications of my findings for family support for young trans Asian New Zealanders and argue that family-supported agency in cultural identity development is valuable for this group.

3.1.1 What is culture?

Historically, the term 'culture' has referred to that which is *cultivated*, whether that is soil, cells, or a society (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952). McDaniel et al.'s (2015) applied definition of culture asserts that "culture is the rules for living and functioning in society" (p. 11). Culture affects a person's foundational world views, such as what

constitutes family and what behaviours are acceptable in different contexts. McGoldrick et al. (2005) argue that cultural background is profoundly influenced by not only ethnicity, but "social class, religion, migration, geography, gender oppression, racism, and sexual orientation, as well as by family dynamics." (p. 1).

In this thesis, I focus on cultures as products of ethnicity, nationality, and/or race, such as the varying Asian ethnic cultures, New Zealand national culture, and White racial culture. I use "heritage culture" to refer to the ethnic culture of a person's ancestors.

3.1.2 Culture key terms

These are definitions of some relevant terms used in this chapter that were not already defined in the introduction chapter, in *1.8: Definitions of key terms*.

- *Home country*: for immigrants and descendants of immigrants, the country that the first-generation immigrant(s) was/were born in.
- *First-generation immigrant*: the person or people in a family who settled in a new country (the *host country*) as adults.
- *Second-generation immigrant*: the children of first-generation immigrants, usually born in the host country. Children who moved to the host country before age 6 may be called "1.75 generation" (Rumbaut, 2004) but I will follow Berry et al.'s (2022) definition of second-generation immigrants as either children of immigrants born in the host country, or those who moved to the home country before the age of 7, due to the vastly similar cultural experiences between this group and those born in the host country.
- *Euro-South Asian*: not a formal term, but a general term that I use for people of mixed South Asian and European ancestry resulting from colonisation of South Asia, which includes groups such as Anglo Indians, Burghers, and Luso-Goans. I use this to obscure the specific culture, and thus the identity of, Family 3. I do not use 'Eurasian' due to its ambiguity of meaning (I discuss the term 'Eurasian' later in this chapter in *Asian & Western identity hybridisation)*.

The first-generation Asian immigrant participants are Ajit (Tsuki's father), Manjula (Tsuki's mother), Aaliyah (Tsuki's grandmother), Ayah (Regina's father), and Margaret

(René's mother). René's father, not included in the study, is also a first-generation Asian immigrant.

The second-generation Asian immigrant participants are Regina, Tsuki, René, Jordan (Regina's best friend) and Bartholomew (Regina's brother).

3.2 Literature review

3.2.1 Introduction

At the 2023 census, of the 861,576 people who identified as Asian, 75% were born overseas, mostly in Asia (Stats NZ, 2025), indicating that a significant proportion of Asian New Zealand families have recent immigration history. Thus, to understand the dynamics of Asian families in New Zealand, it is relevant to examine the values and experiences of Asian families within the context of first-generation and second-generation migration. Immigration status is also a salient identity factor, as Divakalala & Bal (2024) argue that being part of the diaspora is an additional complicating factor to the identity formation and support experiences of LGBTQ+ Asian New Zealanders.

3.2.2 Common values for Asian immigrant families

Existing literature about Asian communities in Western societies ascribes various common cultural values to Asian diaspora communities. Commonalities ascribed to Asian immigrant groups include collectivism and indirect communication. I will describe more general values before exploring values specific to families and later I will apply these values to the context of family support for trans youth.

Collectivism

Asian cultures are typically collectivist (Budhwar et al., 2008; Min, 2025; S. Tan & Weisbart, 2022), embracing a "we" identity over an "I" identity (Lee & Mock, 2005a, p. 271), i.e. placing higher importance on group welfare than individual welfare. Collectivist values include interdependence, conflict avoidance, obligations to the family, respect and reverence for elders, and hierarchy within the family (Lee & Mock, 2005a; Singaravelu, 2015; S. Tan & Weisbart, 2022). Individuals may be viewed as part of

a generational continuum, with their actions reflecting on their ancestors as well as their extended family (Lee & Mock, 2005a).

Indirect communication

Indirect communication is typical of collectivist cultures. Direct expressions of feelings may be discouraged in favour of maintaining harmony (Baig et al., 2014; Lee & Mock, 2005a). Problems may be verbally downplayed (Lee & Mock, 2005a). Asian parents may not express their love towards their children as outwardly as Western parents, perhaps preferring to show their love through working hard to provide for them (Lee & Mock, 2005a).

During times of intrafamily conflict, the affected family members may not speak to one another and neutral family members may serve as intermediaries to facilitate communication (Lee & Mock, 2005a).

3.2.3 Asian ideas of family

Asian cultures traditionally cast a wide net in the extended kinship network in their definitions of family (Bal & Divakalala, 2022; Lee & Mock, 2005a). Traditional Asian ideas of family include centrality of and obligation to the family; reliance on extended family and ethnic communities; hierarchal roles and parental and elder authority. These ideas may be reinforced or modified by immigration contexts.

Centrality of and obligation to the family unit

Typically, in Asian cultures, the family unit is centred throughout one's lifetime (Lee & Mock, 2005a; Wan et al., 2022). Three-generational households are not uncommon, and it may be taken for granted that children take care of their parents in their old age (Lee & Mock, 2005b; Pillari, 2005; Singaravelu, 2015).

Parental socialisation, "a process through which parents impart cultural, moral, and social values to their children" is woven into the concept of family in some Asian cultures (Alamgir, 2024, p. 579). Family narratives are shaped by wider social narratives, including attitudes about the family's own, and adjacent, cultures (Rocha, 2015).

Family reputation/face/honour/izzat

In sociolinguistics, face refers to "the conception of self that each person displays in particular interactions with others" (Cupach & Metts, 1994, p. 3). Though popularised in the West by Goffman (1955), he adopted the term from Chinese (Qi, 2017). Face is a concept across Asian cultures (Baig et al., 2014), though it is known by different names across Asia, including *izzat* in South Asia, *chemyon* in Korea, and *năa* in Thailand (Baig et al., 2014, p. 129). The concept of 'family face' may be understood as honour and reputation (Baig et al., 2014). Rocha (2015) calls fear of losing face over a family member's actions "a particularly Asian sentiment" (p. 80). Internal and external pressures to protect the family's reputation can cause Asian youth to modulate their behaviour (Alamgir, 2024; Baig et al., 2014; K. K. H. Tan et al., 2023).

Hierarchal roles and parental and elder authority

Hierarchal relationships, including attention to the birth order of children, are noted as a value for Chinese (Min, 2025), Vietnamese (Leung & Boehnlein, 2005), Indians (Budhwar et al., 2008), and Koreans (B.-L. C. Kim & Ryu, 2005). Asian families may be patriarchal, with the father as the head of the household (Budhwar et al., 2008; Lee & Mock, 2005a). Some Asian cultures value deference to elders (Leung & Boehnlein, 2005) where young family members are expected to stay quiet in front of elders and not disagree with them, and elders are called in to resolve conflicts.

Reliance on extended family and ethnic communities

Immigration often means losing physical contact with the extended family network that is a typical pillar of support for families in Asia (Leung & Boehnlein, 2005; Pillari, 2005; Pollock, 2005). To combat the loss of the extended family support network, Asian immigrants may create chosen families of friends (Pillari, 2005), engage with cultural community groups (Lee & Mock, 2005b), or choose to live in ethnic enclaves (Lee & Mock, 2005a, 2005b). Asian immigrants may find connection with their local ethnic community more critical to their wellbeing than Western families due to the stresses of leaving behind family and settling into a new culture (Lee & Mock, 2005b). Particularly for Indians, family problems typically must only be discussed within the family (Pillari, 2005), which can make losing family emotionally isolating.

3.2.4 First-generation immigrant experiences of pushing away and clinging to heritage

Asian immigrants' tendencies to either push away or cling tighter to their heritage are influenced by the nature of their immigration circumstances (e.g. arriving via skilled migrant pathways vs forced displacement) and societal pressure to conform to the dominant culture (McGoldrick et al., 2005). Many Asian countries' histories are rife with violent displacement via European colonisation, invasion from neighbouring countries, and internal government oppression. For families who have called Asia home for millennia, leaving to start life in the West may be a difficult decision, perhaps bringing back painful memories of ancestral displacement. Memories of and ties to the home country may turn bittersweet.

Older Asian immigrants who push away their culture may be overwhelmed by traumatic histories in their home country, especially those in recent memory such as the Khmer Rouge regime (Pollock, 2005). Discrimination in Western countries is also a factor, with legal and social benefits to denying being Asian. New Zealand excluded Asians from citizenship until 1951, even those born in New Zealand (Spoonley, 2017). In the 21st century, Anti-Asian sentiment spiked in the wake of 9/11 (Shibusawa, 2005) and COVID-19 (Ng, 2021).

These factors may push immigrants to "ignore or deny their ethnicity by changing their names and rejecting their families and social backgrounds" (McGoldrick et al., 2005, p. 10). This may include attempting to "pass" as members of the majority ethnic group (McGoldrick et al., 2005, p. 10) to benefit from "being considered normal" (Goffman, 1963, p. 74). However, McGoldrick et al. (2005) argue that ethnic minorities who attempt to pass "do so at the detriment of their sense of themselves" (p. 10). Intrafamily conflict may arise If some family members can pass and some cannot (McGoldrick et al., 2005, p. 10); for example, a mixed race Asian/White child may be able to pass as White while their Asian parent cannot. In attempting to pass in a majority ethnic community, some may find that they may not fully fit in with them due to differences in attitudes (Goffman, 1963, p. 87).

Conversely, the alienation of culture shock can spur first-generation Asian immigrants to cling more tightly to their heritage values and customs (Adler, 1975; Baig et al., 2014). However, their children may not have the same values (Singaravelu, 2015). Ethnic minorities face inherent pressure to marginalise their heritage and conform to the dominant cultural norms of the host country (McGoldrick et al., 2005), thus a first-generation immigrant parent may fear "losing their children" to Western culture (B.-L. C. Kim & Ryu, 2005, p. 354). To combat this, they may insist on raising their children under similar conditions as they would in Asia, for example restricting rights to privacy (Almeida, 2005) and pushing for academic success (B.-L. C. Kim & Ryu, 2005). This can spur dissatisfaction and potentially rebelliousness in second-generation immigrant adolescents who see their peers enjoying more freedoms than them (Pillari, 2005).

3.2.5 Impact of Asian values and immigrant experiences on supporting trans family members

S. Tan & Weisbart (2022), extrapolating from Szymanski & Sung's (2010) general LGBTQ+ context, suggest that the collectivist values of conformity, attending to others' comfort, and obligation to the family's reputation can make it difficult for trans young people to come out, and for their family to support them if they do. It is also suggested that part of obligation to the family may be living a 'normative' life, i.e. a cisnormative and heteronormative life (Min, 2025). It is important to recognise that this vein of inquiry has focused on trans and queer Asian diasporic people's *perceptions* of their Asian communities and may not always reflect Asian family members' *actual beliefs*. While a youth-centred approach is valuable, this is an instance where adding family input is useful for articulating the impact of cultural values on trans acceptance.

Discussion of sex, sexuality, and related areas is typically viewed as unacceptable in Asian cultures (Lee & Mock, 2005a), an ideological artifact from European colonisation of Asia (Bal, 2024). Family members may place gender identity in this category, particularly if intimate areas of the body are explicitly or implicitly brought up.

S. Tan & Weisbart maintain that acculturation and generation can be factors in family support for trans young people. First-generation immigrants who are particularly attached to their heritage cultures may see their trans child as forsaking their heritage

culture (S. Tan & Weisbart, 2022, pp. 488–489), especially if they view gender variance as a Western phenomenon. The child being trans may bring up more general fears of "losing" the child to Western culture (B.-L. C. Kim & Ryu, 2005, p. 354).

3.2.6 Second-generation immigrant acculturation experiences

Asian & Western identity hybridisation

In some Asian countries, legal and social communication heavily distinguishes people by racialised categories (Rocha & Fozdar, 2017) that may not represent actual cultural identities (Rocha, 2015).

A term used in parts of Asia to describe people with Asian and European heritage is 'Eurasian' (Rocha & Fozdar, 2017). This term was used in the colonial era to amalgamate all people who did not fit into a single racial category (Rocha, 2015, p. 21). While some modern Asian European people identify with this term, others do not, as it does not capture the nuances between different mixed-race groups, and some identify 'Eurasian' as a distinct culture created by colonial contact (see *3.1.2: Culture key terms* for similar historic mixed cultures).

While the hard categorisation of ethnicity in Asia can reduce sense of belonging for mixed-race Euro-Asian people (Rocha, 2015), 'New Zealander' as an identity has been described as a "non-racial transcendence", offering Asian-Pākehā New Zealanders a cultural identity that does not make them feel othered . However, some Asian-Pākehā associate New Zealand culture with Whiteness and feel that one has to be perceived as White to fit in completely (Rocha, 2015, pp. 69–70).

Gibbons (2003) argues that 'New Zealand identity' is a discursive construction invented by colonial-era Pākehā to describe themselves only (p. 39) and other scholars note the systemic exclusion of Asians from mainstream New Zealand society throughout our history (Leckie, 2021; Lunt et al., 2002; Spoonley, 2017). Despite the non-inclusive roots of the term, Asian New Zealanders may still wear the term 'New Zealander' with a sense of national pride.

As an additional note, not all 'Asian' New Zealanders identify with the term Asian. Some reject 'Asian' as an essentialising artifact of racialisation, preferring more specific terms such as 'Korean' or 'Taiwanese' (Bartley & Spoonley, 2008).

Complicating factors for mixed-race people

Strong opposition to racial mixing, and mixed-race people by extension, can be a hurtful influence for Asians in mixed-race families (Rocha, 2015; Roy, 2017). Some mixed-race groups in Asia have been historically vilified. For example, the Hindu caste system deems mixed-race Indians racially 'contaminated' (Roy, 2017, p. 196). However, in late-colonial India, Whiteness was viewed as more of a cultural than biological identity, and Anglo-Indians could be accepted as White if they "aggressively embraced cultural, behavioural and class markers" (Roy, 2017, p. 197). Performing Whiteness offered them material privileges as well as cultural belonging. Thus, mixed-race Euro-Asians not accepted by their Asian culture may find belonging by favouring their White identity.

Asian & Māori value hybridisation

There are similarities between Māori ideas of family and typical Asian ideas of family. Smith (2021) notes the scholarly argument that in pre-colonial Aotearoa, the "core social unit" was the whānau rather than the individual (p. 243), which is a component of traditional Chinese families (Lee & Mock, 2005b) and other collectivist Asian cultures (Lee & Mock, 2005a).

Divakalala & Bal (2024) argue that LGBTQ+ second-generation South Asian New Zealanders may resonate with decolonisation efforts and Māori values. New Zealand's decolonialisation efforts may appeal to LGBTQ+ South Asians because the colonisation of South Asia largely erased South Asia's indigenous gender and sexual identities from public consciousness (Bal, 2024).

Some Māori values, including whanaungatanga and manaakitanga, may resonate for LGBTQ+ second-generation South Asian New Zealanders (Divakalala & Bal, 2024). The Māori concept of whanaungatanga, which may be simply translated as kinship relationships (Kōwhiti Whakapae, 2026), emphasises the importance of "maintaining and nurturing relationships within the community" (Divakalala & Bal, 2024, p. 7). This is

consistent with the traditional South Asian value of reliance on extended family and community (Divakalala & Bal, 2024, p. 7) and indeed this is a typical feature of Asian peoples, whether they are in a home or host country (Leung & Boehnlein, 2005; Pillari, 2005; Pollock, 2005).

Manaakitanga may be simply translated as care for others and collective responsibility (Kōwhiti Whakapae, 2026). Divakalala & Bal (2024) maintain that observing manaakitanga may help LGBTQ+ South Asian New Zealanders bridge cultural divides. I suggest that the Asian values of obligation to the family's comfort (S. Tan & Weisbart, 2022) and face (Baig et al., 2014) resemble elements of manaakitanga.

3.2.7 Trans Asian youth experiences

Coming out and not coming out

Coming out to family for rainbow Asian New Zealanders may look quite different than for Pākehā. To start with, many do not come out to family. A study of rainbow South Asian New Zealanders found that over two thirds (69%) were not out to their extended families (Bal & Divakalala, 2022). K. K. H. Tan et al. (2021) suggest that relatively more conservative attitudes towards gender diversity in Asian cultures may be a factor in trans Asians choosing to remain closeted with some family members.

Collectivism may play a role in this trend of not coming out to family due to emphases on conformity and obligation to familial comfort and reputation (K. K. H. Tan et al., 2023; S. Tan & Weisbart, 2022). Coming out as trans may be considered upsetting to family members (S. Tan & Weisbart, 2022); affronting to traditional roles, including gender role expectations (K. K. H. Tan et al., 2023; S. Tan & Weisbart, 2022); and damaging to the family's reputation (Alamgir, 2024; Bal & Divakalala, 2022; K. K. H. Tan et al., 2023; S. Tan & Weisbart, 2022). These beliefs may be internalised by Asian trans young people, who may feel that coming out to their family is not an option "due to a deep sense of responsibility towards their parent's reputation and the family's honour" (Bal & Divakalala, 2022, p. 23). Trans Asians may modify their gender expression, i.e. present cisnormatively, in front of their family and cultural community to protect their family's comfort and reputation (Divakalala & Bal, 2024).

When being fully out to family is not possible, some trans Asian young people may co-construct a narrative of convenience with (a) trusted family member(s). Narratives of convenience, first described by Thomsen (2021) in a study with Korean gay men, are a strategy of coming out to only select, trusted family members, and presenting heteronormatively (or cisnormatively) to the rest of the family, wider cultural community, and church if applicable. This allows a trans or queer young person to be out in some situations, while maintaining intrafamily harmony and maintaining the family's reputation.

Rainbow Asians who choose to come out to family have been observed following a pattern of coming out to siblings first, then mother, and then father, attributable to increased power of the father in Asian patriarchal family structures and a perceived and/or actual greater tolerance of rainbow identities in mothers and younger generations (Amerasinghe, 2018, p. 23).

General community experiences

Some trans Asians make links between their biological appearance and their ability to 'pass' (be socially perceived as the gender they identify as; Pfeffer, 2016). A participant in S. Tan & Weisbart's (2022) study of ethnically East Asian trans youth said that Asian trans people tended to have an easier time 'passing', though another participant found it more difficult to 'pass' as a man due to his short stature, "look[ing] so feminine", and having a "baby-face" (p. 494).

New Zealand-specific experiences

Trans second-generation South Asian New Zealanders in Divakalala & Bal's (2024) study expressed the feeling that the compounding of their trans and ethnic identities meant that they experienced more intense discrimination than trans Pākehā New Zealanders. Some of their participants also reported feeling othered by New Zealand's bicultural framework.

Trans Asians in New Zealand show a marked difference in their access of gender-affirming health services: they are six times more likely than average to exclusively access hormones through unlicensed sources (Veale et al., 2019). This may be

influenced by their low likelihood to be out to their family members, with the situation likely exacerbated for legal minors (who have less medical autonomy) and people who live with their parents (who enjoy less privacy than those who live away from home, especially given the Asian value of reduced right to privacy discussed above).

Exclusion from ethnic communities

Trans and rainbow Asians can be marginalised in their ethnic communities due to their gender and sexual identities. Some trans Asian Counting Ourselves respondents mentioned difficulties in connecting with their ethnic communities due to cisnormativity (K. K. H. Tan, Yee, et al., 2021). Religion is also a factor, as Asian diasporic communities can be intertwined with Christian communities, and Christian communities can be transphobic and homophobic. With this mitigating factor, being fully 'out' can result in "major separation" from their religious community and thus their ethnic community (Thomsen, 2021, p. 1016).

Prioritisation of gender identity over cultural identity

Trans Asian youth may feel more connected to their gender identity than their cultural identity, due to factors such as the aforementioned discrimination from their ethnic community, as well as generation, as second-generation immigrants may be less attached to their heritage culture than their parents (S. Tan & Weisbart, 2022). For trans Asian New Zealanders in the Counting Ourselves survey, sense of belonging in the Asian community was approximately half of sense of belonging in the trans community (35% vs 68%; K. K. H. Tan, Yee, et al., 2021). Similarly, Canadian Trans Asian youth research participants in S. Tan & Weisbart's (2022) study "discussed their gender identities enthusiastically" (p. 491) but were less assured about their ethnic identities.

Exclusion from rainbow communities

Rainbow Asians in New Zealand report marginalisation from mainstream rainbow communities, including "invisibilisation" and "erroneous amalgamation" (Divakalala & Bal, 2024, p. 9). Invisibilisation is described by Herzog (2018) as a step beyond silencing. While silencing limits a group's access to participation in public discourse, an invisibilised group cannot be seen empathetically as equal and complex beings

(Herzog, 2018, p. 16). Erroneous amalgamation is "the inaccurate or oversimplified merging of diverse identities within the ethnic LGBTQIA + community, leading to stereotyping, marginalisation, and a lack of nuanced understanding of the multifaceted experiences of ethnic LGBTQIA + persons" (Divakalala & Bal, 2024, p. 9)

Rainbow Asian participants in Amerasinghe's (2018) study noted that while New Zealand has made progress at recognising culturally mediated gender and sexual diversity in Māori and Pasifika cultures, they did not feel this was extended to Asian cultures. For example, some participants expressed not feeling safe dressing in a gender non-conforming way due to familial cis-normative pressure, while simultaneously felt pressure by the rainbow community to dress in a gender non-conforming way, with some participants reporting receiving criticism from White members of the rainbow community for not looking gender non-conforming enough.

Friends and chosen family

Friends and chosen family can be important to trans Asian youth in New Zealand and Asia. Asian Counting Ourselves respondents reported higher rates of support from friends than family members (K. K. H. Tan, Yee, et al., 2021). The authors call for further research into the different types of social support that Asian trans people receive from family versus friends. Young Khawaja Sara and Hijra in Pakistan have been observed moving from rural areas to the nation's capital to live in intentional trans communes (Alamgir, 2024). Those who migrate do this to free themselves from parental authority that does not allow them to express their gender identities authentically at home (Alamgir, 2024). The findings from these two studies suggest that friends and chosen family can be important sources of support for trans youth in New Zealand and in Asia.

3.2.8 Conclusion

Culture and immigration status are important factors in the family support experiences and cultural identities of trans Asian youth in New Zealand. Their coming out experiences with family, including whether to be out to family at all, may be affected by the influence of collectivist values, sensitivity towards the family's reputation, and hierarchal roles within the family (which affects which family members they may feel safer to come out to). Trans Asian youth in New Zealand report discrimination within

ethnic and rainbow communities, hindering their sense of belonging in each community. Second-generation Asian New Zealander trans youth may experience high cultural tension that can be further complicated by being mixed-race, leading to the formation of identities such as 'New Zealander' or 'White' rather than 'Asian'.

3.3 Analysis

3.3.1 Introduction

In this analysis, I will present two case studies to discuss the research findings from examining the data with a cultural lens. Tsuki and Regina are both mixed-race Euro-Asian/Asian-Pākehā New Zealanders. Tsuki has historic European ancestry, while Regina has one Asian parent and one White parent. They similarly experience tension with their multiple cultural identities, though Tsuki discusses more tension relating to national identity (South Asia vs New Zealand vs Japan), while Regina largely focuses on racial identity (South-East Asian vs White). Tsuki's case explores the three most common types of cultural orientation observed in the data: orienting away from the heritage culture, orienting to New Zealand culture, and orienting to Japanese culture. Regina's case explores some of the unique challenges of being a mixed-race Asian-Pākehā New Zealander, including the complexity of self-introduction, the feeling of having to 'perform' heritage culture, and Regina's desire to pass as White. I bring René into the discussion later, in *Points of Connection*. René is a non-Japanese East Asian person who expressed connection to their heritage culture and Japanese culture, particularly involving media and cultural conceptions of gender expression across East Asian cultures.

3.3.2 Pulled in three directions: Tsuki's discursive orientations to South Asian, New Zealand, and Japanese cultures

Tsuki's story is characterised by a background of intergenerational narratives about her South Asian heritage, internal cultural tension between this heritage and her New Zealand identity, and a developed affiliation with Japanese culture.

Intergenerational narratives

Intergenerational narratives are ideas, values, and life lessons that are passed down from older generations to younger ones (Baig et al., 2014; Liu & Zhu, 2023). This passing down of knowledge can be intentional, via parental socialisation (Alamgir, 2024), or absorbed by younger generations through observation. Intergenerational narratives include ideas about the family's own culture(s) and those adjacent to them. Significant intergenerational cultural narratives, particularly negative narratives about monoethnic South Asians, were evident in Tsuki's family's discourse.

Tsuki's family has a Euro-South Asian background, and it was the only family with a historic mixed ethnicity. This identity differs from someone like Regina, who has one Asian and one White parent, as the centuries-old history of Tsuki's family's Euro-South Asian ethnicity means that the family has had time to develop an identity as a mixed-race family. As Ajit explains, "We have different ethnicities within [our country]. And my mum is from a ethnicity called [*redacted*]. They are mixed with [Europeans]." Discourse from Tsuki's father and grandmother suggest that they view monoethnic South Asians from their home country as a separate culture from Euro-South Asians. After introducing his ethnicity, Ajit explicitly verbally distinguishes his background as "not the typical [South Asian] one". He goes beyond ethnic difference, proceeding to list several attributes that he ascribes to the monoethnic population of his home country, including some negative attributes:

> **Ajit:** ...My background is not the typical [South Asian] one where it's lot more rigid. And they are more religious, more superstitious, very likely to be Buddhist and very set in their ways. Mostly. They're also wonderful people, but also-

He describes this group as "rigid" and "very set in their ways", which he appears to mean negatively. He also describes them as "very likely to be Buddhist" which is not necessarily a negative attribution, but the religious comments sandwiched between the comments about rigidity and being set in their ways indicate that he views these attributes as somewhat related to religiosity. Ajit's mother is Catholic and his father was Buddhist. Buddhism is significantly older than Catholicism, so it follows that he may view Buddhist sections of society as more traditional, and therefore conservative, than

those with Catholic heritage. He then self-repairs, adding “Mostly. They’re also wonderful people, but also-”. The self-correction may represent a desire to mitigate insult to that ethnic community due to a cultural value of conflict avoidance (Lee & Mock, 2005a). It may also indicate a cognitive dissonance in his absorbed narratives about monoethnic people from his country, as Ajit discursively presents incongruous views of his wife versus the cultural groups she belongs to. Ajit’s wife, Manjula, was raised Buddhist and is monoethnic South Asian, but Ajit does not ascribe the negative values described above to his wife, claiming that “she’s from a very strict background, but she’s different from where she came from.”

Manjula did not seem to disparage her own culture but did seem to agree that Euro-South Asians and people from certain parts of her country may be more progressive, saying “Ajit is from [*redacted*], of course, that's a more progressive area. Besides, Ajit is a mix [of South Asian and European]. Because of that, I think he was in a crowd a bit more, yeah, as you say, progressive.”

Aaliyah, Ajit’s mother (Tsuki’s grandmother), presents similar discourses to Ajit. She separates the values from her culture with those of monoethnic South Asians by saying “we have that mix there, and we don't have that attitude or that culture or that close tunnel vision”. By “mix” she refers to her ancestry, brought up earlier in the interview: “I was born in [South Asian country], but I have [European] ancestry”. In this statement, she points to ancestry as a point of separation. Interestingly, the trans young people often described disconnection from their culture with a tinge of shame, but Aaliyah and Ajit seem to think it is good that they are not like other, “backward thinking” South Asians (Ajit said “some of my compatriots, people from my culture, they could be a bit sort of backward thinking”). When I told Aaliyah that I think my father’s side of the family still have very Indian ideas, she asserted that they have “the good values, not the tunnel vision values”. Aaliyah has never met my family, but she had already mentally grouped them as ‘good South Asians’, like she has with her own family. Due to parental socialisation, it is likely that Aaliyah’s attitudes about monoethnic and Euro-South Asians has influenced those of her son, Ajit, and, as will be explored now, Tsuki observes that her parents’ attitudes towards their culture have indeed influenced her.

After I asked Tsuki where she was born, she told me a story about visiting her parents' home country that illustrates her cultural disconnection from that country. The conversation began as follows:

> **Tara:** So where were you born?
>
> **Tsuki:** Here in New Zealand. I've been to [my parents' home country] once. Did not like it at all. [...]

My asking Tsuki where she was born brought up for her the cultural tension of which country or countries she affiliates with. This is a tension that can come up for second-generation immigrants with little to no experience of their ancestral land due to familial, community, and outsider expectations that they will have this experience and knowledge (Berry et al., 2022). This theme will be discussed further in the case study about Regina's cultural story.

Tsuki says, "I did not like it at all" and "I would not go again" multiple times each, showing her strong stance that it was a negative experience. Tsuki pointed to negative stories her parents told her about the home country to dispute her parents' expectation that she would like visiting their country, saying "when I was a kid, I would hear stories about how bad it was for my parents when they were kids, and then I get older, and they expect me to like the place they come from. Like, why? I've heard bad stuff about this place my whole life, and now I'm coming here against my will." Based on her own evaluation, Tsuki's orienting away from the heritage culture appears to be at least partly attributable to absorbing negative narratives about the heritage culture from family.

As Tsuki was a child at the time of her family's trip to South Asia, she did not have the autonomy to decide whether to go. "I'm coming here against my will" suggests some resentment about this lack of choice. Tsuki felt an expectation to engage with her heritage through experiencing the home country, but in contrast, in the telling of this story, she emphasises her emotional distance from the home country. This indicates that taking a second-generation immigrant child to their ancestral land will not necessarily make them more connected to their culture.

Orienting to New Zealand culture

As well as orienting away from her heritage culture, Tsuki orients to New Zealand culture in her story of her visit to South Asia. She makes several statements contrasting her relationship with her parents' country and New Zealand:

> **Tsuki**: "I don't identify with [my parents' home country] that much, other than the fact that's where my parents are from. I'm very much a New Zealand kid."
>
> **Tsuki**: "I know the appeal of wanting to be close to where you're from, but I'm not from there. I'm from New Zealand."
>
> **Tsuki**: "I didn't like it [the trip to South Asia] at all. It was way too hot for me. I didn't appreciate lots of things. I just wasn't accustomed to the culture. I'm too much of a Kiwi kid."

Tsuki's narrative of disliking her trip to South Asia seems to reinforce her New Zealander identity. Tsuki discursively contrasts South Asia and New Zealand in each of the three above extracts, stating three times that she is a New Zealand kid/from New Zealand/a Kiwi kid. Tsuki argues that having South Asian heritage does not mean she has a relationship with her parents' home country, identifying herself as a "New Zealand kid". As explained by Rocha (2015) 'New Zealander' is a "non-racial" identity (p. 69) that Asian-Pākehā New Zealanders may use to foster a sense of belonging when they are otherwise othered.

Tsuki's grandmother Aaliyah also orients to New Zealand. Despite being born in South Asia, she does not identify as South Asian. At the end of the interview when she asked how she could further help with my project, I said she could help with advising on how to start conversations with South Asian adults about trans identities. She responded, "we are not South Asian", elaborating by pointing to cultural aspects that she sees the family as orienting more to New Zealand culture than South Asian culture. She says, "though we come from [home country] the kids were born here". By "kids", she means the youngest family generation – her grandkids – rather than her own kids, who were born in Asia. Like Tsuki, Aaliyah points to country as a key factor in a person's culture.

Japan

Tsuki's cultural story heavily involves Japanese culture. Tsuki has been interested in Japanese language and culture since childhood. Around age 10, to access content relating to *Beyblades* (a Japanese spinning top game) that was only available in Japanese at the time, Tsuki taught herself katakana, a Japanese writing system. Tsuki then got into *manga* (Japanese comics/graphic novels) and *anime* (Japanese animated show) from around age 12. She says *YuruYuri* was her "favourite manga", suggesting that she read others. Tsuki described *YuruYuri* as a manga-turned-anime about a friend group of young girls, including some in romantic relationships with each other. Tsuki saw herself in the characters, saying "I related to lots of the characters, pretty much all of them." Saddened that she had no one with whom to discuss the show, Tsuki joined an online *YuruYuri* fan community, where she met her now-best friend, May.

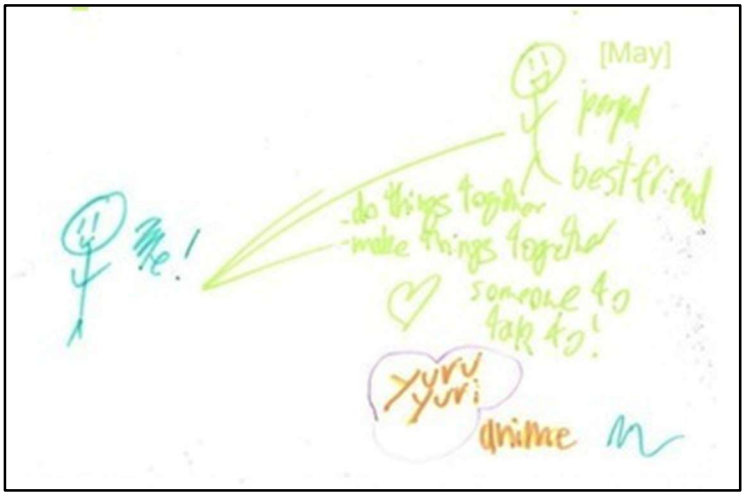


Figure 3: Tsuki's depiction of herself and May

This is the section of Tsuki's drawing featuring *YuruYuri* and May. Tsuki is drawn in blue, labelled as "Me!". May is drawn in green. To preserve anonymity, May's real name has been erased and replaced with "[May]". Underneath, Tsuki has written "penpal / best friend / do things together / make things together/ someone to talk to!" and drawn a heart. Underneath this she has used orange to write "*YuruYuri*" (this word is surrounded by a small, purple cloud) and "anime".

Tsuki verbalised her adding of *YuruYuri* to her drawing of family support, saying "you know, I'm gonna write *YuruYuri* over here. Why? Because I like it. It's something I like. It's not a support thing. I'll put it next to May." The visual placement of *YuruYuri* and anime near May shows how *YuruYuri* is tied to Tsuki's friendship with May, and indeed was the foundation of their friendship. Tsuki elaborated further that she chose to include *YuruYuri* to her drawing because "It's something I like, and I think things we enjoy are really important to- I won't say support, but it's always good to have something you can

escape to." Tsuki's inclusion of media in her drawing suggests the power of media as an element of a trans young person's exploration and acceptance of their trans identity. This will be discussed further in *3.3.5: Further points of cultural connection*.

Though Tsuki says *YuruYuri* is "not a support thing", her drive to add it to her drawing of her experience of being supported in her gender suggests that it has contributed to this experience. This interpretation is somewhat endorsed by Tsuki's musing after starting to talk about *YuruYuri*, where she says "oh, actually, that is slightly related to my trans story, I guess". Tsuki got into *YuruYuri* around the age that she realised she was a girl. The friend group of all girls was slightly older than she was, offering her an aspirational idea of female friendship. As she says, "I liked how the characters had a friend group. And I was like, 'wow, I wish I could have nice times with my friends', which I do now. The characters in that show were 13/14, so when I aged past 13/14, I was so sad. I was like, 'No, that's the best time of your life'."

YuruYuri also offered sapphic (i.e. love/romance between women) narratives. *Yuri* is a genre of Japanese media that centres around intimate relationships between women (Maser, 2013), and *YuruYuri* translates to "easy-going Yuri". These relationships can be, but are not necessarily, romantic. When I asked Tsuki if the 'Yuri' in the show's title meant 'lesbian', Tsuki maintained "yes, but it's not a romance show. It's more of a comedy show with relationships." I do not know how Tsuki identified her sexuality when she began watching the show, but she affirmed that she identified as a lesbian at the time of the interview, making the show salient to her in that respect as well.

Beyond entertainment, Tsuki is profoundly interested in Japan and Japanese language. In fact, she said "Japan" or "Japanese" 52 times in her interview. She began studying Japanese language more earnestly in high school, saying, "it was in my first year of high school when I was really into Japanese and *YuruYuri*. So Japanese thing, Japanese, put them together, I want to learn lots of Japanese." She then found out about a student exchange opportunity from her homeroom teacher. As Tsuki entered high school with a new feminine name and pronouns, Tsuki recalls how this teacher helped ease the transition from the first day. "[S]he came up to me. She was like 'hey. So, Tsuki, what are your pronouns?' She asked me. I was like 'gosh, she her'. And she said, 'Okay, cool'. And that was my first year high school, so my first time I actually used my name widely. She

was really supportive, and still very supportive." This teacher also clearly noticed Tsuki's interest in Japanese, as she told Tsuki about the Japanese exchange opportunity after finding out about it. Tsuki elaborates that after Tsuki decided to take the opportunity, her teacher "was, like, really excited and supportive of me. And she actually also signed up to the program as a chaperone." This teacher seems to have had a positive impact on Tsuki, supporting her in her early gender transition and then her cultural and academic interest.

Tsuki's story of visiting Japan contrasts with her story of visiting South Asia. In direct contrast to her statements of "I did not like it at all" and "I would not go again" about South Asia, Tsuki says, "it was amazing" and "I liked it a lot, and did lots of things, and I would go again". Her trip to Japan was a turning point in her strengthening her cultural connection to Japan, as she says, "I think Japanese is a big part of who I am. I never considered it as a part of who I am until the trip recently, but it is an important part of me, I guess." It is interesting to see that while the trip to her parents' home country solidified her feeling that she is "not from there", going to Japan made her realise that Japanese is a big part of who she is. Tsuki has cultivated her cultural identity with a culture that resonates with her.

Tsuki told an anecdote from the morning before the interview where she was looking for a bowl to serve herself some rice for breakfast, but none were clean:

> **Tsuki**: And then my dad's like, 'use a plate, like a normal person'. I'm like, 'is that not normal?' And he's like, yeah. Well, places like Sri Lanka and India like a plate, but like, Japan and China like using a bowl. Oh my God. Well, I guess I more Japanese than [South Asian]. Anyways.

One's choice of crockery and cutlery is a culturally coded behaviour. Compare, for example, the South Asian practice of eating with the right hand, vs. the East Asian practice of using chopsticks. Tsuki's preference for eating rice from a bowl may be corelated with her recent exchange to Japan, as she would likely have behaved like her host family while there and eaten like they ate. Tsuki uses the rice bowl as a symbol for her acculturation to Japanese culture, metaphorically linking her crockery choice with her cultural identity. Note that Tsuki's choice was instinctive, and it was her father who made the initial cultural connection. This recognition by another person that her

instinctive behaviour is to 'act Japanese' helped to bolster her idea of her cultural leaning towards Japanese culture.

Tsuki's culture is a complex mixture of her parents' culture, her birth country, and a third culture/country that she resonates with. Her discursive orientations towards New Zealand and Japanese culture, and away from her South Asian culture, particularly in the face of feeling familial pressure to engage with it, show Tsuki in an agentive position in the formation of her cultural identity.

3.3.3 "I don't do anything that's Asian": Regina's stress living as a mixed race Asian-Pākehā New Zealander

Regina is a mixed-race Asian-Pākehā New Zealander whose mixed ethnicity presents her with varying challenges. She struggles to explain her ethnicity to others, feels a pressure to 'act' Asian by doing certain behaviours that do not come naturally to her, and prefers to pass as White if possible.

Intergenerational narratives

Regina's parents did not express any negative attitudes towards Regina's father's South-East Asian culture, and while Regina spoke extensively about not feeling connected to her Asian culture, her discourse contained no instances of disparaging the culture.

Self-introducing

When asked to introduce herself, Regina introduced her identity markers in the following order: name, age, trans identity, autism, culture, cultural disorientation, and cultural orientation:

> Hi, I'm Regina. I am turning 23 in less than a month, and I figured out I was trans when I was 18, right before the Covid lockdowns hit. I've known I was autistic my whole life, and that's been a big part of it. And my mom is White, my dad is South-East Asian, so I'm half Asian, but I've never personally connected to the South-East Asian side of my family.... So, like, in my head, I've always referred to myself as White because, like, I grew up on the internet, and a lot of the internet is like American dominated. So, I grew up knowing more about America than I did New Zealand.

The order of clauses in Regina's introduction may be meaningful. Regina knew beforehand that the interview was about trans identity, so it is understandable that it

features early in her self-introduction. It is interesting that she first explains that she feels disconnected from her father's culture before sharing her connection with her mother's culture. Mixed-race people who are part White may find that they are put in the box of the minority group they belong to (consider the 'one drop rule' in the United States that declared that 'one drop of Black blood [ancestry]' classified a person as Black; Omi & Winant, 2014), which can make them feel a need to explain the details of their mixed cultural identity.

While introducing herself, Regina launches into a seemingly instinctive mitigation after saying she is half Asian. I suggest that her response is formulaic after being asked this question many times throughout her life. She says "So I'm half Asian, but…" to quickly put an asterisk on her ethnicity and start explaining that her identity is more complex than where her parents are from. Regina explicitly states that she has never felt connected to her South-East Asian side and thinks of herself mentally as White.

Regina experiences a tension when asked to identify her ethnicity on forms, where she does not have the same opportunity to explain the complexity of her identity as she does in speech. She expresses frustration with being put in this situation, saying "every time I go to the doctor, and they make me fill out the form, it's like, 'what culture are you?' It's always such an annoying question to me, and I know that's, like, just a me specific thing, but like, I feel weird putting Asian, and I feel weird not putting Asian." Being asked to distil her cultural identity for the form is frustrating for Regina as her cultural identity is complex. She "feel[s] weird putting Asian" and "feel[s] weird not putting Asian", because she does not feel wholly one or the other. Though she asserts that she doesn't "do anything that's Asian", it is worth noting that her tension indicates that she at least feels somewhat Asian: otherwise, she would have no internal problem with simply writing "NZ European".

Regina says, "it feels embarrassing" in situations when mentioning her South-East Asian culture triggers questions about her culture, because "[she] can't answer that". As an independent adult, she has stopped indicating her South-East Asian identity on forms, except when her father is present, explaining "I don't want to disappoint him, because it matters a lot to him. It just doesn't matter to me."

Performing culture

While Regina and her brother Bartholomew both express disconnection from their South-East Asian culture, they have two points of contrast: their names and how they felt wearing their father's cultural clothes. They were both given traditional cultural names at birth, and Bartholomew is "still quite attached to [his]". He "like[s] the way it sounds" and thinks that the meaning suits him. Conversely, Regina dislikes her birth name, which means 'princely'. Regina discussed her disdain for princes: "being a prince sucks, because, like, being a king is like powerful, like being a queen is like powerful, and being a princess is cute, but who wants to be a prince?" Regina's disparaging of the meaning of her birth name can be seen as a discursive disconnection from her assigned sex. Regina explained that when she transitioned to female and chose her new name, she chose what she saw as a "cute White girl name" and did not take meaning into account. Regina's choice to change her name to a "White girl name" can be seen as an act of claiming both her authentic gender and personal cultural identities. Though Regina is ethnically half South-East Asian and half White, her White identity is what resonates with her. There is also a spiritual component, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Both Regina and Bartholomew described wearing their father's cultural clothes to multicultural day in high school. Bartholomew called it a "fancy [South-East Asian] shirt and said wearing it was "cool". Meanwhile, Regina said wearing "his traditional [South-East Asian] garbs…felt like blackface to [her]". Blackface traditionally refers to mocking, stereotyped portrayals of Black people by non-Black actors, typically using makeup to change their skin tone (Thompson, 2021, p. 19). The term "yellowface" is the equivalent term for caricatures of East and South-East Asian people. The concept of blackface comes from the United States. Regina seemingly draws on this concept rather than yellowface due to her American influences ("I grew up on the internet, and a lot of the internet is like American dominated"). Regina felt that because she did not know anything about her culture, that engaging with it was beyond cultural appropriation: that she was portraying a caricature of a person from her culture.

White and American identity

Regina is mixed-race. She acknowledges “my mom is White, my dad is South-East Asian, so I'm half Asian”, but because she has “never personally connected to the South-East Asian side of [her] family”, she does not identify with her Asian ethnicity. She explains that “in my head, I've always referred to myself as White”. Interestingly, her discursive explanation for feeling more ethnically White than Asian refers to the ways in which she does not feel Asian, for example not having visited her father’s country or learning his language, rather than aspects of connection with her mother’s culture. However, her attachment to ‘White culture’ can be seen by her choice of the name ‘Regina’ due to thinking it “was a cute White girl name”, and her friend group in school being mostly White girls.

Unlike Tsuki, Regina orients less towards New Zealand culture and more towards American culture, a country with which she has no familial connection. She says that she “grew up on the internet, and a lot of the internet is like American dominated. So, [she] grew up knowing more about America than [she] did New Zealand”. She also says that she and her brother watched a lot of American television as a child. She says some words in an Americanised way, for example calling her mother “Mom” instead of “Mum” and draws on American terms such as “Comic Con” and “blackface”.

3.3.4 Anime influence in drawings

Regina comes from an artistic family. Regina studied Creative Arts at university. She and her brother are both talented digital artists, while her father loves to paint, saying “Bartholomew takes after me because I am an artist.” Regina chose to draw while talking and mused “I am not drawing to my fullest capacity right now. I am half trying to communicate and half doing like scribbles on a napkin right now.”

Regina's drawing

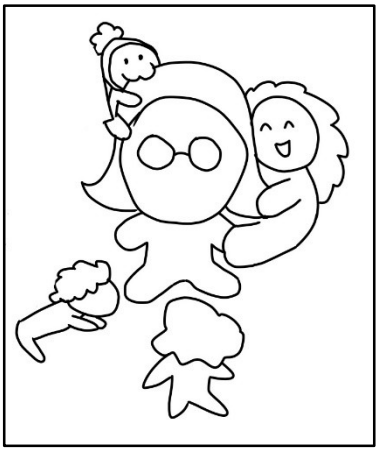


Figure 4: Regina's depiction of herself and Jordan

Regina's drawing was highly intertextual to Japanese popular media, drawing on chibi, kawaii, and emoji. In Regina's drawing, she drew herself in the middle, covered in chibi creatures that represent her best friend, Jordan. Chibi, Japanese for small (Alverson, 2026) is a Japanese art style with characters with huge heads, small bodies, and stubby limbs[7], which Regina says she did because she "wanted to draw her cute", and the multiple creatures surrounding and climbing over her represent that Jordan is always around. Regina says "let's just say each different Jordan is, like, a different time she visits me. She comes over often." Jordan is "very clingy", which makes Regina feel secure that she will not be abandoned, like Regina's "last best friend did". Regina notes "I like it when things do not change suddenly." A need for consistency may be associated with neurodivergence, indicating that this type of support could contribute to neurodivergence-based support, as will be discussed in Chapter 5: Neurodivergence.

Regina goes on to discuss the importance of touch in her relationship with Jordan in maintaining a "healthy mental state". The provision of comfort is reciprocal, as Regina says, "I am basically, like, always clinging to Jordan whenever she's here, because we are both touch starved, and we both like, are comfortable in each other's arms." So, while the drawing of the chibi Jordans encompassing Regina has a metaphorical component, representing Jordan being around a lot, it also appears to have a literal component, depicting the physical affection that Regina and Jordan give each other.

[7] For examples of chibi art, see Marcus et al. (2017)

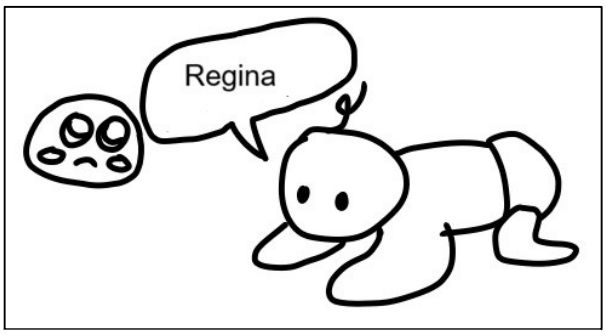


Figure 5: Part of Regina's drawing, with her nephew calling her Regina

This is another part of Regina's drawing. The baby on the right represents how Regina's nephews easily caught on to Regina becoming a woman:

"[In the drawing] There's also my nephews using Regina, which I'm really glad they've caught on to that, they know that that's my name, because, like, a lot of people, especially online, will say, like, 'oh, transitioning is so confusing for children'. But like they've known me as a boy and as a girl, and they have not had any confusion so far, at least, none that I know of." The face on the left is drawn in a kawaii style[8]. It has large eyes that take up a huge proportion of the face, light reflected in the eyes, blushing cheeks, and no nose. The face represents Regina's reaction to the nephews calling her Regina. Regina later clarified via chat message that the face was "Me going 🥺", i.e. representing a facial expression similar to the 'pleading face' emoji[9]. The face may represent joy and a response to cuteness.

Bartholomew's drawings

Bartholomew, Regina's brother, made a drawing and a meme to describe his support for Regina.

Like Regina's drawing, Bartholomew's drawing has similarities with Japanese manga and anime style. As also seen in Regina's drawing of herself, Bartholomew's depiction of Regina has glasses that obscure her eyes. This is an anime trope sometimes

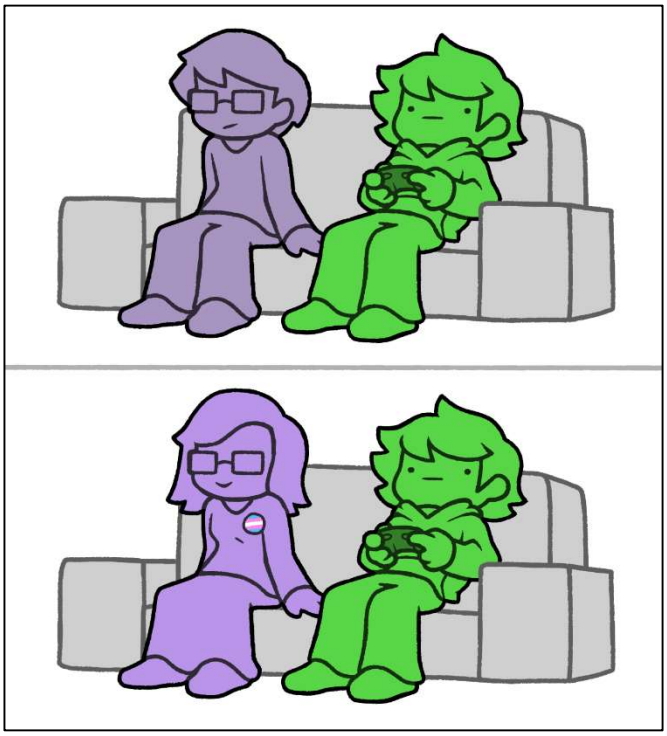


Figure 6: Bartholomew's drawing

[8] For examples of kawaii character art, see https://www.domestika.org/en/blog/3392-what-is-kawaii-art-japan-s-culture-of-cuteness

[9] For an example of the 'pleading face emoji', see https://emojipedia.org/pleading-face.

called “opaque nerd glasses” (TV Tropes, 2026). Bartholomew is drawn with wide set eyes, which is also seen in kawaii.



Figure 7: Bartholomew's meme

In addition to drawing, Bartholomew created an image macro, a type of meme, from an anime called Full Metal Alchemist (note that the name used in this image has been redacted and replaced with the pseudonym for his sister). Bartholomew said that he has never seen the show, but he is aware of the meme via popular culture. The meme is in the format of an image macro, created using a meme template. The character in the meme is an anime character, thus is drawn in an anime style, with large eyes that reflect light, brightly coloured hair, and a small nose.

Originally the meme shows the character responding to same-sex and opposite-sex couples and saying, “I see no difference, love is love”. Bartholomew has taken this sexuality-affirming meme to affirm his sister’s gender. Bartholomew explained that the meaning behind the text is “because of my philosophy that she is my sibling first and someone with pronouns second. I don't treat her terribly differently after the fact. I just look out for her same as I've always tried to.” Regina and Bartholomew share an artistic interest in anime style that influenced how they visualised their journey of Regina’s gender transition together.

3.3.5 Further points of cultural connection

Though the case studies show disconnection from the heritage culture, there are also strong examples of connection. René has found connection to Japan and East Asian cultures in general through popular media and East Asian ideas of androgyny, while Tsuki has connected to her heritage culture through jewellery and her choice of middle name, both mediated by her relationship with her grandmother.

René’s interest in Japanese media and East Asian androgynous style

In high school, René’s friend group was largely Asian, and René and many of their friends enjoyed manga and anime. René connects that interest to their cultural identity,

saying “I think as an East Asian person growing up in New Zealand, like even though I’m not Japanese, things like manga and anime really gave me a window into East Asian culture and it was more accessible.” René was particularly interested in gender-bending stories in high school, before they knew they were non-binary. One of these was *Ouran High School Host Club*. The main character is a girl who assimilates into a boys’ school because of her boyish appearance. The other media René mentioned fit into the general narrative of a girl assimilating into a male environment: the Disney film *Mulan* and the Korean drama *You’re Beautiful*.

Mulan is based on the Chinese legend of Hua Mulan. Mulan disguises herself as a man to enlist in the army in her ailing father’s stead. René’s earliest memory of having “an inkling that [they] might not be a girl” was watching *Mulan* as a child. *You’re Beautiful* has a somewhat similar premise to *Mulan*, following a woman who impersonates her injured brother to take his place in his boy band. I note that these three works contain Japanese, Chinese, and Korean characters respectively. This shows René’s ability to connect with stories and characters from various cultures in East Asia.

René continues to be interested in Japan. They enjoy spending time in Japan and attended a genderqueer march there. They described a conversation with a non-Japanese trans man at the march who found it much easier to ‘pass’ as a man in Japan. René explains that this is related to differing ideas about gender expression in Japan. They point to Japanese media as a reflection of this, saying, “there's a lot more variation and nuance in the way that a man can look and a woman can look in a lot of Japanese media. There'll be men with beautiful long hair… And these men are considered beautiful; it's such a trope in anime that the one with a really long waist-length hair is the beautiful one.” A higher tolerance for sense of dress that incorporates overt femininity and masculinity is one of the reasons why René finds East Asian ideas of androgyny more “accessible to [them] than forms of White, non-binary androgyny”. When they were first exploring their gender expression, they tried to conform to “White, non-binary androgyny”, which they describe as “like classic plaid shirt, pixie cut, hipster glasses” but they found that “that’s not really [them]”. Conversely, when walking in the streets of Japan, “sometimes you see the fashion with like, Asian people wearing black clothes and looking real androgynous and I'm like, ‘Ah, that hits right.’” Exploring what

androgynous gender expression can look like in East Asian cultures has helped René find a style that feels "right" to them.

Tsuki's interest in cultural jewellery and her cultural name choice

Bangles are a common gift for young girls within South Asian families. Tsuki's grandmother Aaliyah describes how Tsuki wanted bangles from a young age, even taking some that were a gift for her sister. Aaliyah laments that her "heart breaks" at knowing that Tsuki would keep the bangles in her drawer but did not wear them. Aaliyah adds "see, it was happening, and we didn't know," referring to Tsuki's gender identity. She expresses disappointment in herself that she did not realise earlier that Tsuki wanted to be a girl. This early event of Tsuki being drawn to South Asian jewellery adds a layer of poignance to Ajit's story of Aaliyah's initial reaction to Tsuki coming out as trans, which will be discussed now.

Aaliyah's first sign of showing support for Tsuki in her gender identity was in a culturally significant way, through the offering of gold:

> **Ajit:** My mum took her in straight away. The first thing she said was 'Well, I have to change my will now, because I'm going to have to leave her some gold, some jewellery.' That's a cultural thing. 'Because I was leaving my jewellery to the girls, but now I have to make sure I leave some for her'.

It is customary for South Asian women to leave female descendants gold jewellery as an inheritance (N. Mehrotra, 2004; Zulfiqar, 2022). Collecting gold is a heavily gendered practice in South Asian societies, as women have historically been generally ineligible to inherit land, but their investment in gold is socially acceptable (N. Mehrotra, 2004). Gold investments are intergenerational, typically passed down from mother to daughter (Zulfiqar, 2022). Aaliyah's proclamation that she will have to amend her will to leave jewellery to Tsuki shows that she views Tsuki as female, and it re-emphasises that Tsuki is an important descendant to her.

Tsuki's bond with her grandmother is also evident in Tsuki's choice to take her grandmother's first name as her middle name. Tsuki was the only one of the three trans young people to choose a name from their cultural origin when transitioning. This shows a connection to her grandmother, but also a cultural connection. As Aaliyah explains, her name "is a special name in Arabic and in Indian culture…It's a special name.

Powerful."[10] While travelling recently, Tsuki's grandma bought Tsuki a necklace with their shared name on it, which links with Tsuki's lifelong interest in jewellery. These stories of jewellery and name show hints of connection to cultural heritage in Tsuki's gender transition.

3.4 Discussion

3.4.1 Bucking trends from literature

The literature indicates that Asian families are less likely to accept a trans family member due to reasons such as collectivist values of conformity, attending to others' comfort, and obligation to the family's reputation (S. Tan & Weisbart, 2022), but the Asian family members in this study all showed support for the trans young people. There is, of course, bias, as family members were only surveyed if the trans young people identified them as supportive. However, these findings show that family members of varying age and relationship (e.g. parent, grandparent, and sibling) can be sources of support for Asian trans young people. The interviewed Asian family members did not mention having culture-based misgivings about the young person being trans. No family members brought up fears that the young person was being 'lost' to Western culture, nor a belief that being trans is an exclusively Western phenomenon, which are potential concerns for Asian families according to Kim & Ryu (2005) and S. Tan & Weisbart (2022).

3.4.2 Influence of intergenerational narratives

As discussed, three generations in Tsuki's family recounted negative narratives about Tsuki's heritage culture, including Tsuki. Tsuki identified a paradox in her parents' expectation that she would like their home country despite having "heard bad stuff about this place [her] whole life". No negative cultural discourses were detected in Regina's family's narratives, including Regina's. This parallel suggests that cultural narratives from older generations can influence those of younger generations.

[10] Like the other names in this thesis, *Aaliyah* is a pseudonym. It was selected to resemble the linguistic and cultural meanings of the original name as closely as possible.

3.4.3 Use of Western gender frameworks

The three trans young people used Western-based gender terms, such as trans, non-binary, AFAB, and androgynous, and did not use gender terms from their Asian cultures. The family members also did not use cultural gender terms. When asked if she had heard about gender identities from her culture, Tsuki replied, “no, actually, no, I haven't. I feel like my relatives would have brought it up at me at some point”. Asian families not knowing about gender identities in their cultures is influenced by colonisation, as European puritanism criminalised and erased gender and sexual diversity (Bal, 2024).

3.4.4 Automatic and defensive self-presentations

Self-presentation is how people broadly present their identities to others, indicating how they want to be viewed (Baumeister & Hutton, 1987). One avenue for self-presentation is self-introductions, in which a person describes salient features of their identity. This is a common practice when meeting new people and can become rote over time. Regina presented a self-introduction about her cultural identity that appeared to be automatic; after, as she describes, being forced to explain her cultural identity throughout her life.

For people who experience identity tension, self-introductions and self-presentations can also be defensive: showing others how they do not want to be viewed (Baumeister & Hutton, 1987; Hogan, 1983, p. 78). Regina, Tsuki, and Ajit (Tsuki’s father) appeared to use defensive strategies in their self-presentation of their cultural identities. People can make (unflattering) assumptions about an Asian person’s cultural identity and ideologies based on their physical appearance (Amerasinghe, 2018; Divakalala & Bal, 2024; Herzog, 2018). This can create a felt need to use defensive self-presentation strategies such as claiming a New Zealander/White identity above an Asian identity (as seen with Tsuki and Regina) and distancing oneself from ‘certain types of Asians’ (seen with Ajit).

3.4.5 Connection to Japanese culture

Interest in Japanese popular culture was seen across the trans young people. Tsuki was drawn to a manga/anime involving girlhood, female friendships, and sapphic

relationships. René was drawn to stories of girls assimilating as boys and depictions of diverse gender expressions. Regina loves video games from Nintendo, a Japanese company, mentioning *Pikmin*, *Yo-kai Watch*, and *Pokémon*, with anime style influences seen in her art and her brother's.

Manga, anime, and video games are pillars of Japan's 'cool' popular culture (Kimura, 2020) that Japan has cultivated and exported globally (Kimura, 2020; McGray, 2002). When René was interested in learning about East Asian culture, manga and anime were "more accessible" than other kinds of East Asian media. The material accessibility of Japanese media in New Zealand is a consequence of Japan's highly developed 'cool' exportation market. Japan's 'cool' image may also make Japanese culture more palatable to Western audiences than other Asian cultural exports.

Additionally, gender non-conforming characters are prevalent in Japanese popular media (Etherington, 2024). René notes that while gender-bending stories are common in Japanese and other East Asian media, "you don't really get that so much in Western culture." The accessibility of stories and characters that resonate with diverse gender identities may be a point of attraction for young trans Asians.

3.4.6 Implications for family support

The findings from this chapter indicate that cultural identity can be a sensitive topic for young trans Asian New Zealanders. One participant (Tsuki) felt unhappy when she felt "expected" to like her parents' home country when taken there "against her will" as a child and strongly disliked the trip. This suggests that pressuring young Asian New Zealanders to engage with their culture can sometimes be ineffective and potentially detrimental to their formation of their view of their heritage culture. Conversely, fruitful engagement with the heritage culture can come about when the young people are allowed agency over constructing their cultural identity, as the same participant engaged with her culture when she autonomously decided to take her grandmother's cultural name when she transitioned. Her parents also supported her in fostering her connection to Japanese culture by financing and facilitating Japanese lessons and a student exchange to Japan, which is another form of cultural support.

Another participant (René) engaged with their culture independently from their family's influence, finding connection with both their heritage culture and Japanese culture. The third participant (Regina) was largely given a choice whether to engage with her Asian heritage as a child (e.g. was allowed to eat Nutella sandwiches if she did not want the cultural food her father made) and has ultimately chosen to embrace her White identity foremost.

Therefore, a way that Asian families can support a trans young person with their cultural identity is by letting them take the lead in forming their cultural identity and avoiding placing pressure on them to engage with their heritage culture.

3.5 Conclusion

The findings from this chapter suggest that young trans Asian New Zealanders are likely to experience complex cultural tensions. They may feel pulled in many directions, including their heritage culture(s), New Zealand culture, and additional culture(s) with which they have affinity.

The next chapter will be about religion and family support.

4 Religion

4.1 Chapter introduction

This chapter is about religion. I will start with a literature review about trans people's relationships with religion, including church institutions, church members, God, and personal spirituality. All three of the participants in my study came from Christian households, so my focus in this chapter is Christianity.

I will begin the analysis by describing the primary participants' relationships with religion, including their familial influences and current religious identities. I will then present key findings in the form of two case studies. In the case of Regina and her family, I will explore religion as a factor in the extent to which family members support a trans young person. In the case of René, I will explore organised religion compared with spirituality in the development of René's religious identity. I will then discuss two observed types of religion-based support: prayer, and church as a family activity. In the discussion section, I discuss the findings in relation to the literature, focusing on support factors from family, churches, and God; and acknowledging the impact of religious harm. I end by discussing the implications of my findings for family support.

4.2 Literature review

4.2.1 Introduction

Church institutions and members can be sources of both support and rejection for trans people. Positive experiences can include senses of belonging in religious networks and feelings that God supports their gender identity. Negative experiences can include hearing transphobic religious rhetoric, rejection upon coming out at church, and mixed feelings about whether God accepts them. Race and ethnicity can also be complicating factors in trans people's negative experiences with religious institutions. Some trans people who are rejected from denominational churches for being trans may find homes in non-denominational churches or in non-religious spirituality.

4.2.2 Importance of religion to trans people

In the 2023 New Zealand census, 41% of the population, or 2,057,487 people, responded with a religious or spiritual affiliation (calculated with data from Stats NZ, 2024). 79% of these respondents affiliated with Christianity (denominational and non-denominational). Additionally, 26,097 people identified as transgender. Unfortunately, Stats NZ does not provide tables that compare transgender identity and religious affiliation. We do know, however, that 32% of Counting Ourselves' (trans and non-binary New Zealander) participants identified as religious, and 53% said that spiritual beliefs or religious faith were somewhat or very important to them (Veale et al., 2019). This indicates a lower general religious affiliation among New Zealand's trans population, but a higher rate of spirituality. There is limited research into explaining why trans people may be more likely to identify as spiritual but not religious. One Iranian study found that many trans people moved from a religious to a spiritual identity, particularly because while they did believe in a higher being, the stigma from the Muslim community caused them unbearable psychological stress (Safavifar et al., 2016). This could also apply to trans people in faith communities in New Zealand. Spirituality as a movement offers more flexibility of belief than dogmatic churches (Huss, 2014), and a similar relationship might be seen between flexible non-denominational churches and more rigid denominational churches. Denominational churches often must answer to a church union and/or follow prescribed doctrine, which can dissuade them from taking a stance that does not align with conventional practice. As W. F. Brown (2023) describes, churches face criticism no matter how they stand on inclusivity, so I suggest that autonomous, non-denominational churches may have less difficulty adopting a trans-inclusive stance (if it aligns with their beliefs). Non-denominational churches were popular with the participants in Yarhouse & Carrs' (2012) study, with at least 14 of the 32 trans adult participants attending non-denominational churches. This supports the argument that non-denominational churches may be more likely to be welcoming to trans people, or at least that religious trans people may tend to prefer non-denominational churches.

Religion can be inextricable from people's ethnicity/race and everyday life (Bal, 2024; Kishor et al., 2023; Pipkin & Clarke, 2024; Thomsen, 2021). Some authors intertwine

ethnicity/race and religion in their language: Bal (2024) often uses "ethnic and religious communities" as one phrase when talking about South Asian communities. Bal (2024) argues that South Asia's historic narratives about LGBTQ+ people almost exclusively come from religious texts. Kishor et al. (2023) back up some of Bal's (2024) claims in "Our Histories Our Queer" (Bal, 2024) – that ethnicity and religion are intertwined in South Asian society; and that third gender people in India are described in ancient religious texts, were once respected (and even revered) in Indian society, and their social marginalisation in modern times is attributable to British colonisation.

4.2.3 Trans people's positive experiences with religion

Religion is integral to the everyday lives of some religious trans people globally (Ghazzawi et al., 2020; Okrey Anderson & McGuire, 2021). Being included by a faith community can foster a sense of belonging for trans people, whether this be through being treated like everyone else (Gandy et al., 2021), or being celebrated for being different (Bhattacharya et al., 2021; Coyne et al., 2024). Importantly, church institutions and members can be a form of family for trans young people. This can be especially true in cases where they are rejected by biological family (Gandy et al., 2021). The church can be seen as a "psychological family" – people that a person leans on, whether physically or symbolically, in good times and bad (Boss, 2016). Okrey Anderson & McGuire (2021) expand on this by describing psychological families of faith as "assemblages of loved ones, related or not related, alive or dead, human or deity, that an individual communes with and relies on for the practice of their faith and spirituality" (p. 393). Religious social networks not only offer opportunities to develop relationships with others who share similar spiritual and religious beliefs (Wang et al., 2023), but also social support, such as physical affection and a listening ear (Coyne et al., 2024), and material support, such as transport and free or subsidised meals.

If using the definition of psychological family as those who a person leans on, God certainly fits as a psychological family member for many religious trans young people. One participant in Yarhouse & Carrs' (2012) study wrote that "Jesus accepts me as female and addresses me as such" (p. 25), showing a vital relationship between themselves, God, and their gender. Similarly, one participant in Counting Ourselves

wrote: “My Christian-based values and beliefs, what I have learnt from reading the bible, through prayer these things have helped me hugely get through my transition. I believe God has blessed me in my transition as well and has protected me and cared for me and watched over me.” (Veale et al., 2019, p. 99)

Positive relationships with God in the face of stigma from the church is a recurring theme in the literature. There is a positive correlation between high religiosity and high resilience in trans people, even if they face stigma from church institutions (Wang et al., 2023). Half (4) of the trans people whose letters were included in Ghazzawi et al.’s (2020) study wrote that they felt their trans identity was created/given to them by God, despite their church telling them the opposite. Their faith in God gave them resilience from attacks from even within the faith community. For example, after experiencing intense transphobia during a church service, one trans woman in Graham’s (2014) study remained steadfast that “God loves us all no matter what” and maintained that “the main reason why I made it was because of Jesus” (p. 8). In fact, a third of Yarhouse & Carrs’ (2012) participants indicated that their trans identity strengthened their faith or brought them closer to God. Reasons for this include having to lean more on their relationship with God due to their human relationships falling apart because of discrimination.

4.2.4 Trans people’s negative experiences with religion

Along with the positive effects of religiosity, religious affiliation in trans people is associated with negative effects such as increased risk factors for depression, suicidality and substance abuse, even more so than for queer cisgender people (Gandy et al., 2021). Trans and non-binary participants in Gandy et al.’s (2021) study faced extra struggles in faith communities, and their feelings of rejection were heightened. Some found that while their churches may comment on sexuality, they did not comment on being trans, which could cause feelings of erasure and invisibility. Others felt there was a double standard, where their faith community affirmed queerness but not gender diversity, which was experienced as more hurtful than if coming from a wholly non-affirming community. Anti-trans doctrine that paints being trans as a sin can result in feelings of alienation, shame, and fear in trans churchgoers (Graham, 2014) and gender-

essentialist rhetoric in the church can leave young trans people with "no language or framework to understand their experiences" (Okrey Anderson & McGuire, 2021, p. 391). Coming out experiences for trans people can be even more psychologically damaging than for cis queer people (Graham, 2014). For trans women participants in Graham's (2014) study, the consequences of coming out and of attending church as a woman included having to switch churches, refraining from dressing as a woman at church, and fear of coming out in future.

Trans women in two studies reported tension between feeling accepted by God for their gender identity but experiencing transphobia from religious individuals and/or church. This discrimination included transphobic preaching at church, familial religiosity/clergy, and of others using religion as a rationale for rejecting them (Graham, 2014). A psychological result of this tension is that trans women in Yarhouse & Carrs' (2012) study distinguished between their relationships with God, their faith/religion, and members of their faith communities. A third of their participants said that while they had been hurt by religious people, they had not necessarily been hurt by their faith/religion itself. However, while some study participants reported feeling unconditional acceptance from God, including regarding their gender identity, others worried that God did not approve of their gender identity. Inner conflict involving trans identity and relationship with God was common in Etengoff & Rodriguez's (2022) Muslim participants and Yarhouse & Carrs' (2012) Christian participants.

Ethnicity and race can further complicate trans people's negative experiences with religion. Some participants in Gandy et al.'s (2021) study "compartmentalised and prioritised their identities" (p. 103) and chose faith communities based on one identity marker (e.g. choosing one of: LGBTQ+ affirming, compatible theology and ideology, racial makeup, and worship style). Other participants felt true inclusion was only when all the identities salient to them were affirmed. Several participants described the intersection of race, LGBTQ+ identity, and faith as a "unique tension" (p.105). They had to negotiate boundaries between their different identity markers with church members and accept that their faith community might not meet all of their needs (e.g. LGBTQ+ affirming but not racially affirming, i.e. not racially diverse enough or not enough congregation of their own race). This work uses "triple jeopardy" (p. 106) to describe the

impact of juggling ethnic/racial, LGBTQ+, and faith identities. Rejection from an ethnic church for being trans may be felt more intensely and "may represent a unique form of denunciation" (Graham, 2014, p. 9), as the trans churchgoer may feel on one hand strongly supported in their race/ethnicity but then rejected for their trans identity. Trans people in Muslim communities face additional challenges, including encountering more sex-segregated spaces (Etengoff & Rodriguez, 2022; Safavifar et al., 2016), questions of veiling and body-covering, and patriarchal attitudes inherent to Islam (Safavifar et al., 2016).

4.2.5 Trans people leaving religious institutions

Rejection and fear of rejection for being trans are common reasons for leaving a faith community. Okrey Anderson & McGuire's (2021) study cites the US Transgender Survey of 2015, which showed that 19% of trans people who had ever been part of a religious community left it due to rejection, while almost twice as many (39%) left due to *fear* of rejection. This suggests that fear of rejection is a strong source of anxiety for trans people when at church. This study suggests that internalised transphobia, in part due to messages from the non-affirming religious environment, leads to low self-esteem that can prevent people from feeling empowered enough to leave that environment. However, leaving church institutions is not a clear-cut solution to these problems. Gibbs and Goldbach (2015) surveyed nearly 3000 LGBT+ people in the USA and found an association between leaving one's family church and increased risk of suicidality (as well as a positive effect of reduced internalised homophobia). Gandy et al. (2021) also found that fear of rejection could be based on experienced and hypothetical rejection. In the Counting Ourselves survey, 14% of respondents had left a religious community due to being rejected for being trans, while twice as many (28%) had left due to *fear* of trans-based rejection (Veale et al., 2019). Anticipated rejection and hypervigilance are forms of minority stress (Valentine & Shipherd, 2018). These numbers were higher for Asians, with 26% having left a religious community due to experiencing rejection for being trans, and 52% having left due to fear of rejection for being trans. Fear of rejection resulting in feeling unable to come out at church may be heightened by living in a small community (Ghazzawi et al., 2020), where a trans person may not have many other

churches to choose from, and cannot help from seeing their detractors out in the community.

Leaving a church due to rejection can shake a trans person's sense of belonging in Christianity in general. A Baptist participant in Ghazzawi et al.'s (2020) study left their church because their church did not accept them. Though they had felt that their trans identity was God-given and that God accepted them, their rejection by the church led them to believe that that they could not reconcile their gender with Christianity. However, it is possible to heal the negative feelings caused by rejection from a church by finding an accepting, affirming faith community (Gandy et al., 2012). People can feel strong attachments to their family's denomination and seek an affirming church in the same denomination (Gandy et al., 2012). For example, one participant in Counting Ourselves wrote: "When I started transitioning, I left a Baptist church which I felt would not be supportive of me and joined another Baptist church which is fully supportive of me. I was so overjoyed I wept the first three times I went there" (Veale et al., 2019, p. 99). This is also an example of Gandy et al.'s (2012) "heavenly bliss" (p. 104), where someone finds a faith community that fits exactly what they need.

Trans people who had never felt connected or invested in their family's faith community typically reported leaving their family's faith community as positive or neutral (Okrey Anderson & McGuire, 2021). Conversely, those whose descriptions of their early experiences with faith aligned with the idea of psychological family of faith may experience ambiguous loss upon leaving the church (Okrey Anderson & McGuire, 2021). Ambiguous loss is a theory proposed by Boss (2016) to describe the unresolved feelings that come about when partially separated from a family member. Participants in Okrey Anderson & McGuire's (2021) study talked about varying iterations of physical presence/absence in church and psychological presence/absence in spiritual relationships with God or other members of the psychological family of faith, e.g. physical absence of family member and psychological presence of God, or physical access to faith practice with psychological absence of community.

4.3 Analysis

4.3.1 Introduction

This analysis will begin by describing the religious backgrounds of the primary participants and their families. The two main themes I will address in this analysis are religion as a potential negative force in family support for trans people, using Regina's experience as a case study, and individual spirituality as an alternative to organised religion, using René's experience as a case study. I will also discuss prayer as a form of family support and church as a family activity.

4.3.2 Descriptions of identity

All three of the trans young people in my research had experience with Christianity. The experiences range from positive (Tsuki) to mixed (René) to negative (Regina). Tsuki has had positive experiences with religious institutions and is unsure about spirituality. René has had negative experiences with religious institutions and has some spirituality. Regina has had negative experiences with religious people, and neutral experience with religious institutions, and has no spirituality. Tsuki and Regina have some familial exposure to Buddhism.

Tsuki identifies as agnostic. She went to church regularly as a child and sometimes attends her grandmother's church with her as a social activity. Tsuki's grandmother is a devout Catholic. Tsuki's parents are not strongly religious, though her mother was raised Buddhist.

René has a complicated history with Christianity. They went to church with their family (parents and sister) as a child. René was unhappy with the "self-hating Christianity" they saw preached at church and sought their own spiritual relationship with God. They do not currently identify as a Christian but still pray with their Christian sister occasionally and have visited their sister's church.

Regina identifies as an atheist. She followed her mother to church until she was about 8, at which point she decided she no longer wanted to go as she did not feel she gained anything from going. Regina's mother is very religious, and her Christian belief impedes her from accepting Regina's trans identity. Regina's father converted from Buddhism to

Christianity and did not present a tension between his religion and acceptance of Regina's gender identity.

4.3.3 "Duality of opinion": religion as a negative factor in Regina's experience of family support

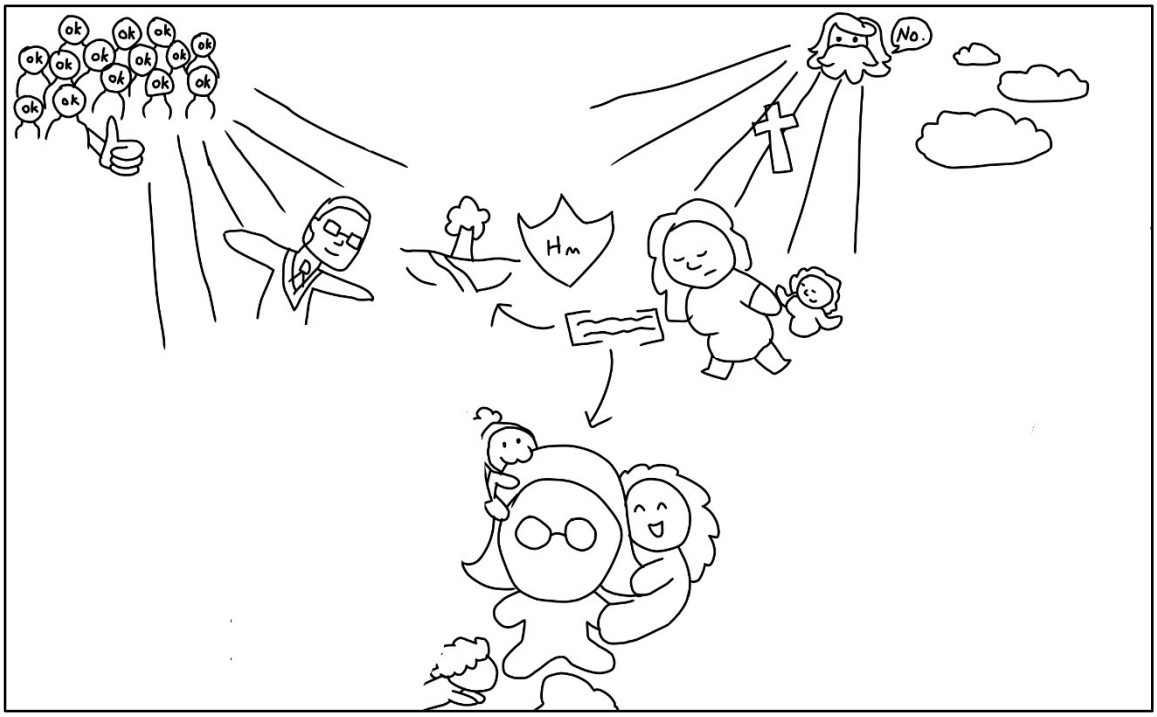


Figure 8: Religion-related elements in Regina's drawing

This is part of Regina's drawing. Regina drew a tapestry of her life with many components. To make the image readable, visual elements not being analysed here have been erased (full drawings are in Appendix K). These elements together tell a story about religion in Regina's life.

At the bottom of this section, but central in the full drawing, is Regina herself. In the top-left is Regina's extended family on her father's side, shown as a crowd with the word "OK" replacing their faces. Beneath them is Regina's father, smiling with his arms outstretched. In the top-right is a drawing of God, clouds, and a crucifix. According to Regina, this represents Christianity. Beneath this are two drawings of Regina's mother, one larger one that is frowning and bowing her head, and one smaller one that is smiling and shrugging her shoulders. To the left of this is a nametag that represents Regina's

birth name. Two arrows extend from it: one pointing to Regina, and one pointing to a tree and shield that represent the meaning of her birth name.

This is how Regina describes this section of the drawing:

> **Regina**: There's Ayah giving me acceptance, and the rest of the [South-East Asian] side of the family I never talked to, but they accept me as well. There's my mom, who is not quite as accepting, but still like willing to give me a shot. And Christianity, which is her reason for not accepting me, because God said Regina isn't my name and my dead name, which is like resilience, she thinks that's more fitting for me.
>
> **Tara:** What is your mum holding?
>
> **Regina:** I just drew her twice. One of them is just small. It's like the duality of her opinion of me. The big one is disapproving because of God, and then the other one is like, 'yeah, it's okay'. Like, it's kind of shrugging, like it doesn't matter, she's not forcing her beliefs onto me.

As Regina says, she drew two depictions of her mother to represent her mother's duality of opinion of Regina. As Regina calls her mother "Mom", I will call the larger drawing "Sad Mom" and the smaller drawing "Happy Mom" for the purpose of analysis. Sad Mom represents Regina's mother under the influence of her faith. Happy Mom, who is neutral to Regina's trans identity, may depict Regina's mother either not under the influence of her faith, or maintaining faith but not letting it affect her relationship with Regina. The latter interpretation is supported by Regina's statement that Happy Mom is "kind of shrugging, like it doesn't matter, she's not forcing her beliefs on to me". Sad Mom and Happy Mom are distinguished by their size, facial expression, and gesture. The size difference could represent that her mother is Sad Mom more of the time, and/or that Sad Mom has a bigger influence on her (Regina's) life. As previously described, Sad Mom appears unhappy, with a frowning mouth, downturned eyes, a bowed head, and her body leaning forward. Happy Mom conversely has a smiling mouth, slightly upturned eyes, and an upright posture. Interestingly, Sad Mom is depicted with sadness-related features rather than angry features (expected angry features would include a furrowed brow, folded arms, and upright stance). This is notable as the word "disapproval" may be more associated with anger than sadness. The depiction of her mother as sad when influenced by her faith suggests that Regina views her mother's

faith as being detrimental to her mother's own wellbeing as well as her relationship with Regina.

According to Regina and her mother Leah, Leah's religious beliefs manifest in the importance she places on names:

> **Leah**: I believe that your destiny is really tied to your name. So, I had a discussion when she first came out as trans that I wasn't ready to let go of the destiny that God had showed me that she has.
>
> ---
>
> **Regina**: Ultimately, Mom is probably the least supportive person in my life. She is supportive, I would say, but she does think, it's like, a trend. It's something I'm doing because I have a broken heart and I needed love, and I'm not really sure how that ties into being trans, but that's what she said to me, and also that she talked to God, and he said my name was actually Dead Name. So, names are very important to her, so me changing my name was like cardinal sin to her. So, we ultimately agreed that we would like she would just never refer to me by name ever again. She didn't want to call me the dead name because it upset me, but she didn't want to call me the new name because it was "wrong". I say in air quotes. So, I don't have a name anymore.

Leah's justifications for not accepting Regina's change of name include her belief in the spiritual importance of Regina's birth name, and that God Himself said that Regina's birth name is her true name. The appeal to God's authority serves to shut down argument that Regina's name is her choice, as God is all-knowing. Similarly, Leah argues that she put spiritual consideration into Regina's birth name, so changing her name goes against Regina's spiritual destiny. Some Christians believe that destiny is pre-determined by God's will; therefore, Regina's name is not seen as a personal choice, but rather part of her predestiny, like her eye colour and adult height might be. Regina says, "changing my name was like cardinal sin to her", which is interesting given its religious connotations. Cardinal sin can formally refer to damnable religious offences (answerable to God) and informally can refer to serious mistakes or unforgiveable acts (answerable to humans). Regina's use of "cardinal sin" seems to take elements from each of these definitions, portraying her mother's reaction to her changing her name as both a spiritual and personal offence.

Regina appears to contradict herself when she later says that her mother is supportive:

Tara: How does that make you feel when she doesn't call you anything?

Regina: It's a bit annoying, and I do feel like I'm missing out on something, but it's not that big of a deal, like I know it could be so much worse. So, I'm just happy I got what I got, you know. She is a very supportive person in general. Both with my gender and just with me, everything in life.

Literature about LGBTQ+ Asian people shows that they can feel supported by their family even if they are not supported in their rainbow identity. Being out to family, for example, is not necessarily essential for LGBTQ+ Asian youth to living an authentic life (K. K. H. Tan et al., 2023; Wong & Thomsen, 2023), and the rainbow identity and family identity can be separated. Thus, it may not be a contradiction when Regina says that her mother is very supportive despite the issues they have had with their relationship over Leah's religious views about Regina's gender. As will be explored in the next chapter, Regina says that her mother is a strong advocate for her when it comes to Regina's autism-related needs.

Regina does not relate the depictions of her father and his side of the family to religion in her words, but the drawing shows parallels between her father's and mother's levels of acceptance of her gender. Regina's parents are both Christians, and her father comes from a Buddhist background, so members of her extended family on his side may have Buddhist influences. The religious beliefs of her father and his side of the family did not prevent them from accepting Regina's gender. The lines above the depictions of her parents show connection to the figures above them:

Tara: Have your mum or ayah supported you with your extended family? Like I see here, you've got your ayah, and then you've got behind him is your extended family. And then what are these lines?

Regina: It's just like a beam of light to show that they're connected.

Tara: Okay. Because he kind of looks like Superman firing guns at his back.

Regina: That is not what it was supposed to be. It was just like; it all connects to him.

Tara: Because they're his family.

Regina: Yeah, he knows him better than I do. I don't even know most of their names.

The lines provide a visual parallel showing that Regina's mother is influenced by Christianity, and her father is connected to his extended family. Regina's father acts as a

mouthpiece for her to communicate with her extended family. The features of the drawing reflect the most salient aspects of them: there are many, she does not have personal relationships with them, and they are okay with her being trans. She does not know them well, which is reflected in her drawing of them as a faceless crowd. The word "OK" that replaces their faces shows that they accept her gender. When Regina came out as trans, her father gained her permission and then messaged his family group chat with the news on her behalf. They "accepted [her] very well".

A further interpretation of Regina's depiction of her father is as a protector. As Regina's mouthpiece, he saved her from coming out to her extended family herself, which could have been uncomfortable for her for many reasons: she may have had to come out many times to reach each family member (while her father was able to do it all at once via group chat); she did not know them well; she did not know whether they would react positively (especially because she did not know them well); and she did not want to make a bigger deal out of coming out than she had to (as shown by her coming out to her mother and brother being her saying "by the way, I'm trans" and then leaving the room). There is also a potential neurodivergent component, as Regina's autism may make uncertain social interaction more uncomfortable. Evidence to support this suggestion includes her statement "I don't like talking to people" and her fear of being touched without warning. With his arms outstretched, Regina's father looks like he is acting as a shield, helping to reduce her communicative load and buffering potential negative responses.

4.3.4 Alienation in religion, refuge in spirituality: René's mixed experiences with Christianity

Christian faith is very complex for René. It is tied up with gender norms (e.g. witnessing preaching of gender roles), neurodivergence (e.g. experiencing sensory overload at their sister's church and finding the Christianity in their heritage culture "flashy"), and culture (e.g. finding many New Zealand churches to be "very White", but also not feeling at ease in an Asian church due to the flashiness mentioned above). Note that René's definition of a "very White" church appears to be not just 'mainly composed of white people' but 'reproducing White dominance' (I discovered this when I called my stepfather "very

White" to mean that he is pale-skinned, and René reacted with disgust, showing that they mean the term to be negative). René's experience of religion was also tied to culture from a young age. René remarks: "Sunday school there was a lot of really poorly behaved White boys".

I will now discuss the development of René's faith experiences from childhood to teen years to young adulthood. René grew up attending church off and on with their parents and sister. As a child, church "was kind of boring" for them. René worried they were "wrong" for not "believ[ing] in God yet" and asked their mother if that was okay. They remember the gist of their mother's response as: "you know what? It's okay. You don't have to, and it's something that comes with time, you know, and you figure it out." Though René's mother is a devout Christian, she appears to have taken a stance of non-pressure towards her children's religious affiliation. René's mother supported René's religious agency during childhood and adolescence, giving them a choice about whether to attend and leaving the invitation open if they changed their mind. After months-long stretches of not attending church, they would decide to resume regular attendance, citing it as "kind of a nice change of pace".

As a teenager, René's general sense of self-worth was adversely affected by their church experiences. The "self-hating Christianity" preached by their church caused them to build up self-hatred. In René's words: "I built up a lot of self-hatred, definitely related to that church that I mentioned earlier. Not just related to sexuality, all it was just a general sense of like, unworthiness." Their wording of "not just related to sexuality" suggests that René's self-hatred was partly related to absorbed homophobic messages from church. René recalls having a "big crisis" around age 12: "I was like, 'Oh my god, I'm not straight. But I think I just have to come out and tell people'." Their crisis may have been exacerbated by religious teaching against homosexuality. This argument is supported by their mother's initial reaction of giving René Christian anti-homosexuality pamphlets, which René says they felt "betrayed" by. Religious pamphlets, or tracts, of this nature are harmful for queer and trans people and their families. Tracts can appear authoritative as they typically come from religious organisations and contain Bible verses, so Christian families of queer and trans people may assume they are truthful and helpful. Christian family members who do not know much about being queer or

trans, like René's mother, may turn to these tracts for guidance and share them with their rainbow family member, unfortunately harming the rainbow family member and cultivating homophobic and transphobic ideology in the process.

Reductive attitudes towards gender roles were an issue in René's old church. René recalls a sermon they witnessed in Year 10: "they had a sermon that was about gender roles, and I remember really disagreeing with it. And that was kind of not the vibe". René did not know that they were trans by this stage, but the sermon affected them from a feminist standpoint. The memory remains vivid to them to this day, showing that preaching about gender roles at a formative age can impact trans people into adulthood. René had a similar experience in a church they visited in their undergraduate years. This time, René seemed to gain confidence and argued with the speaker:

> **René**: "I went to the new attendees' little get-to-know-each-other session, after the service. And one of the church leaders was literally saying, like, 'men do this, women do that'. And I was like, 'okay, but like, gender roles', and then he was like, 'in the church, we believe this'. And he kind of like had this like, knowing smile as if he was like, 'yeah, there's gonna always be one of those'."

René's retelling suggests an air of condescension towards René through the "knowing smile" and the assertion of authority through "in the church we believe this". René was questioning their gender at this stage and not out as trans, so they thought to themself "if you only have places for men, and you only have places for women, where do I fit? Clearly, I don't belong here." René says this is the last church they sought out while studying in this city, suggesting that this interaction could have contributed to their separation from the church altogether.

René's moments of greatest faithful conviction were in self-directed and self-reflective spirituality. As they say: "I really liked the way that they did the Christian stuff at my high school. It was more about general spirituality and self-discovery, rather than 'follow God specifically Sky Man Important.' It was like, here's a place to reflect, you know? It was good." This contrasts with the rigid structure they experienced attending formal church services.

René's profound spiritual experiences also revolve around the severe depression they suffered as a teenager. One spiritual experience was of praying and crying out to God for help with their depression:

> **René**: "I had like, this moment with God, where everything felt like it was like, way too much. I remember leaving class to cry in the bathroom, and I think it was one of the few times I remember praying to God and saying, like, please, please, please, you're supposed to carry me through when things are too hard. And things are way too hard right now, and I can't do it. And then, I felt that I literally heard and felt God speak to me directly. And then suddenly, I just felt, like, kilos lighter."

Here, René brings up the 'God carries' metaphor from Christianity. As evidenced by René's description, 'God carries' in theological parlance means that God takes the brunt of life's difficulties so we can cope. Some people report physical experiences when they have a spiritual encounter with God, as René did when they "felt kilos lighter". This description is an extension of the 'God carries' metaphor, as it suggests that a weight or burden was lifted off René and taken on by God. René's experience brings up the idea of God as a supportive 'family member'. Like one might approach a family member for help, René approached God and felt a physical response that made them feel better. René speaks of the importance of this encounter: "and that was quite an important spiritual moment for me. And I remember leaving the bathroom being like, 'Oh, shit, God's real'. So, I was like, real hardcore Christian. I used to, like, preach to my friends and shit. [Laughs] It was so bad." This powerful experience also spurred them to undertake religious confirmation, a rite in which a believer proclaims their faith in front of their church and loved ones.

René discusses closing themself off emotionally due to their depression. René uses several metaphors to describe how their depression felt protective to them, including mucous, clownfish and anemones, and slime. René says: "the depression was like a numbness, and I remember describing it as kind of like a cold mucousy layer that kind of protected me kind of like with like clownfish and anemones". The "mucousy layer" acted as a barrier for them to protect them from extreme emotions, but it was also "cold" and isolating. René's particular concern was thinking "I can see how much my depression is hurting the people around me". "Clownfish and anemones" references the symbiotic relationship of the two creatures, where the anemone's sting harms most

creatures except for the clownfish, which has a protective mucous layer. The animals protect each other from predators, and the clownfish catches food for them both. In René's metaphor, it seems that they are the clownfish, hiding from predators (emotions) in the anemone (depression), protected by a mucous layer (numbness). To extend this metaphor, the symbiotic relationship required René to 'feed' the depression by maintaining their mucous layer with "all that toxicity that [they'd] been growing and festering". However, their cultivated relationship with their depression excluded their loved ones, which René began to realise, saying "even if it's not for my sake, I want to make sure that I'm not hurting them anymore, because I can't stand hurting the people I love. And so, I kind of started feeling feelings again."

However, breaking down their emotional walls was spiritually uncomfortable: "and then having scraped off that slime, gotten rid of that depression, suddenly, I could feel everything really intensely and very raw, kind of, like, when you've got like new skin forming or like under a blister or something, you know, it was everything felt really heightened. And around that time, I was like, maybe, maybe this is too much." The words "scrape", "raw", and "blister" relate the experience to an injury. Like a new layer of skin, feeling emotions was intensely sensitive and overwhelming.

Moving to René's experiences of religious support in their family of origin, René discusses how their mother "really struggled at first" with René's bisexual identity. However, she came around and now tries to understand René's sexuality and non-binary identity, and René says, "now honestly, she's the cool parent." René taught their mother vocabulary around gender and sexuality through dialogue and YouTube videos. Unlike René's father, René's mother was receptive to learning, saying: "René sat me down one day and actually showed me a YouTube clip, and it just blew my mind. It explained all the different definitions of what is sex, what is gender and all the different terminology that exists in this world, LGBTQ world." René's mother uses metaphors of colour to express how her worldview has changed through her non-binary child. She says: "my eyes have been opened now to the spectrum, and the thousand shades of grey, and the rainbow." This quote shows how she has developed from a binary-based to spectrum-based idea of gender. This has been a fundamental shift for René's mother, as she says, "I'm very much binary, I used to be a concrete thinker and lived my life in a

concrete way". She also notes that her change in perception of the world was initiated by her marginalised experiences as an immigrant, ethnic minority in New Zealand, and a woman in her profession. Living with multiple marginalisations primed her to be "open to differences" and helped her learn to become more tolerant of ambiguity. René's mother acknowledges the role that her Christian upbringing had in her previous misgivings about LGBTQ+ identities: "it's taken me a long time, I think, as a person, to get to this point. Because growing up as a Christian in a Christian family, it's very much 'you shouldn't do this, you shouldn't do that.'" Regarding René's choice not to attend church, René's mother maintains the stance she has had throughout René's life that it is René's choice. She does hope and pray that René "will find their way back to God and Jesus" and find a welcoming church, as she believes that faith could help René cope with the struggles of life like it has helped her.

4.3.5 Religion-based support

Prayer as support

Some family members used prayer as a form of supporting their trans loved one. Tsuki's grandmother Aaliyah talks about praying for Tsuki's safety, even more than she does for her other grandchildren, because she is trans:

> **Tara:** Have you faced any challenges supporting Tsuki?
>
> **Aaliyah:** No, no. The only challenge for me, is, because I'm a grandma, I worry about her safety. That's the only challenge, I would say. All the time I pray, I pray for her more than I pray for [my other grandchildren]. Because I say, 'God, keep her safe. Because this world is not a not a good place for people like Tsuki, and keep her safe.' That's all I pray for. Keep her safe. That's my challenge. Fear, fear for her safety. But we are in a good country.

Tsuki's father shared that he was initially apprehensive about telling his mother (Aaliyah) that Tsuki was trans because Aaliyah is a devout Catholic. However, Aaliyah shared no misgivings with me about Tsuki's gender, religious or otherwise. Her "only challenge" was an increased concern for her safety. This fear could spur some people to try to deter their family members from transitioning, but instead Aaliyah problematises the world for not being accommodating to trans people like Tsuki.

Margaret, René's mother, also prays for René's safety:

> **Tara:** What do you pray for?
> **Margaret:** For their safety. (Margaret begins to cry) For their health. I hope that- I know that God will keep them in His love. That is another journey. Another separate journey.

By "another separate journey", Margaret is contrasting with René's 'gender journey'. This quote has connections with Margaret's drawing. The central figure of the drawing is reproduced in Figure 9, showing Margaret standing behind René in a protective stance. Margaret no longer lives in the same country as René, and laments that she cannot be with them physically. Praying for God to keep René "in His love" is a way that Margaret eases her concerns by trusting God to help protect René when she cannot physically be there.

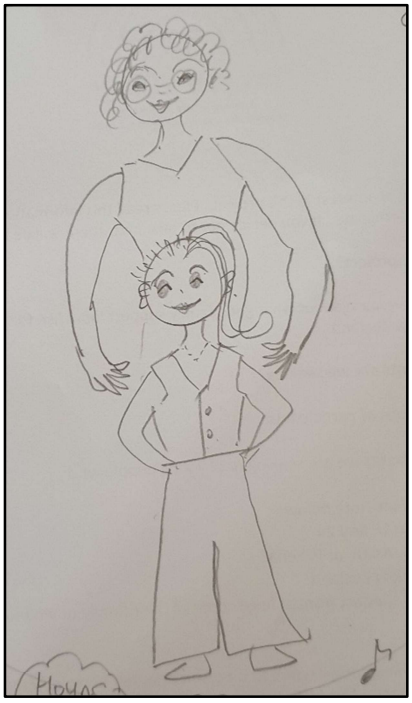


Figure 9: Margaret's depiction of herself and René

René also prays occasionally, typically with their sister, who is a devout Christian:

> **René**: I maybe pray like once a year, like with my sister. She's trying for a baby, so I often do pray for her because she's really struggling emotionally with it. But I wouldn't really offer that to anyone else. It's only because it's my sister and I love her. I know it means a lot to her. And it's something that I can do from where I am. And that is something that I do really appreciate about Christianity. It gives you a feeling like you can do something, even if you're feeling kind of helpless. Cause you can pray.

Despite not identifying as a Christian, René finds comfort in being able to pray for others when they are struggling with something. This is an example of engaging with spirituality when not religiously affiliated. René appreciates that prayer offers a feeling like "you can do something" when you otherwise cannot, such as when someone is going through

something, and you cannot physically be there for them and/or the situation is somewhat out of human control, such as fertility. Prayer is something René only offers their sister due to their special relationship. René and their sister have very different lifestyles. René is into “really aggressive left-wing stuff” and queer, and their sister is a “very God-fearing woman” with a “heteronormative life”. Their sibling bond is strong, and their different lifestyles do not divide them. René said “sometimes I'm really worried that she might not really get me because she's quite religious and all that and she lives a very heteronormative life, but she actually is super supportive. And she always just shows me nothing but kindness and love, like always.” Receiving their sister’s support to be authentically themself makes their relationship a safe place for René to engage with spiritual practices with their sister despite René’s complicated experiences with religious institutions.

Church as a family activity

Going to church is a way to spend time together as a family. Inviting someone to church can be a form of support as the inviter usually thinks that the service may help the invitee. Accepting the offer can also be a reciprocal form of support as it may show the inviter support for their faith and a desire to spend time with them in a place that makes them happy. René showcased this form of support for their sister when they visited their sister’s church with her.

Though Tsuki attended church when she was very young, she considers herself as not being raised religious. She identifies as agnostic now, and her grandmother is Catholic. Her grandmother talks to her about God, and invites her to church, but never forces her religion onto Tsuki.

Tsuki discusses how her grandmother applies her religion to her relationship with Tsuki:

> **Tsuki**: She'll talk to me about God, but she'll never, like, try to make me come to- she'll try make me come to church sometimes, but not to like, be religious, [but] to like, see one of her friends or something. She'll never force her religion onto me.

Tsuki’s grandmother frames attending church as a social activity to Tsuki. Tsuki’s false start, where she almost says “she’ll never try to make me come to church” is an extension of the idea that Tsuki’s grandmother does not force religion onto Tsuki. This

non-threatening framing of churchgoing allows Tsuki to maintain a connection to church that makes her and her grandmother happy.

4.4 Discussion

4.4.1 Prevalence of religious identities

The majority (79%) of religious New Zealanders affiliate with Christianity (Stats NZ, 2024). My sample aligned with this, with all the families having some affiliation with Christianity.

The diversity of relationships with religion and spirituality in my small sample reflects the findings in the literature that each trans young person has a complex, individual journey with religion and spirituality. Moreover, while spirituality and involvement with religious institutions are connected, engagement or disengagement with one does not necessitate the same situation with the other. My study involved a person who is neither spiritual nor a church attendee (Regina), a person who is spiritual but rarely attends church (René), and a person who sometimes attends church but is not spiritual (Tsuki).

The religion of one's family can influence which religion a person engages with through their life (Gandy et al., 2012). This is to say that if a person is raised in a particular religion or denomination, they are more likely to engage with that religion or denomination over others. This trend was observed in this research, as no primary participants reported converting to different religions from those they were raised with.

4.4.2 Preferred ways of practising religion

Trans people may find some denominations more inviting than others (Yarhouse & Carrs, 2012). Tsuki's grandmother is a Catholic but prefers to attend the Anglican church because "they are more understanding. They even have gay marriages".

Spirituality can be more appealing than organised religion for trans people because of the presence of transphobia in faith communities (Safavifar et al., 2016), and because spirituality offers more flexibility of belief than organised religion (Huss, 2014). Both of these factors influenced René.

4.4.3 Support experiences with God and churches

God can be a support person (Yarhouse & Carrs, 2012). This is what René found. René did not talk about God supporting them with their gender, but rather their mental health.

Churches can offer community to trans people (Gandy et al., 2021). Tsuki seems to be happy to partake in the social aspect, and her grandmother implies that she engages in the social and material support system ("Tsuki wants to continue going there and build up a rapport with them for the future").

René's experiences of churches preaching binary ideas of gender roles made them feel like they did not have a place at that church as a non-binary person. Hearing transphobic attitudes likely contributed to fear of rejection for being trans, a common fear reported by trans religious people in the literature (Gandy et al., 2021; Okrey Anderson & McGuire, 2021; Veale et al., 2019).

4.4.4 Intersections with culture

Religion was not closely tied to ethnicity/race for the people in my study, but feeling ethnically minoritised was one of the factors that deterred René from choosing to attend a specific church.

Interestingly, Tsuki's connections to religion and culture are both heavily influenced by her relationship with her grandmother. This shows the positive potential for connection through a familial bond.

4.4.5 Implications for family support

Religion can be a negative force in whether a family member accepts a trans young person, but it need not be. While Regina's mother struggles to reconcile her Christian beliefs with her daughter's gender identity, Regina's Christian father and Buddhist family members do not present the same struggles. René's mother also struggled at first due to her Christian beliefs, but Tsuki's Catholic grandmother did not. There is no monolithic 'religious belief': religious people carry their own ideas of right and wrong based on their personal beliefs and what they have been taught through their own journeys with religion.

Another finding is that all a person's identity markers and beliefs are relevant in whether a trans young person feels safe and included in a church institution. René was unable to find a church in their chosen branch of Christianity that affirmed their non-binary identity, was ethnically diverse, shared their views on gender and sexuality, and was not overstimulating in its worship style. René most enjoyed the "general spirituality and self-discovery" centred by their high school Christian group, and the spirituality they pursued on their own.

4.5 Conclusion

My participants experienced religious and spiritual support and harm in many ways, with religion presenting as both a facilitator and barrier to family support. Despite similarly having Christian upbringings, they diverged significantly in the formation of their religious identities and the extent to which they engage with religious institutions and in spirituality.

The next chapter will be about neurodivergence and family support.

5 Neurodivergence

5.1 Chapter introduction

This chapter is about neurodivergence. I will start by discussing what neurodivergence means. I then begin a literature review about the intersection of neurodivergence and trans identity, first examining the state of the literature on this topic. I will then explore the internal experiences of gender of neurodivergent people, followed by internal and external factors that can lead to neurodivergent trans people suppressing aspects of their identity. I will then describe the types of communities trans neurodivergent people engage with, and what they have reported desiring in family support. I will end with notes on trans neurodivergent people's relationships with religion. I will then begin an analysis of the data, firstly exploring an extended case study involving René's experience of their gender interacting with their neurodivergence. Afterwards, I will note further findings across the families, then discuss different types of neurodivergent-coded support seen in the data. I will compare my findings in relation to the literature in the discussion section. Finally, I will discuss the implications of these findings for family support for neurodivergent young trans Asian New Zealanders.

5.1.1 What is neurodivergence?

The term 'neurodiversity' describes how brains develop uniquely, like fingerprints (Cleveland Clinic, 2022). 'Neurotypical' (i.e. 'neurologically typical') describes a social construction of how a "normal" brain works (Ako Aotearoa, 2026). Those whose brains work differently to expected are called 'neurodivergent'. Neurodivergence can be innate or acquired (Ako Aotearoa, 2026). Neurodivergent conditions include, but are not limited to: autism, ADHD, OCD, intellectual and learning disabilities, and some mood disorders (Ako Aotearoa, 2026; Cleveland Clinic, 2022). While neurodivergent conditions are distinct, there can be significant overlap in characteristics and support needs (Brotherton, 2025).

5.2 Literature review

5.2.1 State of the literature

Lack thereof

Much of the available literature about neurodivergent people appears to centre on autistic people[11]. This does not reflect the diversity of neurodivergent experiences. Another limitation is that most of the literature is based in the United Kingdom and United States, with little attention paid to non-Western experiences of neurodivergence and gender.

Due to the literature's focus on the needs of cis autistic men, there are deficits in our understanding of the needs of gender minorities (Kourti & MacLeod, 2019, p. 53), especially regarding the relationship between autism and gender identity in trans and non-binary people (Cooper, 2024, p. 3; Hillier et al., 2019, p. 99). Literature involving autistic women and people assigned female at birth is limited, partly attributable to the "default" portrayal of autism being cis males (Cooper, 2024, p. 3), but research indicates that these populations may experience neurodivergence differently than cis males (Brotherton, 2025). Furthermore, much of the existing research on neurodivergence and LGBTQ+ identities is quantitative (Toft, 2024), and largely focuses on prevalence rates (Munday et al., 2025, p. 47) rather than lived experience.

Early qualitative research about neurodivergent people typically did not involve participation from neurodivergent people, with neurotypical researchers often interviewing neurotypical family members of autistic people (Jackson-Perry, 2024; Munday et al., 2025). This practice reflects and perpetuates the objectification of autistic people. It is essential to collect firsthand accounts from autistic people to produce meaningful and ethical research about them (Jackson-Perry, 2024, p. 141).

Pathologisation (in literature)

The history of literature around both neurodivergence and LGBTQ+ identities is fraught with pathologisation (Jackson-Perry, 2024; McAuliffe et al., 2023; Toft et al., 2020). The

[11] I use identity-first language as recommended by Kenny et al. (2016)

prevalence of LGBTQ+ identities in autistic people has previously been interpreted under a neuronormative, cissexist paradigm (Munday et al., 2025, p. 46) as "a deficit in understanding by autistic people" (McAuliffe et al., 2023, p. 8) or a result of autistic people's "cognitive inflexibility" (Jackson-Perry, 2024, p. 141). Both autism and LGBTQ+ identities have been medicalised in research and society and treated as something to be fixed (Toft, 2024).

Models

Much of the reviewed literature labelled neurodivergent conditions as disabilities or grouped them in a broader study of disability (e.g. Hillier et al., 2019; Hurlbutt & Chalmers, 2002; Kourti & MacLeod, 2019; Miller, 2018; Müller et al., 2008; Toft et al., 2020; Womack et al., 2022), while others distinguished between the two categories (e.g. Botha, 2020; Toft, 2024). I acknowledge that not all neurodivergent people identify their neurodivergence as a disability, as is expressed by some participants of Cohen et al. (2022), and one of my participants.

Current models of gender should be acknowledged as neuronormative (Munday et al., 2025; Toft, 2024) and based in Euro-colonialism (Munday et al., 2025). Munday et al. (2025) express concern over the prevalence of deficiency-based narratives in research around trans autistic people that frame "Autistic gender identity as a manifestation of Autistic insufficiency" (p. 46).

Intersectionality

Some scholars argue that current intersectionality research has failed to adequately consider the intersection of gender identity and disability (Miller, 2018, p. 327), particularly autism (Hillier et al., 2019, p. 101).

Toft (2024) argues that while "dual identity" research of LGBTQ+ autistic populations is useful, it does not enact the intersectional approach that it may claim if it does not consider the person wholly (p. 106). Hillier et al. (2019) identified LGBTQ+ and disabled identities as "overlapping and intertwined", as participants of theirs believed that bias against them for being LGBTQ+ and disabled was based on their cumulative identity (p. 105).

Queering autism and the mind

Some researchers have called for 'queering' understandings of autism (Davidson & Tamas, 2016; Kourti & MacLeod, 2019), with Munday (2024) proposing a 'neuroqueer framework' for 'neuroqueering' research with autistic LGBTQ+ people. This call for 'queering' autism research includes in research epistemology, as Kourti & MacLeod (2019) argue that researchers should "understand autism not as a biological deficit, but as a form of 'neurological queerness'" (p. 57). It also includes eschewing cisnormative assumptions and expectations of autistic people (Davidson & Tamas, 2016, p. 63).

Historic gender theories of autism

Autism has been viewed as a "predominantly male condition" (Kourti & MacLeod, 2019, p. 56), in the senses that it has been believed to chiefly affect males, and in the academic theory that it is caused by an "extreme male brain", or "over-developed male attributes" (Davidson & Tamas, 2016, p. 60). Thus, autism research is skewed towards male experiences, and women and gender non-conforming people are neglected in research (Kourti & MacLeod, 2019, p. 56) and in accessing a diagnosis.

5.2.2 Neurodivergent experiences of gender

Correlation between neurodivergence and being trans

The gender makeup of several studies with autistic people indicated a significant percentage of trans and non-binary participants. In Cooper (2024), ten people assigned female at birth (AFAB) were interviewed, but only four fully identified as women. In Kourti & MacLeod's (2019) study with 21 AFAB autistic people, all of them mentioned not relating to typically feminine presentation or activities (p. 55). Sala et al. (2020) interviewed autistic and non-autistic people, and while they did not measure the rate of binary trans people, the rate of non-binary people was 7/31 for autistic people and 1/26 for non-autistics, showing that significantly more of the autistic respondents identified as non-binary.

Gender informed by autism

Trans and gender non-conforming autistic participants across several studies talked about their gender identity and expression being informed by their autism (Cooper,

2024; Hillier et al., 2019; Kourti & MacLeod, 2019; McAuliffe et al., 2023; Toft et al., 2020).

One participant believed that she is non-binary and asexual "because" she is autistic (Toft et al., 2020, p. 13), while others refuted this: one participant denied that their gender and autism were connected at all, describing them as "like oil and water in a container" (Toft, 2024, p. 40).

One trans autistic person described a sense of agency in playing with gender, saying "I am secure enough in myself to explore, manipulate and subvert all aspects of gender. Gender is mine and there are no rules." (Toft, 2024, p. 35).

Davison & Tamas (2016) argue that for many autistic people, "gender is barely present at all; it's kind of a nonsense or nonentity" (p. 61). Some participants described not feeling like any gender and "not even [being] sure what a gender should feel like" (Kourti & MacLeod, 2019, p. 55). While some younger people confidently identified their gender as non-binary, genderqueer, or agender, one older autistic AFAB person said "I don't fit either. I wish there was a neutral" (Kourti & MacLeod, 2019, p. 56), suggesting a generational gap in the availability of terminology.

For some, getting an autism diagnosis helped them understand their gender and accept themselves, with one participant saying "It explains why I've been so different and why I struggle with male/female roles and identity. It helps me to better accept myself." (Kourti & MacLeod, 2019, p. 56). Some felt that their autism spurred them to be more authentic in their other identities, including gender, as they associated autism with avoiding "artifice" and "performing things" (McAuliffe et al., 2023, p. 15).

Autigender

Some participants in Toft 's (2024) study used the term "autigender" to describe how gender can be "experienced "through" autism"" (p. 40). Physical manifestations of this include "dressing for comfort rather than gendered purposes" (Toft, 2024, p. 40). Toft (2024) argues that terms like autigender (and its equivalent sexuality term, autisexual) are useful in the fight against deficiency-based narratives (p. 41). Munday et al. (2025) argue that existing gender terms are overly focused on the gender binary, and that terms

such as autigender and gendervague represent a neurodivergent perspective on gender (p. 53).

Contextual shifting of gender

Some AFAB, non-binary autistic people described their gender as contextual: they identified more as a woman when they were with other women (Cooper, 2024, pp. 11–12). One participant described feeling the shared "struggle" of being perceived as a woman, even though they did not fully identify as one, and added that they considered themself a lesbian "because I feel like I am a woman in context with other women" (Cooper, 2024, pp. 11–12).

Performing gender

Some AFAB autistic people had trouble connecting to femininity because it felt like "another layer of performance" (Cooper, 2024, p. 11). Enacting the gender roles expected of them could feel like "performing" and "mask[ing] their autism" (Kourti & MacLeod, 2019, p. 56). One participant described "copying" gendered behaviours from others growing up, resulting in a "tomboy-ish" gender expression due to only having brothers (Cooper, 2024, p. 11).

A common theme among autistic gender non-conforming people was that special interests contributed to their identities more than their adherence to gender roles (Cooper, 2024; Kourti & MacLeod, 2019).

5.2.3 Internal and external suppressive factors

Fear of identifying as autistic without a diagnosis

Undiagnosed autistic people may fear claiming an autistic identity due to concerns of "undermining the experience of real autistic people" (McAuliffe et al., 2023, p. 14).

Limited access to representation and vocabulary

Trans autistic participants in several studies noted that they did not grow up with the representation or vocabulary for understanding being trans (Hillier et al., 2019; McAuliffe et al., 2023; Womack et al., 2022). One participant reported only having

access to resources aimed at men, which she could not identify with (McAuliffe et al., 2023, p. 12)

In some cases, family members refused to talk about LGBTQ+ topics (Womack et al., 2022), and lack of privacy to explore one's identity was a barrier (Hillier et al., 2019). These echo the experiences of some Asian trans youth explored in the literature review of the Culture chapter. These factors can be detrimental to relationship-building (Hillier et al., 2019, p. 99) and identity development (McAuliffe et al., 2023, p. 12)

Infantilisation and delegitimisation

Infantilisation is a common issue for LGBTQ+ neurodivergent people (Toft, 2024, p. 38). Autistic people can be perceived as immature and unable to understand gender and sexuality (Toft et al., 2020) and thus unable to know that they are trans (McAuliffe et al., 2023). This means they can be disbelieved when they assert a trans identity (Hillier et al., 2019; McAuliffe et al., 2023; Toft et al., 2020). Trans neurodivergent people have refuted the idea that their neurodivergence inhibits their comprehension of gender and understanding of their identities (Hillier et al., 2019; Toft et al., 2020). Toft (2024) argues that autistic people do understand gender, but they are more likely to question gender norms (p. 36). Due to stigma, some trans neurodivergent people may work to convince themselves that they are cis, to the detriment of their mental health (Toft et al., 2020, p. 13)

Trans autistic people described delegitimisation from family members and health professionals who believed that they were "confused" about their gender due to their autism (Hillier et al., 2019; Toft et al., 2020). One participant asserted: "people assume when you are autistic you don't know yourself, but even people I know with intense symptoms, know themselves." (Hillier et al., 2019, p. 104). One participant attributed this type of delegitimisation to binary thinking, saying "they just seem to want to put you in separate categories, so when there is intersection people get really confused or they will be like "you are *that* because you are *this*"" (Hillier et al., 2019, p. 104). This echoes the sentiment of "you can't be too many things" shared by a trans person of colour in Pipkin & Clarke (2024). One participant discussed this sentiment further, saying "when you try and explain it to people who think of themselves as normal, it feels like this huge

pile of labels and after like the third one, brains start to melt and they assume you're just doing it for the attention" (McAuliffe et al., 2023, p. 17).

Some parents of autistic trans children reported wondering whether their child's autism caused their trans identity (Kuvalanka et al., 2018), or if queerness was a "symptom" of being autistic (Toft, 2024, p. 37). Parents may actively inhibit their child from socially transitioning due to infantilising ideas, with one participant saying of their 12-year-old, "I'm not sure that he's ready or that I'm ready to allow him to make that decision for himself" (Kuvalanka et al., p. 1177).

Trans identity viewed as a phase

Being trans may be viewed by family as a 'phase'. This can be influenced by the belief that neurodivergent people's identities are "becomings"; that their identities are not fully formed (Toft et al., 2020, p. 8). For example, a trans person with a learning disability described her family seeing her trans identity as a phase due to her neurodivergence and young age (Toft et al., 2020, p. 8). Participants "strongly rejected" the suggestion that their being LGBTQ+ was a phase (Toft et al., 2020, p. 3)

Dual systemic pressures

Participants discussed dual pressures to conform to cis norms and neurotypical norms (Kourti & MacLeod, 2019). Some mentioned feeling shamed for acting outside of these norms, and would strategically hide their gender identity and autism in unsafe or unsure social situations (Hillier et al., 2019, p. 104).

5.2.4 Communities

Value of community

Participants across multiple studies extolled the virtues of being in identity-based communities (Hillier et al., 2019; Hurlbutt & Chalmers, 2002; Milton & Sims, 2016; Toft, 2020; Womack et al., 2022). This included support groups for young disabled LGBTQ+ (Toft, 2020), autism forums (Milton & Sims, 2016; Womack et al., 2022, p. 10), in-person autism meetups (Milton & Sims, 2016), and neurodivergent social skills groups (Hurlbutt & Chalmers, 2002). In general, support groups offered a "sense of belonging whilst negotiating identity", affirmation and education (Toft, 2020, p. 1906).

University could be a pivotal period for meeting people with similar identities. Some autistic trans people who did not grow up with a framework for understanding their experience of gender reported finally meeting people "like them" in university (Hillier et al., 2019, p. 103). One autistic trans person found that they did not need to seek out queer community in university as "the queer and autistic communities are so intertwined" (Womack et al., 2022, p. 14).

Participants in support groups for young disabled LGBTQ+ valued the specificity of the groups to their experience, which made them a 'safe space' for them, particularly if accessibility concerns prevented them from engaging with mainstream LGBTQ+ spaces (Toft, 2020, p. 1906).

Inaccessibility of LGBTQ+ spaces

Some neurodivergent people find in-person groups inaccessible (McAuliffe et al., 2023, p. 23). In-person spaces that can feel inaccessible include Pride events and groups that meet at bars, both of which can cause sensory overload due to factors such as large crowds and loud and overlapping volumes (McAuliffe et al., 2023). Some people feel a pressure to drink alcohol and feel judged for engaging in coping strategies (McAuliffe et al., 2023, p. 20). Other barriers to access are discomfort with unfamiliar spaces and situations (Davidson & Tamas, 2016, p. 62), physical inaccessibility for people with mobility needs, and geographic inaccessibility for people living outside cities (McAuliffe et al., 2023).

Internet

The internet removes many barriers to participation for trans neurodivergent people, particularly geography (McAuliffe et al., 2023), difficulty with in-person communication (McAuliffe et al., 2023; Müller et al., 2008), and unfamiliarity of spaces (Davidson & Tamas, 2016, p. 62). Many neurodivergent people identified the internet as helpful for relationship-building and self-education about neurodivergence and LGBTQ+ (Cooper, 2024; Davidson & Tamas, 2016; McAuliffe et al., 2023; Milton & Sims, 2016; Müller et al., 2008; Womack et al., 2022). For people for whom in-person communication is difficult, the internet is valuable for its offering of alternative modes of communication such as chat, email, and role-playing (Müller et al., 2008, pp. 183–184).

Internet communities can provide much-needed connection that can boost mental health (Toft, 2020; Womack et al., 2022), self-confidence and sense of self (McAuliffe et al., 2023; Womack et al., 2022). They can also provide solace for autistic trans people who are rejected by their families (Womack et al., 2022). Autistic LGBTQ+ people discussed the value of meeting people with similar identities, which could help them realise and appreciate their own identity (Cooper, 2024; Hillier et al., 2019).

Discrimination from LGBTQ+ communities

Some participants indicated that they could not assume other LGBTQ+ people would support their neurodivergence or disability (Hillier et al., 2019; McAuliffe et al., 2023; Toft, 2020). LGBTQ+ neurotypicals sometimes had stereotypes about what neurodivergent people should be like and discredited a person's diagnosis if they did not fit this stereotype (Hillier et al., 2019, p. 103; Toft, 2024, p. 38). Autistic LGBTQ+ people who engaged with the mainstream LGBTQ+ community reported "feeling "othered," discredited, tolerated rather than accepted, pressure to conform to "normal" behaviour, always being in "education mode", and being treated as "inspiration porn" (Hillier et al., 2019, p. 103).

"In-community gatekeeping" was a concern, particularly for non-binary neurodivergent people (McAuliffe et al., 2023, p. 18). Participants felt the LGBTQ+ community expected them to "perform alternativeness" (McAuliffe et al., 2023, p. 18) and be "the 'right kind of gay'" (Toft, 2020, p. 1907). Fitting in with these expectations could feel inauthentic to their neurodivergent experience of gender (Davidson & Tamas, 2016) and could take "a lot of work" (McAuliffe et al., 2023, p. 18).

Additional ideas about multiple identities

Being a part of multiple groups could be a positive, as it allows for more groups with which to identify, more support networks, and more potential connections (Hillier et al., 2019). Conversely, some trans autistic people did not feel they fit into either the LGBTQ+ or neurodivergent communities due to their dual identity (Hillier et al., 2019, pp. 103 & 106).

Despite LGBTQ+ communities being described as unwelcoming to disabled and neurodivergent people, some disabled LGBTQ+ people with mental health issues found LGBTQ+ communities accepting in this regard (Toft, 2020, p. 1908).

Some participants believed that society was becoming more tolerant of queer sexualities, but that acceptance of trans and disabled people was lagging (Hillier et al., 2019, p. 105).

5.2.5 Support

Through interests

Neurodivergent people with special interests were able to find support through sharing their special interests with others (Milton & Sims, 2016; Müller et al., 2008). Some used the pen pal section of an autism-focused magazine to find others who shared their special interests (Milton & Sims, 2016, p. 13). Special interest groups "created natural opportunities for thematically focused interactions based primarily on the exchange of information" (Müller et al., 2008), which could be helpful for those with difficulty communicating in unstructured settings.

One person brought up the term "parallel play", or "engaging in the same activity side-by-side with someone else" (Müller et al., 2008, p. 182). Others in the same study did not use this term but equally described "enjoying activities that created a shared focus, but required minimal interaction with one's companions" (Müller et al., 2008, p. 182).

General support needs

Some autistic participants noted preferring one-to-one communication (Müller et al., 2008). They wanted loved ones to appreciate their need for alone time and that they may not desire socialising, e.g. enjoying a party for them may mean sitting quietly and just listening to the music (Müller et al., 2008, p. 186). Having a "non-judgmental" attitude was identified as helpful, as well as embracing differences rather than just tolerating them (Müller et al., 2008, p. 186). Participants in Milton & Sims (2016) expressed needs to "feel safe from fear and ridicule, to be valued for their contributions, creativity and effort, and to be acknowledged" (p. 14).

Support from neurodivergent loved ones

A lot of autistic people discussed the support benefits of having other autistic people in their life (Crompton et al., 2020; Hurlbutt & Chalmers, 2002; McAuliffe et al., 2023; Sala et al., 2020). They felt that other autistic people understood the toll of masking (McAuliffe et al., 2023, p. 18) and trying to fit in with neurotypical people (Hurlbutt & Chalmers, 2002, p. 107). Some people felt less pressure to mask and act "normal", and were less anxious about interactions going "wrong" (Crompton et al., 2020, pp. 1443–1444). They also saw silences as being more tolerated within an autistic group (Crompton et al., 2020, p. 1443). One autistic person found their autistic friend group "a much more accessible community" for them because they saw autistic people as more "sensitised to people being or feeling left out…so many of them seem to make a really big effort to stop that from happening" (Crompton et al., 2020, p. 1443). Participants also noted feeling less tired after spending time with autistic family and friends, compared with talking to neurotypicals (Crompton et al., 2020, p. 1443)

Some autistic people with neurodivergent partners found this dynamic helpful for mutual understanding, improved emotional intimacy, and relationship longevity (Sala et al., 2020, p. 4140). One participant with "family on the spectrum" described their family's "positivity" as a factor in the family's ability to cope with adversity (Milton & Sims, 2016, p. 14).

Support from neurotypical loved ones

Having neurotypical loved ones can also be helpful for neurodivergent people. They can be advocates, social ambassadors, and educators. They can advocate for the neurodivergent person to be treated properly in institutional settings (Hurlbutt & Chalmers, 2002). Social ambassadors help facilitate socialising, including initiating socialisation and inviting to social events (Müller et al., 2008). If the neurodivergent person loses the thread of a conversation, their social ambassador can provide a one-on-one explanation (Crompton et al., 2020, p. 1443). Some neurodivergent participants wanted their neurotypical friends to take on a larger share of the responsibility for keeping the relationship going via initiating contact after long silences (Müller et al., 2008, p. 187). In some families, neurotypical parents and siblings helped their young

neurodivergent family member understand social expectations and cues (Hurlbutt & Chalmers, 2002; Müller et al., 2008), e.g. showing them meanings of facial expressions and conventions for communal play (Müller et al., 2008, pp. 183–184).

Some participants lamented that while they tried to make accommodations for their non-autistic loved ones (e.g. "I work very hard to pass as 'normal'"), the loved ones did not seem to make similar effort (Crompton et al., 2020, p. 1444). Physical and sensory inaccessibility of organised events was a concern (Crompton et al., 2020). Some participants expressed the wish that neurotypical people understood them better (Milton & Sims, 2016, p. 14). One participant wished their neurotypical friends would slow down their conversations so they could keep up, and have patience for them when they needed time to find the words (Crompton et al., 2020, p. 1444).

Family of origin

Mothers were brought up a couple of times as particularly supportive family members (Hillier et al., 2019; Hurlbutt & Chalmers, 2002). Some trans autistic participants reported that their mothers were more supportive than their fathers, and that both mothers and fathers became more supportive of their children's trans identities over time (Hillier et al., 2019, p. 104) Parental support could also be mixed, for example supporting a social transition but not a medical one (Hillier et al., 2019, p. 104).

Found family

Friends, particularly those with similar identities, have been described as "found family" for LGBTQ+ neurodivergent people, and can be particularly helpful in bolstering self-acceptance (McAuliffe et al., 2023, p. 16).

A study of facilitators and barriers to emotional intimacy for autistic and non-autistic individuals in romantic relationships found that the autistic people were more likely to value direct, explicit communication and intellectual similarity, and to seek partners with similar diagnoses (Sala et al., 2020). One participant commented that it was easier to maintain romantic relationships with other autistic people (Sala et al., 2020, p. 4140)

Physical contact

Some neurodivergent participants spoke of liking to be gently touched by loved ones while spending time together (Müller et al., 2008, p. 184). One autistic person with an autistic partner described enjoying hugs, but asking their partner before hugging them because their desire for touch was variable (Sala et al., 2020, p. 4141).

Institutional support desires

One participant wished there was more support available for young neurodivergent people during their transition to adulthood (Sala et al., 2020, p. 4142).

5.2.6 Religion

Religion came up as a positive support factor for multiple trans neurodivergent people (Hurlbutt & Chalmers, 2002; Müller et al., 2008). In one study involving three autistic people, religion was an important influence in the lives of all three (Hurlbutt & Chalmers, 2002, p. 107). One participant described a negative influence of religion in their life, namely that it was difficult to discuss their LGBTQ+ and autistic identities with their family (Hillier et al., 2019, p. 105). Another participant believed religion was incompatible for them because "there wasn't enough explanation WHY" religious doctrine was the way that it was (Toft, 2024, p. 35).

Religious practice

One autistic person said they were "comforted by prayer", and another said that their faith had positively contributed to their self-worth and self-esteem (Hurlbutt & Chalmers, 2002, p. 107). One neurodivergent person practiced meditation to help "orient [their] life" to their "highest aims and desires", one of which is "to relate socially" (Müller et al., 2008, p. 185). Christian spiritual practice helped one person "be more accepting of [themself]" (Müller et al., 2008, p. 185)

Religious community

Some neurodivergent participants felt accepted at and supported by their church (Hurlbutt & Chalmers, 2002; Müller et al., 2008). Several of Müller et al.'s (2008) participants extolled the virtues of "being part of a group that accepts them

unconditionally (p. 185). One participant in the same study found church a “safe place to practice [social skills]” (p. 185).

5.2.7 Conclusion

The combination of neurodiversity and trans identity is understudied, but there are significant findings in this area. Neurodivergent trans people may feel their neurodivergence influences or informs their gender, that their gender changes based on context, and that they ‘learned’ to do gender similarly to how they learned other social behaviours. The discrimination that trans autistic people report has similarities to reports of discrimination by trans Asians, including limited access to representation of and vocabulary for trans identities, not being believed by their family when they come out as trans, and feeling excluded from mainstream rainbow communities. Compared to neurotypical religious and Asian trans people, trans neurodivergent people uniquely reported sharing special interests as a medium of family support. Participants discussed the different advantages of having supportive loved ones who are either neurodivergent or neurotypical. Finally, religion was an important influence on the lives of some trans neurodivergent people. Religious practice could provide comfort, and religious community could be a source of support.

5.3 Analysis

5.3.1 Introduction

This analysis will first describe the neurodivergent identities of the three trans young people in my study. I will then explore the case study for this chapter, about the value of play in René’s exploration of their gender and neurodivergent identities. I will then discuss some further findings, namely about the term “autismgender”, relationships between neurodivergence and culture, and the understanding that can occur when multiple family members are neurodivergent. I will then discuss types of neurodivergent-coded support, including body doubling, help with executive function, advocacy, and engaging with special interests.

5.3.2 Descriptions of identity

All three trans young people in the current research understand themselves to be neurodivergent, either officially diagnosed or self-diagnosed. Additionally, all the trans young people suspect a form of neurodivergence that they have not been officially diagnosed with. René is diagnosed with ADHD and is "pretty sure" they are autistic, Regina is diagnosed with autism and thinks ADHD sounds fitting to her, and Tsuki is not diagnosed but believes she is neurodivergent. I will discuss the neurodivergent identities of the three young people now, paying more attention to Regina and Tsuki as René will be the focus of this chapter's case study.

Regina

Regina identifies as neurodivergent and was diagnosed with autism when she was about 2 years old. Regina says, "I was very autistic as a kid", and her parents took her to a doctor because she "was like, just staring at the carpet for hours on end, not doing anything." Regina is now considering that she may have ADHD as well.

Regina attributes her frequent Americanised inflections to her autism, saying "I learned to speak the way I first heard the word pronounced". As a child, Regina preferred to spend her time alone rather than talking to others and picked up a lot of language from American television.

Neurodivergence is a theme in Regina's family. Regina's brother Bartholomew is autistic, and her father Ayah is undiagnosed but believes he is autistic as well. Regina's best friend Jordan identifies as neurodivergent and has ADHD.

Tsuki

Tsuki thinks she is neurodivergent (with autism and/or ADHD) – in fact she is "sure" she has some neurodivergence – but has not been diagnosed. She quietly identifies as neurodivergent but does not generally express this outwardly. She says, "I think I am [neurodivergent], but I don't like to say I am, because I haven't got a diagnosis."

She recalls that a doctor gave her permission to say she is neurodivergent if she believes she is, but Tsuki does not feel right saying so without a diagnosis. Tsuki does not feel like her neurodivergence hinders her and says that people with diagnosed

neurodivergence suffer more than she does. She plans to pursue a diagnosis someday but is deterred by the difficulty and deems it non-urgent, saying “I'm not suffering, so I'll deal with it”.

Tsuki’s father discloses that neurodivergence in Tsuki “never crossed [his] mind”. He describes traits in a relative that he believes is autistic and contrasts them with Tsuki’s traits. He says Tsuki “always did very well in school” and is “extremely efficient with her friends”, having no problems making and keeping friends, “so there was nothing, no signs to make you think that [she was autistic].” Meanwhile, Tsuki reported that she has autistic friends that think she is autistic.

René

René identifies as neurodivergent and was diagnosed with ADHD. René thinks they and their father are both autistic. René also scored very highly on an autism assessment test and believes that “a lot of it is just crossover with my ADHD tendencies and patterns anyway, so there's a lot of overlap.”

5.3.3 Gender is a playground: René’s relationship with gender and neurodivergence

Introduction

This chapter will present one case study split into two parts. This case study follows René, who spoke extensively about the relationship between their gender and neurodivergence. I chose to focus on this one case study due to the richness of the findings in this case.

This case study focuses heavily on René’s use of metaphor to conceptualise their experience of family support as a neurodivergent trans person. I will first discuss different ways that René relates play to their neurodivergence and gender identity and then explore René’s extended metaphor of “gender is a playground”.

Play, neurodivergence, and gender

René explicitly relates their ADHD to their non-binary gender, saying that play is very important to them in all aspects of their life, including their conception and expression of gender.

René explains that "the ADHD brain, just my dopamine system is fucked. So, I need a lot of novelty to keep me vibing." 'To keep me vibing' in this context seems to mean 'to remain at equilibrium'. By "novelty" René refers to how they like "fun ways to make jokes", "finding different ways to express [themself]", and "using subversive humour with the right people". René uses the metaphor of being "an explorer", saying "I'm an explorer. I like to discover what brings me joy. And that's where a lot of play and exploration comes in." The types of play that René enjoys include parody masculinity, power exchange play, and non-verbal physical play.

Parody masculinity

René's play can be entwined with gender, as they say they "like parody masculinity": playing an exaggerated role of a "big manly man" who is "really scary and big", contrasting with their smaller physical body. René says that parody masculinity is "another fun way that [they] get to engage with [their] partner as well". Timothy supports them by participating in this play, for example by playing the part of the "male wife". Timothy believes that "part of how [he] support[s] René in their gender is just [they] feel free to be [them]selves around each other, even when that's kind of silly or stupid, or embarrassing, just because it's fun."

Timothy discusses how play is facilitated by trust, saying "I think it's a way of just getting to be silly with someone who you trust. Because you know each other, you know what you're comfortable with and you can just do silly things like that and be comfortable with it." René and Timothy's statements indicate a symbiotic relationship between playfulness and emotional intimacy.

Power exchange play

René finds similarities between parody masculinity and "power exchange play" with kids, "where you pretend that they are strong enough to push you over or whatever. Really big and strong. They love it." In either case, "no one's getting hurt. But we're just having fun doing play pretend." René enjoys playing with kids and feels like their ADHD gives them some "childlike tendencies" that make it easy to play with kids and "meet them at their level". They employ their natural silliness when engaging with kids. René says, "I think just acting childlike in general is just a very fun way to be." Most of René's work has involved working "with kids in some capacity or the other". René says "I just connect with them on their level. And I think that that is facilitated by my ADHD. Whereas before, I was like, 'Oh, how do I hang out with kids?' But now that I'm kind of more chill just being myself in general. I think that kind of extends to time with kids, like some of the most fun I've had with kids is like, not necessarily even like talking but just like messing around." René's becoming "more chill just being [them]self", which may include becoming more comfortable in their gender and/or neurodivergence, has helped them relax in their interactions with kids. René recounts a story with Timothy's young niece, in which the niece was doing a silly pose and René copied her, which made her laugh. This is a type of non-verbal physical play that René enjoys engaging in with their loved ones.

Non-verbal physical play

René and Timothy engage in a lot of simultaneous non-verbal physical play and stimming (doing repetitive, self-stimulatory actions such as making certain movements or sounds; Brotherton, 2025), which is "very, very important" to René. René feels like it is "quite neurodivergent" "to do stimming together or parallel play. Just feels real nice." René recalls that someone once described Timothy and themself as "like two bouncy balls just bouncing along together." Similarly, Timothy drew himself and René as beans, saying "we're beans, because I always think that we're silly

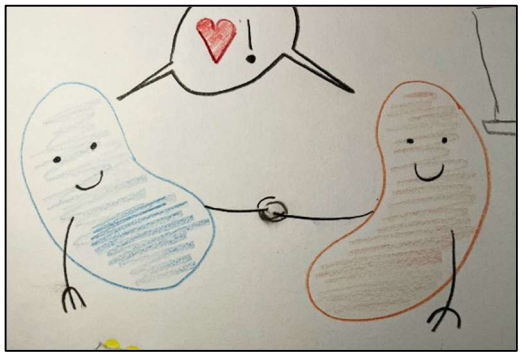


Figure 10: Timothy's depiction of himself and René

little beans". Stimming together and parallel play allows René and Timothy to connect without needing to talk.

René also enjoys physical play with their sister, which they have shared since childhood. René says, "we just still get along really well, because I think like we grew up just being stupid and messing around together", indicating the power of playfulness in maintaining their relationship. Even as adults, there will be occasions where René will "just be like, on the floor doing some of [their] Pilates and she'll just lie on top of [René] and squish [them]." Non-verbal physical play has been a constant in the relationship between René and their sister throughout their lives, including before and after René's gender transition. This type of consistency in a family relationship can be valuable in affirming that a person's gender transition need not change how family members relate to one another.

5.3.4 "Gender is a playground" metaphor

René used an extended metaphor that I will call "gender is a playground". They use the playground metaphor to describe how they "play" with gender, and they feel supported when their loved ones "hang out" on the playground with them. When asked to draw their experience of family support with their gender, René drew their playground.

Drawing: introduction

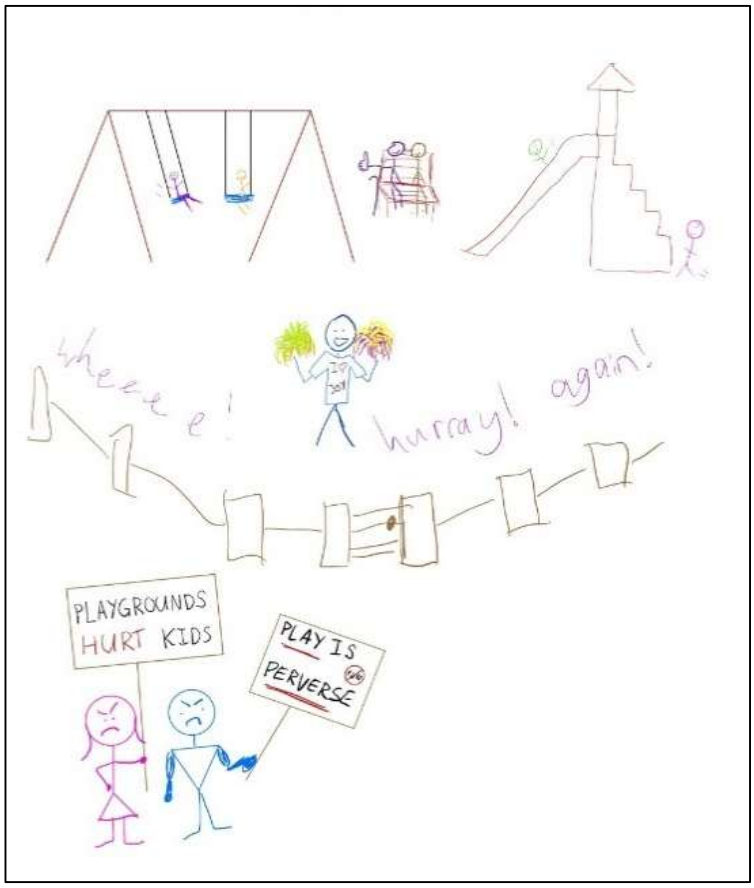


Figure 11: Full reproduction of René's first drawing

The drawing has five main elements: people playing on the playground, people on a park bench, a cheerleader, a fence, and picketers outside the fence.

Each visual element maps to an aspect of the overarching metaphor of "gender as a playground". Trans and gender non-conforming people who 'play' with gender, play on a playground. Their strongest supporters, who also play with gender, play on the playground with them, and may cheerlead. People who do not play with gender, for any reason, but support trans people's right to do so, sit on the park bench. Fences separate safe spaces, where people are free to play with gender, from unsafe spaces. People who are hostile towards trans people are on the outside of the fence – they are not allowed to come into the safe space. I will now discuss each visual element and their meanings.

Playing with gender as playing on a playground

According to René, "a way that I like to describe my gender is, like, gender is a playground. I'm just here to vibe and have fun." Their life partner, Timothy, is a cis man, but he plays with gender as well. He sees playing as "making jokes" and coming up with "ideas and things". One of these jokes is that Timothy is René's "male wife" because he is better at cooking and cleaning and more interested in personal grooming (according to René). Timothy says he is "very comfortable to be René's wife". He demonstrates the usefulness of the "male wife" joke in René's gender journey, saying, "I think pairing that

with the budding sense of gender identity that they were, and I was helping them to explore, about where exactly they felt comfortable, that kind of fell naturally out as one of those jokes." Timothy explains that by playing with his gender role in the relationship, he is helping give René space to explore their own gender role, so that René is not forced into the feminine role. Timothy comments, "the perception that I got was that it was like they were previously putting on a persona as a cisgender woman. And that by exploring gender and starting to open up the possibility that they didn't have to be that person, around me in particular, I feel really, really deepened the connection that we were able to make." At the end of this passage, Timothy shows how playing with gender has helped himself and René to form a strong bond.

Active support as playing on the playground

René says there are other "people who play on the playground too", like "[their] partner, [their] friends". These are René's active supporters. René says they "feel the most supported when people just have fun with me and play, poke fun at gender". They "vibe", which means they have positive energy and feel contented, and "play [with] and poke fun at gender". Part of "vibing" is choice: "it's not 'you all have to play on the playground the exact same way as me', it's like you use the playground how you want, as long as we're all safe and having fun." Just as there are various types of play structures on a playground, people can play with gender in different ways.

Active support as cheerleading

Another metaphor for active support is cheerleading. As one of René's "biggest cheerleaders", Timothy "helps [René] feel secure and safe, like if [they're] in an uncertain environment, or [they] don't know if it's safe for [them] to be out" as non-binary. René also mentions that their counter to people who are hostile about their identity is "living [their] best life and having [their] cheerleaders" who do support their identity.

Annalise, René's childhood friend, co-constructs this metaphor by calling for family members of trans people to "be the best cheerleaders that you can be, the best supporter that you can be, because it's a privilege to be a safe person".

Passive support as sitting on the park bench

René acknowledges their passive supporters as well, saying "some people are just not playground people. But you can see them on the park bench. They're still just like sitting there, enjoying the vibes." “Park bench people” represent passive supporters. One park bench person in the drawing has a walking cane, showing that they “can’t use the playground as much”. This could represent people who cannot safely express gender non-conformity, for example due to having unsupportive family. Others “don’t really feel a need to” play on the playground, for example gender-conforming cis people. René’s mother and sister “are more like park bench people. They're like, 'I don't get it. But like, you do you, go off. Love you.'” René comments that it took time for their mother and sister to adjust to René being non-binary, “but they respect [their] new name and [their] pronouns and all that”. They are welcome in the playground space because they “enjoy the vibes” or take part in the positive energy of being gender-affirming, and they respect trans people’s names and pronouns.

René talks about the importance of people meeting them on their level, ideally with both their gender and neurodivergence, but “usually if people can meet [them] on one [level], [they] can at least kind of relax a little bit around them.” This means René can allow them into the playground area, and they can sit on the park bench.

Fence as a separation of safe and unsafe spaces

René uses the metaphor of a fence to clearly mark the distinction between safe and unsafe spaces. They explain that “it’s very important to have safe spaces. And not have the bad stuff in your safe spaces”. Whereas the supportive people are on the inside, the picketers, who represent transphobic people, cannot come inside. While “it’s okay if you’re curious and open to learning”, René asserts that “if you’re determined to villainise it, when it's something that actually brings a lot of people joy, then I can't help you. I can't let you hang out on my playground. I can't tell you about my pronouns. I can't play with you. So, you have to stay on the other side of the fence." René draws this firm boundary to keep their ‘safe space’ safe. The fence is bi-directional: it keeps the people inside safe together, and it pushes away the villains. René takes joy in their playground but also pride – essentially telling the people outside the fence that if they insist on

villainising trans people, it is them missing out, because they do not get to hang out on René's playground.

Gatekeepers

Annalise, René's childhood friend, and Timothy, René's partner, seem to metaphorically construct themselves as 'gatekeepers' of the 'fence'.

Annalise explains that at one point in René's transition, "there were two very distinct groups of people where René was safe and comfortable to be René with group one, and then group two, René still needed to be 'Rachel' for safety reasons" (I have used 'Rachel' in place of René's birth name). Annalise contrasts "being René" and "being Rachel" as shorthand for the gendered personae that René embodies at different times. When René did not feel safe to be out to the world, they had to 'be' or 'play the part of' their assigned sex. With 'safe people', René could 'be' René, i.e. their trans self. René also relates gendered masking to neurodivergent masking, which I will discuss further in the next section. Annalise describes "straddling" both groups – she is welcome in the playground, where René is free to be themself, and she interacts with the picketers, which includes some of René's unsupportive family members.

Timothy describes his involvement with the "long and slow process" of René coming out as non-binary to their family. He explains that he did not do much talking, saying "I don't think it's ever been my position to speak for them, because I can't do that. I can't speak to their experience." He describes his role as a "mitigating presence, because it's hard to direct so much negative emotion towards one person when there's two people standing there." Timothy supported René at this time by buffering negativity from unsupportive family members, which gave René a safer environment to speak for themself.

Conclusion

Play connects René's gender and neurodivergence. They enjoy finding different ways to express themself and employing parody masculinity and power exchange play to "poke fun" at gender and stimulate their brain at the same time.

The playground metaphor is a powerful and rich way of describing René's family support experiences as a gender non-conforming, non-binary person. There are different ways of enjoying the playground. Trans and gender non-conforming people, and cis people who play with gender, play on the equipment. Some of these same people are also cheerleaders, who advocate for their trans loved ones. Passive supporters watch happily from the park bench. With the park bench motif, René emphasises that one need not be gender non-conforming to be supportive of those who are.

5.3.5 Further findings

Autismgender

René describes a concept that they call "autismgender" (spelled in other sources as 'autigender'). This concept, with either spelling, appears to be new in academic literature, only appearing in the literature reviews of Toft (2024) and Munday et al. (2025). The autistic-led advocacy group AutismBC describes "auti-gender" as "the experience of gender that's so heavily influenced by autism that the two can't be unlinked" (Laube, 2023). René's use of the term seems to be an autism-informed, non-binary experience of gender, where a person just feels like 'themselves' rather than being a particular gender.

René describes a video they saw about autismgender, "where it's like, when you're around different people, the masks that you have created, have genders. But then when you're on your own, you kind of don't really feel one way or the other, it's just kind of like vibing and chill. And so, like your autism in the way that makes you experience social worlds and inner worlds affects how gender fits into those worlds".

René recalls a family friend whose description of their gender resonated with them. René quotes them as saying "'I don't really understand feeling 100% one way or the other because I just kind of feel like I'm just me. I don't really particularly think I'm a woman person. I'm just me'". René designated this description "autismgender at its finest" and called it "the boomer version of non-binary", which evokes the idea of older people who do not feel completely cisgender but do not have the resources (e.g. access to contemporary online discourses about trans identities) to deeply explore their gender.

René described a contextual shifting of their gender expression, via language and voice, when they are around cis women. René says, “when I'm meeting other, like, cis women, around our age, I often will do like the girl talk identity. I think I was being like, ‘oh, my god, girl, tea, absolutely’. It'd be like, ‘Oh, go off’, you know, that kind of just generic, supportive, funny vibe. And that's quite a feminine identity. It's kind of campy.” The literature associates this way of “doing” an identity around certain people with neurodivergence. René’s observation that it is “kind of campy” also suggests an element of non-seriousness and humour in performing an exaggerated gender identity.

Neurodivergence and culture

Sensory issues, involving high sensitivity or low sensitivity to sensory input, are a common feature of neurodivergence. All three young people seem to have sensory issues involving high sensitivity that make parts of their cultural heritage less accessible to them. Neurodivergence, including but not limited to sensory issues, features in the trans young people’s experiences of direct cultural transmission, food, clothing, and environment of the parents’ home country.

Cultural transmission

I asked if Regina’s father tried to teach her about his culture, and she responded, “I think he tried when I was really young, but gave up pretty quick, because I was a carpet starer, remember, I did not really care about anything that wasn't me.” In this passage, Regina suggests that her autism influenced her lack of interest in learning about her culture as a child.

Food

Regina describes herself as a “picky eater’’ and did not partake in the cultural food that her father would make when she was growing up, instead eating simple food like Nutella sandwiches. I brought up that autistic people can have sensory issues with food, and she agreed that this is part of it for her. She emphasises her closed worldview as a child, saying “even if he did make [South-East Asian] food, I would not have noticed.”

Clothing

René says their heritage culture and its style of Christianity are “just too flashy”. Growing up, they “didn't really like a lot of the [cultural] clothing because a lot of it is

quite busy. And [they], in [their] very undiagnosed autism, prefer very plain." In this passage, René links their autism with oversensitivity to "busy" clothing. René pointed out during the interview that they were wearing all black. They connected this with gender, saying "sometimes you see the fashion with like, Asian people wearing black clothes and looking real androgynous and I'm like, 'Ah, that hits right.'".

Environment of parents' home country

As discussed in the Culture chapter, Tsuki visited her parents' home country with them when she was 11, and she "didn't like it at all". As well as issues of culture shock, she describes feelings of oversensitivity to the environment. It was "way too hot"; "the hottest time of the year for them". Tsuki also says, "I just wasn't accustomed to the culture", which could refer to many things, but some of South Asia's major differences from New Zealand are much denser populations, disorderly traffic, and squat toilets in public washrooms, all of which could evoke sensory issues in a neurodivergent person, or even a neurotypical New Zealander who is not used to them.

Mutual neurodivergence creates understanding

There is neurodivergence in Regina's family, with her father, brother, and best friend all being neurodivergent. There are some other family members that the primary participants speculate might be neurodivergent, but the space for understanding through shared experience appears to come about more prominently when the family member also understands themselves to be neurodivergent.

Autism as a source of connection "wasn't anything [Bartholomew] had ever thought of consciously growing up", but he discusses some shared experiences. As children, they both preferred spending their time independently and quietly. As Bartholomew explains, "with the both of us being on the on the autism spectrum, it was quite easy for the both of us to get overwhelmed with perhaps a little less stimuli than other people at times." Bartholomew says that he and Regina argued a lot as children, which he partly attributes to overstimulation from their autism, with their "stir craziness" taken out on the other as "[their] computers were in the same room, right next to each other, so [they] were next to each other, like, almost 24/7". He also cites their both being "very, very strong visionaries in very different directions a lot of the time" as a source of conflict.

As discussed in the Culture chapter, creativity runs strongly in Regina's family. Regina's father attributes his creative thinking to his autism, saying "when I had the opportunity to be to find my own self, to work to the way I want, I'm just like, way up there, outside the box thinking, and I mentioned my solutions to other people, so they say that it's so simple, so clever, my solutions, yet simple, and so simple that they wondered 'Why didn't anyone come up with that?'. I believe that is because of my autism." Regina and her father experienced similar underestimation due to their autism; Regina's father experienced it internally and Regina externally. Regina's father says "I used to blame myself for, 'oh, I'm just useless. I'm stupid, and I can't understand something like other people, or most people'". Meanwhile, according to Regina's mother, "it took [Regina's mother] years to convince the school to allow her [Regina] to try out for the gifted kids because she had a teacher aide, right? They couldn't see that you can be both." When Regina's father was asked if his autism helps him to understand Regina in certain ways, he responded "absolutely, no doubt".

Conversely, neurotypical family members may be less supportive of a trans neurodivergent young person's identities. Regina's mother is not autistic and believes that Regina's being trans could be a symptom of her autism. She sees many similarities between gender dysphoria and autism, saying "when I looked at the things out there, where you can kind of see 'is it that I'm in the wrong body?' And it's like, yep, that's an autism thing. Yep, that's an autism thing."

5.3.6 Neurodivergent-coded support

Many of the participants identified as neurodivergent: all three of the trans young people, as well as a few family members. I identified many instances of what I call "neurodivergent-coded" support: support that appears to accommodate neurodivergence. This includes body doubling, help with executive function, advocacy, and engaging with special interests.

Body doubling and parallel play

Body doubling is a term from the neurodivergent community that means doing tasks near someone else, to increase productivity (Eagle et al., 2023) and mitigate issues with executive function (discussed in the next section). To Timothy, René's partner, it means

“using each other’s presence to get more out of something than we would have otherwise”, so it expands to pleasurable activities as well. They enjoy each other’s presence, so doing things together makes them more enjoyable. Doing pleasurable things near another person can also be called ‘parallel play’.

Parallel play is recognised as a typical stage of early childhood development that can remain valuable to older neurodivergent children as a relationship building tool (Roccograndi, 2026). Regina and Bartholomew seem to have engaged in parallel play as children. Though they were engaged in their own activities or projects, they would sit next to each other on their computers. Bartholomew says, “we both made accounts on the same websites and social media platforms, and just sort of, when we saw a funny video, we just looked to our right and said, ‘haha, hey, check this out’. And then, yeah, we had a lot of cross-play in terms of media consumption and such.” By “cross-play”, it is unclear whether Bartholomew is simply referring to their playing similar games, or ‘cross-play/cross-platform play’ functionality that allows users of different computers or consoles to play together. Both interpretations show that Regina and Bartholomew did not need to talk to enjoy playing video games alongside each other.

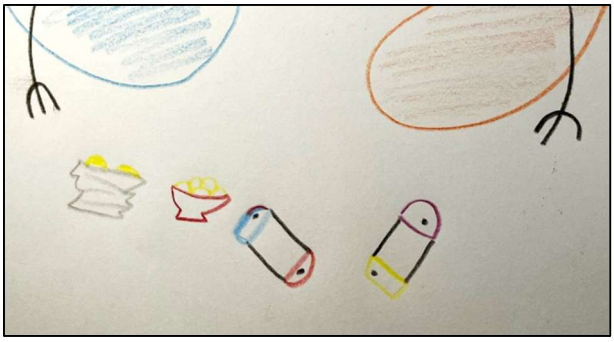


Figure 12: Food and video game controllers depicted in Timothy's drawing

Video games also came up for René and Timothy. In Timothy’s drawing about supporting René, he drew food and video game controllers. Timothy says “we both really love food, and we also love body doubling with each other, watching things or playing games or anything. There's a certain, I think, loving and indeed supporting that comes from just doing things together.” Timothy explains that sharing things like food and video games help “enrich our love and our time that we spend together.”

Body doubling also helps René to accomplish tasks that they might normally struggle with, if Timothy is working at the same time. As Timothy says, “they're much more likely to see that things that need to be done, will get done if we both do it.” As well as a type of body doubling, this is support through help with executive function, which was also seen in other family members.

Executive function

Neurodivergent people may struggle with *executive function*, a system of thinking skills that form the brain's 'control centre' (Ashworth-Watts, 2025). This can include difficulty initiating tasks, planning, and coping with changes of plan (Ashworth-Watts, 2025).

René receives executive function support from Timothy and their childhood friend, Annalise. Regina receives similar support from her brother, Bartholomew, and her best friend, Jordan. Tsuki's mother also recalled giving Tsuki support in a way that fits this category.

René has struggled with executive function due to their ADHD. Particularly when René was going through depression, René struggled with managing their executive function, including cooking varied meals for themself. Timothy says, "René struggled a little bit with bringing themselves to- I think they had some challenges with their own executive function and productivity at times and that extended to cooking, you know, 'real' meals." In the early days of the relationship, Timothy took on more of the housework, especially cooking, which is something he seems to enjoy, as he says "I would do a lot of, like, home cooking, things that were special to me, or things that I liked and I wanted to share". The couple's division of labour also happens to interact with gender. As discussed in René's case study, René jokingly called Timothy their "male wife" because he took on many stereotypical "wifely duties".

Annalise helps René with their executive function in several ways. René describes Annalise as "empathetic but also constructive". Annalise says that an aspect of their relationship is that "it is very unlikely that [she is] ever going to judge René for anything they do". Annalise says, "I try not to parent them", setting boundaries for her support role as a friend rather than a parent.

The first support method Annalise describes is helping René acknowledge and learn from their mistakes. When René makes a mistake, Annalise says she "might kind of whack them over the ear and go, 'Okay, that was a stupid decision', or 'that was an ADHD moment'". Annalise's use of the phrase "that was an ADHD moment" when René makes a mistake acknowledges the role that René's neurodivergence plays in their

decision-making and function. This can be affirming as it places some of the blame on the neurodivergence, instead of all on René.

Another support method is helping René plan. Annalise appreciates that planning can be difficult with ADHD. During René's university studies, there were times when René got overwhelmed with their workload. Annalise recalls the scenario as "[René being] like, 'I don't know what to do', and sometimes just creating that situational space of, okay, well, let me meet you at uni, and I think we went to a student lounge and we sat down with their diary and said, like, 'okay, how much time have you got, or how much time is left? What needs to get done? It's this, this and this.'" Annalise let René use her as a "soundboard, but a practical one" to make a schedule. Again, placing boundaries on her support role, Annalise's plan of action included "how might we put provisions of support underneath you to get these things done that don't specifically lean only on me?" This led to a third method of support, helping René get further support with their executive function. She helped René link up with an accountability buddy at university to meet with each week. This took the pressure off Annalise and got René more professional advice.

Bartholomew and Regina both struggle to motivate themselves to do household chores, which seems to make living together easier for them as they have similar expectations. They have developed systems to help them both with their executive functioning. Bartholomew says, "we are admittedly both a little terrible about doing chores to clean up, but that's because we're equally terrible…at the very least, we've developed systems to help manage whose turn it is to do the dishes". This involved arranging magnets on the fridge with the arrow pointing in different directions to indicate each person's turn, with the arrow pointing upwards for Regina "because she's taller".

Regina sometimes struggles with administrative work. According to Jordan "it's too much effort, because she gets drained really easily. So, if something takes too much effort, she usually won't do it unless she gets support with it, unless she has someone walking through [it with her]". Jordan pushed Regina to update her driver's licence with her new legal name and an updated photo. She describes "pestering" Regina "because she was kind of dragging her heels about it, but I kind of walked her through what she needed to do". Though this task took concerted effort, it was ultimately helpful for

affirming Regina's gender. Jordan says "afterwards, she was actually really grateful that I pestered her to do that, because now it's got her accurate picture and we're able to get into bars, and she was able to comfortably show her ID and such." This is an example of Jordan supporting Regina with her gender and neurodivergence at the same time.

A second example of this combined support is Jordan inviting Regina to a trans meetup. Regina told Jordan that "she wasn't going to go, because she didn't know about [using] meetup.com", so Jordan walked her through it, and they went together. Jordan's open offer of accompanying Regina to events has helped Regina attend more social events, including gender-related ones. Jordan's perspective is that "because I've been able to come with her to do a lot of things, she's been able to do stuff, more stuff than she would have otherwise been able to do."

Additionally, Tsuki's mother Manjula took on the task of filling in all Tsuki's administrative work for schools. Manjula gives the reason for Tsuki wanting her to do the applications for her as simply that Manjula had been doing them thus far. Tsuki's aversion to filling in the forms could potentially be related to executive function. Whatever the reason, Manjula supported Tsuki by lightening her workload.

Advocacy

Regina's mother, Leah, fought for years for Regina to be allowed to try out for the gifted programme in primary school. Regina had a teacher aide due to her autism, and the school did not believe that she could be gifted while having special needs in the classroom. Her advocacy meant that Regina finally did get to try for the gifted programme and performed spectacularly.

> **Leah**: "I knew that there was such rich intelligence in there and it wasn't being fed because the school system wasn't able to feed that, especially when you were somebody who had a teacher aide, so you were sort of kicked down, so I wanted it [Regina to be able to try for the gifted programme] for that reason."

Leah's advocacy for Regina's schooling continued into high school selections. Leah researched the local high schools' special needs provisions in the background while giving Regina the autonomy to research and decide about the schools herself. When Regina had made her choice, Leah revealed that she was pleased Regina had picked the

school with the better special needs provisions. Regina agreed that her mother is generally good at giving her autonomy of her own life. Regina says, **“**my mom was very vigilant in making sure I was treated correctly at school, which I'm very thankful for now.”

Engaging with special interests

Neurodivergent people can have intense interests, often called “special interests”. Engaging with a neurodivergent family member’s special interests can be a form of support, as it shows interest in the things that matter highly to that person.

Regina discussed special interests including video games and insects. As discussed in *Body doubling*, Regina shares her video game special interest with her brother. Regina also plays games with Jordan, her best friend and sexual partner. Jordan says they have “been able to bond over” playing video games and that she is emotionally invested in the game that Regina is designing. Jordan is also neurodivergent and expressed that Regina’s special interests were one of the things that she liked about and found attractive in Regina. When asked what she likes about Regina’s femininity, Jordan said “I like her personality and her special interests…she likes little creatures and insects, and I'm really fascinated about her interests.” Similarly, when Jordan was asked about how her attraction to Regina differs from her attraction to men, Jordan said “with Regina, it's her femininity, the things that she likes, her hobbies”. Jordan has supported Regina through engaging in an interest they have in common (video games), and one they do not necessarily have in common (insects).

A support person engaging in their loved one’s special interests may or may not involve harbouring the same interest. In René’s family, they have a family member who shares interests with them (Annalise), while their mother and sister do not share the same interests, but the factor that matters most to René is “meeting [René] on [their] level”.

Annalise and René have shared interests, and René knows they can come to Annalise to talk about certain interests, like tattoos, “rather than potentially receiving judgment if they wanted to talk to a family member about that.” Annalise asserts that “it is very unlikely that [she is] ever going to judge René for anything they do”, so René can feel safe sharing anything with Annalise.

René's mother and sister accept René's eccentricities even if they do not agree or understand. René describes them as "just go[ing] 'oh okay, whatever.' Even if they disagree outright, they're like, 'oh, weird, but okay'. They're used to me just being kind of like eccentric." One of René's special interests is rats. René and their mother Margaret both recall Margaret being nervous of René's rats when René first showed them to her. Within a few weeks, however, Margaret is "really on board with it". René says, "now she's like, 'are you enjoying your babies? Can I see some more photos?'". René uses this example after saying "it's when people can also match me on my level as well. That's kind of huge. So like, my mum, she'll celebrate my wins with me". This shows how significant it is for René that their mother engages with René's special interest in rats. Margaret engaged deeply with René's interest in rats during her interview, saying "it's only been a few weeks since they've got four rats as pets. And it's been amazing what they've achieved in that short time in terms of like the cage, all the equipment they needed to get to make the rats comfortable...so much research and intelligence has gone into taking care of these rats and they're just absolutely adorable and cute. They seem to trust René and feel comfortable. I just think they're amazing what they're capable of." This shows a genuine enthusiasm in René's special interest and shows Margaret's pride in René's achievement in their goals, demonstrating the two-way benefit of this supportive practice for René and their mother.

5.4 Discussion

5.4.1 Prevalence of neurodivergent identities

The autistic identities of the trans women and non-binary AFAB person in my study contribute to the growing body of literature working to disprove the theory that autism is a result of having an overly "male brain", and that people of all genders and gender expressions can be autistic (Davidson & Tamas, 2016; Kourti & MacLeod, 2019).

Like some undiagnosed participants in the literature, Tsuki expressed fear of identifying herself as neurodivergent without a diagnosis. Tsuki's comment that "I don't like saying I'm like, autistic or ADHD without a diagnosis, because I feel it's disrespectful to people who actually do have it real bad." resembles that of a participant in McAuliffe et al. (2023) who said "before I had got the autism diagnosis, I felt uncomfortable claiming

that identity…I was worried that I was undermining the experience of real autistic people". (p. 14).

5.4.2 Usefulness of the internet for trans neurodivergent people

For many participants in my study, the internet was useful for its accessibility of information, like-minded communities, and alternative forms of communication. Unlike the major finding in the literature about trans neurodivergent peoples' internet use, my participants did not mention using the internet to find trans and neurodivergent communities but rather used it to find resources about trans identities for themselves and their families, talk to others with the same special interests, and chat with friends from school. The many forms of communication offered by the internet were also useful for talking to my participants: after the initial email stage, four of the younger participants accepted the offer to move to chat-based messaging, where they usually nominated the app Discord. One person preferred to communicate entirely through Discord message.

5.4.3 Influence of neurodivergence on gender expression

René reported changing their gender expression via language and voice when they were around cis women, reminiscent of the contextual shifting of gender seen in the literature. René also described how their clothing preference was affected by their neurodivergence-informed sensory needs.

5.4.4 Special interest support

As seen in the literature and in my data, engaging with the trans neurodivergent young person's special interests was a key form of support from neurodivergent and neurotypical family members.

5.4.5 Rejecting and mixed support behaviours

Regina experienced delegitimisation explicitly connected to her autism. Like some of the participants from the literature, Regina struggles with a parent seeing her trans identity as a phase and as a possible symptom of her autism. Regina also received mixed support (Hillier et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2020) from her mother, where her mother supported her needs as an autistic person but not as a trans person.

5.4.6 Implications for family support

Young people that are trans and neurodivergent need to be supported in all parts of their identity. Sometimes family members only support one of these parts of identity, which can be hurtful for the young person. Having multiple neurodivergent people in a family can help those family members understand each other's support needs. There are various forms of neurodivergent-coded support that family members can use to tailor support to the needs of a neurodivergent trans young person, some of which connect to gender.

The findings from this chapter suggest that young neurodivergent trans New Zealanders may consider their gender and neurodivergence inextricably linked. Supporters of neurodivergent trans youth should consider the ways in which gender and neurodivergence may interact, and how support for neurodivergence and gender can be consolidated through actions such as advocacy and support with executive function.

5.5 Conclusion

Neurodivergence modulated the participants' experiences of family support, with positive support for neurodivergence-related needs typically reported. For René, neurodivergence interacted with gender significantly. Each primary participant discussed one or more sensory issues that made engaging with aspects of their heritage cultures less accessible. Now that I have explored the themes of culture, religion, and neurodivergence, I will bring these themes together with my Discussion & Conclusion.

6 Discussion & Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

I will start this Discussion & Conclusion chapter with a summary of the thesis. I will discuss how my findings contradict stereotypes of Asian families in society and the literature, then evaluate the research tools of intersectionality and discourse analysis. The main body of the chapter is a discussion of the findings through the answering of the research questions. The answer for the overall research question is where I will make recommendations for families for supporting a trans Asian young person. I will then discuss the implications and recommendations for community engagement and policy. Finally, I will evaluate this thesis's strengths and contributions to the literature, its limitations and my recommendations for future research.

6.2 Summary of thesis

This thesis explored family support for trans Asian young people in New Zealand. The thesis was structured around three identity categories that can intersect with trans identity. This fit naturally with the intersectionality focus of the research. I conducted interviews with three trans Asian New Zealander young people aged 17 to 25, and three to four each of their self-selected most supportive family members. Each participant created an image (or two) of their experience either receiving family support in their gender (primary participants) or supporting their trans family member (family member participants). I analysed the data using intersectionality theory, multimodal discourse analysis, and the discursive phenomenon of metaphor. The data was presented around case studies, followed by patterns observed across the data.

6.3 Stereotypes of Asian families

Stereotypes of Asians as homogenous in ethnicity and thought (Divakalala & Bal, 2024; Young & Pedersen, 2024) are concerns for researchers and wider society. The literature focusing on family support for trans Asians has considered the roles of Asian collectivist and conservative values as negative influences on family support (Bal & Divakalala, 2022; K. K. H. Tan, Yee, et al., 2021; K. K. H. Tan et al., 2023; S. Tan & Weisbart, 2022). These studies were conducted by LGBTQ+ Asian researchers and offer nuanced and

culturally sensitive approaches to this issue. In my research, the Asian family members did not express concerns of a cultural nature about the young person in their family being trans. This was the case across age groups and immigration histories, suggesting that generation and acculturation may not have had significant impacts on the findings. This (very small) sample was not unbiased as the interviewees were identified as generally supportive, but it does show that Asians are not essentially transphobic. While it is important for research on family support for trans Asians to consider how Asian values can modulate family support, researchers should take care not to over-generalise findings about Asian cultural values and trans acceptance and perpetuate stereotypes of Asians as unsupportive of gender diversity. Future research should continue to examine the impacts of generation and acculturation on Asian people's support for trans family members in Western diasporic contexts.

6.4 Evaluation of research tools

Intersectionality

Intersectionality proved to be a highly useful framework for my research design and analysis. Combined with my youth-centred approach, an intersectional approach allowed me to ask what identity categories were most salient for my participants rather than identifying participants whose identities fit my interests. There is a risk in identity-focused research to centre one identity category and peripheralise or ignore others, but an intersectional approach forces researchers to 'ask the other question' (Divakalala, 2023) and continuously question how experiences in one identity (e.g. trans identity) are influenced by other identity categories and forms of oppression (e.g. culture and racism, neurodivergence and ableism).

Intersectionality as a framework pushed me to consider how participants' identities and experiences of family support were impacted by many identity factors concurrently, and how families may tailor their support practices to a person's intersecting identities. Intersectionality helped me complicate my understanding of 'Asian culture' by considering the impacts of religion, immigration history, generation and age on a person's values and how they show support.

Intersectionality was useful for investigating identity tensions and mixed support. I examined trans Asian participants' identity tensions in light of their other identities, which revealed complex interactions of cultural heritage with nationality, race, and interests. An intersectional lens revealed instances of mixed support ('support in X identity but not Y') which complicates assumptions of family members as being either supportive or unsupportive.

Intersectionality as a framework demanded constant reflexivity, which had some drawbacks. To avoid generalising participants' quotes, I spent considerable time teasing out the nuances of quotes, which lengthened the thesis significantly. When multiple identity categories were mentioned in a data section, it was sometimes difficult to determine to which broad theme it fit. Readability and organisational needs of a thesis meant I often felt I was 'chopping up' data to fit it into neat categories, which is not necessarily a drawback of an intersectional framework, but an example of how 'complicating research' can be difficult given the format requirements of Western scholarship.

Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis, particularly multimodal discourse analysis, was effective in extracting the socially constructed meaning from participants' words and drawings. Collaborating with participants to determine their intentions in their drawings was key in producing analysis that represented their realities as best as possible. A spoken text linguistic approach meant I could examine language features such as accent, self-repair, and affected speech that indicated reported speech or a humorous intent. Analysing discourse across family members allowed me to consider how different family members framed the same event and had different perspectives of the support provided (e.g. family members often downplayed how supportive they were compared to the trans young person's evaluation of them).

The multimodal angle was useful as spoken text combined with drawings painted a fuller picture of the participants' worlds than one medium alone, particularly when metaphors were repeated across media. Visual and verbal metaphors provided vivid distillations of participants' processing of their experiences of family support. These

metaphors shed light on the nature of the participants' family relationships (e.g. a parent drawn twice: smiling when she is being supportive and frowning when she is not, representing her mixed support). Beyond content, the form of the drawings also led to interesting findings, such as the connection to Japanese culture evidenced by the anime style drawings of the young people and some of their family members.

A challenge with using discourse analysis, especially with drawings, was that some level of researcher interpretation was required, and there is always a risk of misconstruing the participant's intent. I mitigated this by implementing collaborative analysis with participants, and by reaching out to participants to ask them to clarify the meaning of certain symbols if the symbols had conflicting interpretations (e.g. I could not tell whether a face was meant to represent the participant or her family member, which affected the interpretation of that image).

6.5 Answering research questions

My overall research question was: What does good family support look like for trans Asian young people in New Zealand?

My sub-questions were:

- Sub-question one: What identity categories are most salient to trans Asian young people in New Zealand?
- Sub-question two: How do trans Asian young people experience family support in these identity categories?
- Sub-question three: How do trans Asian young people experience family support at the intersections of these identity categories?

I will answer each sub-question in turn, and these answers will inform the answer to the overall research question.

6.6 Sub-question one

> What identity categories are most salient to trans Asian young people in New Zealand?

The most salient identity categories discussed by the trans Asian New Zealander young people ("the primary participants") were **trans identity, culture, religion, and neurodivergence**. These identity categories were discussed by all three primary participants at significant length. As discussed in *2.11.3: Identifying the most salient* themes, I reflected on the most salient identity categories after immersing myself in the data numerous times, and measured the most salient identity categories based on how many participants discussed them, at what length the participant(s) discussed them, and to what extent the discussions linked back to family support.

6.6.1 Trans identity

Trans identity was all but a given as a salient identity category as it was a stated focus of the research in recruitment materials. Trans identity was a central topic of questioning, and participants were open to sharing extensively about this identity. Participants used discussion of trans identity as a springboard to other topics, including the other identity categories, family support, institutional experiences, and mental health.

6.6.2 Culture

Culture was a broad category, encompassing discussion about nationality, race, cultural identity performance (e.g. customs, clothing), and interests (e.g. popular culture). Participants reported mixed feelings of connectedness to their Asian heritage cultures. Regina, who is White and Asian, preferred to identify as White; and René, who is Asian and non-White, appeared to identify with their Asian heritage culture. Tsuki, who has Anglo-South Asian heritage, connected more to New Zealand and Japanese cultures than her heritage cultures.

While cultural heritage was expected to be a salient category as the primary participants were all of Asian heritage, the broad connections to Japan and its popular culture were unexpected. It is unclear what identity variables most influence a connection to Japanese culture, but age, Asian heritage, trans identity, and neurodivergence were noted as potential contributing factors. Japan has a well-cultivated popular culture export market that brands Japanese culture as 'cool' (Kimura, 2020), which can appeal to young people. This mass exportation has made Japanese popular culture highly accessible to young New Zealanders. René, a non-Japanese East

Asian person, discussed wanting to learn more about East Asian culture as a teenager, and described manga and anime as "more accessible" than other forms of East Asian media. Tsuki, who is South Asian, developed passions for Japan as a culture and country, and Japanese language. With Japan's image in the West as a 'cool' Asian culture, some (non-Japanese) Asian diaspora may associate less stigma with engaging with Japanese culture compared to their heritage cultures.

René and Tsuki described connections to Japanese media that related to their genders. René, who is AFAB and non-binary, was drawn to gender-bending stories and girls assimilating as boys (e.g. at an all-boys school). Tsuki, who is a young trans woman, was drawn to a manga/anime about a group of female schoolfriends. Regina, who is autistic, appears to have a special interest in video games by Nintendo, a Japanese company. This was visible in her and her family's descriptions of her passions for video games, the collectibles from these games in her bedroom, and the anime style influences in her art. Unlike Tsuki and René, Regina did not express a connection to Japan as a country or culture, or the Japanese language; her connection appeared to be based on special interest in the media alone. Thus, the only identity category through which Regina appeared to relate to Japanese culture was her neurodivergence. These findings suggest that the identity categories of young person, Asian heritage (even if non-Japanese), trans identity, and neurodivergence may contribute to a connection to Japanese culture. The appeal of Japanese culture specifically to (trans) Asian New Zealand youth, and the factors that most contribute to this appeal, are a topic worthy of further inquiry.

The diversity of cultural connection in this study suggests that cultural identity for trans Asian New Zealanders can be quite individual. Culture was a salient part of identity negotiation for the trans young people, including and beyond cultural heritage.

6.6.3 Religion

Though none of the primary participants identify as religious, religion, largely Christianity, was a prominent influence on them all growing up. Furthermore, when religious identity is viewed as a spectrum rather than as the presence of faith, we can view the participants' religious orientations (spiritual but not religious, agnostic, and atheist) as religious identities. Religious identity of LGBTQ+ people is often measured in

the literature by the presence of faith (Benson et al., 2018; Ghazzawi et al., 2020) or affiliation with a faith community (Benson et al., 2018; Gandy et al., 2021; Levy & Lo, 2013). These measures are starting points, but as Gandy et al. (2021) acknowledge, they do not cover the full picture of trans and queer people's relationships with religion (p. 108). I argue that intersectional research can deepen understanding of religion as an identity category by viewing religious identity as a spectrum that includes low- and non-religiosity. Additionally, religion has clear ties to all primary participants' experiences of family support in their gender identities. Thus, the religious identities of family members helped make religion a salient identity category for the primary participants.

6.6.4 Neurodivergence

Neurodivergence was a salient identity category for all primary participants. For René, ADHD explicitly interacted with their gender via 'play'. Play for René involves having fun while questioning gender binaries. They engaged in parody masculinity, power exchange play, and non-verbal physical play to fulfil these dual goals. René used the term "autismgender" (also spelled 'autigender') to describe how autistic masking can be gendered. They also described how their gender expression, via language and voice, can shift based on the genders of their interlocutor(s). Participants described aspects of their cultures that were less accessible to their neurodivergent needs. This included sensory issues with food and clothing, being less responsive to cultural transmission, and being overwhelmed by the cultural differences of their parents' home country. The primary participants shared their special interests and comfort items in the interviews. All primary participants discussed the accessibility of the internet for finding digital resources and in-person services about trans identities, meeting others with the same special interests, and communicating with friends.

6.7 Sub-question two

> How do trans Asian New Zealander young people experience family support in these identity categories?

The answers to this question focus on singular, non-intersecting identity categories as the intersections will be discussed in the answer to the next question.

6.7.1 Trans identity

As part of this thesis's intersectional approach, the findings about family support in trans identity were presented in relation to support for other identity categories. However, participants did describe some types of family support that (seemingly) focused solely on trans identity. This included self-correction after accidentally misgendering or deadnaming, willingness to learn about gender diversity, standing up against transphobia, and supporting gender expression.

Participants noted that intent could be more important than outcome regarding use of pronouns and names: mistakes may be tolerable if a person shows that they are trying to adjust to a trans person's new name and pronouns (e.g. through self-correction). As one participant noted: "when I hear her making those corrections, it lets me know that she's trying. So, I don't actually mind when she makes the mistake so much, because I know that she's trying her best".

Willingness to learn about gender diversity can make a big difference in trans young people's perceptions of family support. René contrasted family members that were willing and unwilling to learn about gender diversity. They described being emotionally harmed by family members repeating anti-trans rhetoric, including that trans people groom children to be trans and that trans people are mentally unwell. René described these family members as having "a certain idea of reality" and being mentally inflexible. René expressed frustration that they would not listen to René's arguments, for example that everyone uses pronouns, and would derail discussions with jokes. These family members damaged their relationship with René by refusing to listen to their experience and expertise about being trans. In contrast, René's partner's parents, who also initially did not understand trans identities, did listen to René. They initially misgendered René, but René's partner spoke to them about it (another act of support, discussed further in the next paragraph) and they began self-correcting when they misgendered René. René described a time that their partner's father thanked René for showing them a new perspective of gender, where he said: "'René, I just wanted to thank you and share with you that I've learned so much about gender with you being in our lives. And I've learned to like, think about a lot more and I started to see things in ways that I would never have

before". René said this "meant the world" to them. René's partner's parents' open-mindedness, empathy, and willingness and effort to learn and grow made René feel supported and deepened their relationship.

As mentioned in *5.3.4: "Gender is a playground" metaphor*, cis ally family members helped buffer negativity from unsupportive people, including other family members, by acting as a "mitigating presence, because it's hard to direct so much negative emotion towards one person when there's two people standing there" (Timothy, René's partner). Regina's and Tsuki's fathers also used battle metaphors to describe their willingness to stand up for their child against transphobes. Regina's father described wishing he had been there during an incident when Regina and her friends were harassed for being trans. Though he describes himself as a pacifist and "not a big person", he says that "the size of the fight in the dog is a lot bigger than the size of the dog" and he would do anything to defend Regina if she were threatened. Similarly, Tsuki's father said he was "ready to fight the world" if Tsuki's extended family or school were unsupportive.

Notable acts of supporting gender expression included a trans woman's sexual partner complimenting how her body was becoming womanlier with HRT, a non-binary person's partner offering to help cut their hair, and (described hypothetically) family members being non-judgemental when a trans person experiments with different clothing.

6.7.2 Culture

The main finding regarding family support in cultural identity was that the trans Asian young people typically preferred to explore their cultural identities independently. A participant described feeling unhappy when she felt that her parents "expected" her to enjoy visiting their home country, which she did not, as she felt like "too much of a Kiwi kid". Feelings of familial pressure to engage with one's heritage culture can push a person away from their heritage culture. Alternatively, another participant who explored their culture independently developed a stronger connection with it afterwards. This suggests that pressure to conform to a 'collective' cultural identity may place stress on trans Asian New Zealander youth, and that they may find agency in cultivating a 'personal' sense of cultural identity. Regina's story best fits this idea, as she was given choices such as whether to eat Asian-style or Kiwi-style foods growing up. I contend

that presenting children with choices over whether to engage with their heritage culture, as in Regina's case, benefits their agency in cultural identity development. It may be difficult for Asian families to see a young family member seemingly disconnecting from their heritage culture, but it is important for families to understand that strong connection to heritage culture is not the only positive outcome. Regina and Tsuki have cultural identities with which they feel connected; these are just not their Asian heritage cultures. As a half-White and half-Asian person, Regina has chosen to embrace her White identity, while Tsuki has found a home in Japanese culture. Notably, after Tsuki independently explored and became passionate about Japanese language and culture, she received a form of cultural support from her parents as they financed and facilitated Japanese lessons and a student exchange to Japan. Finally, disconnection from heritage culture in childhood does not necessitate disconnection in adulthood, as René chose to learn more about their heritage culture as a young adult.

6.7.3 Religion

The primary participants received religious family support through prayer, invitations to church, and agency to choose their own religion. Primary participants offered their family members religious support by praying with them and visiting their churches. Each family had one family member who described praying for the trans young person. Two participants described attending church with their families as children but then choosing to quit attending, which their family supported. René also described how having an ex-partner who was very unsupportive of their religion contributed to losing their faith.

6.7.4 Neurodivergence

Neurodivergence was a rich category for experience of family support, with support given through body doubling and parallel play, help with executive function, advocacy, and engaging with special interests. Body doubling involved doing chores side-by-side to ease friction for the neurodivergent person. Parallel play involved doing pleasurable activities such as gaming near one another and gleaning enjoyment from being close without necessarily having to talk. Help with executive function took many forms, including one family member taking on household tasks that a neurodivergent family

member particularly struggled to initiate themselves, helping someone make a study schedule, making systems to ease division of household labour, encouraging someone to complete a difficult but high-reward task, and teaching someone to use Meetup so she could join more social groups. Advocacy involved a parent checking that her child's school was meeting her neurodivergent needs and pushing her child's school to allow her child to apply for a gifted program after they disqualified her because she needed a teacher aide for her autism. Engaging with special interests involved sharing and bonding over similar interests and showing enthusiasm for the neurodivergent person's interests (even if the interest is not shared).

6.8 Sub-question three

> How do trans Asian New Zealander young people experience family support at the intersections of these identity categories?

6.8.1 Trans identity and neurodivergence

The intersection of trans identity and neurodivergence was particularly fruitful for examining family support. It involved family members participating in a neurodivergent non-binary young person's desire to play with gender, an autistic trans woman getting help from a friend to get the name on her ID card changed, and the same woman feeling supported by her mother in her autistic identity but not her trans identity. While two participants felt that being supported in either their gender or neurodivergence was better than nothing, they felt more supported when a family member affirmed both identities.

6.8.2 Trans identity and culture

Asian families commonly emphasise extended family, and some young people may feel that they do not know their extended family well because there are so many people in the family circle. Thus, if the trans young person wishes to come out to everyone, it can be difficult to know how to broach the topic with people they do not regularly speak to. To mitigate this, certain family members can serve as 'mouthpieces' to other members of the family in a trans young person's coming out process. In this research, two fathers served this role. This practice can help shield the trans young person from potential

negative responses, reduces the number of times they must come out, and makes coming out 'less of a big deal' if that is what the trans young person wishes.

Tsuki's father described being concerned how his family would respond when they learnt that Tsuki was trans, due to their culture. He did not consider culture an excuse for transphobia, however, and said he "was ready for a fight" if they were unsupportive. Fortunately, there was no need. Tsuki's father argued that the parents' level of certainty in their support sets the precedent for how extended family members respond to the child coming out as trans. Tsuki's father said "even if they have some hang ups, how much they would voice it depends on how much the parents will allow it to be voiced. So, we always made sure that everyone knows very, very clearly that it's not something that will be accepted. So, either you are positive or you're not here." This example reflects a difference in how parental support in the event of intra-familial dissent differs from that of family members of the same age as the young person. While younger family members describe being a "mitigating presence" and considering it not their place to speak for the trans person, parents, particularly Tsuki's and Regina's fathers, were discursively constructed by themselves and their children as fighters, defenders, and shields against potential transphobia from extended family.

6.8.3 Trans identity and religion

Transphobia pervades many religious institutions (Harris et al., 2020), even those that are queer-affirming (Gandy et al., 2021). As a non-binary person, René described feeling alienated from churches that strictly adhered to binary gender roles. René came out as queer to their mother before coming out as non-binary. René's mother reported initially having concerns about René's queer identity due to religious beliefs developed from her Christian upbringing and from religious leaders. She did not report apprehension when René came out as non-binary but did call herself generally a "binary" and "concrete thinker". She grew more supportive through learning from René, viewing media by LGBTQ+ people about their identities, and prioritising her love for her child over her fears. As gender-based rejection has contributed to René's feelings of alienation in some churches, Margaret prays that René will find a trans-affirming church that will support them in their trans identity while nurturing their faith. Tsuki's grandmother, the

oldest participant and a devout Catholic, reported that she had no religious apprehension about Tsuki's trans identity. She prays to God to "keep her [Tsuki] safe" from transphobia. Regina's father also does not present religious concerns relating to his current Christian faith or his Buddhist upbringing. Finally, by contrast, Regina's mother does not support Regina's trans identity due to her religious convictions. She uses the Christian concept of pre-ordained destiny to argue that Regina was not meant to change her name and gender. These cases reflect diverse family support outcomes for religious family members of trans young people, suggesting that religious attitudes towards gender diversity are not homogenous, but shaped by a person's personal convictions and religious education.

6.8.4 Culture and neurodivergence

Regina, an autistic participant, received family support at the intersection of culture and neurodivergence as her family appreciated that aspects of her autism made engaging in some cultural practices less accessible for her. Regina described having a small radius of interest as a child, where she did not respond to her father's attempts to teach her about their heritage. Though her father has keenly maintained his connection to his culture, he has not forced it onto Regina. An example of this is when her father made Asian food for the family, Regina was made bland, repetitive alternatives, such as Nutella sandwiches, per her preference.

6.8.5 Culture and religion

Literature about LGBTQ+ Asian experiences often emphasises the intertwining of some Asian communities with religion and the resulting impact of religion on Asians' acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities (Bal & Divakalala, 2022; Divakalala & Bal, 2024; O'Connell et al., 2024; K. K. H. Tan et al., 2023; Thomsen, 2021). However, this study's participants spoke little of the intersection of culture and religion in family support. Tsuki's father did note that he considered mono-ethnic people from his (South Asian) home country more religious, more superstitious, and "very set in their ways" compared with his Anglo-Asian ethnic group. He believed that his mixed-race background positively influenced his support of trans people. Tsuki's mother softly concurred with her husband's views. She is from a mono-ethnic South Asian and Buddhist background

and did not know anything about LGBTQ+ people until she left her home country at age 18. She said that her culture considered 18-year-olds children and adults would not tell children about LGBTQ+ identities. While the combination of her culture and religious background restricted her knowledge about trans identities, she began educating herself immediately after Tsuki came out as trans. She sought broad sources, including Rainbow Youth, trans healthcare professionals, friends and co-workers with trans family members, following trans people on social media, and Tsuki and her friends. She has applied this knowledge to actively engaging with and advocating for her daughter's care.

6.8.6 Religion and neurodivergence

René dislikes loud preaching styles, describing disliking a pastor who "got way too excited" and "would raise his voice quite a bit". This made the service inaccessible to them, and they had to go outside. They also found churches with strict dogma less accessible and preferred the style of their Christian high school group that emphasised "general spirituality and self-discovery". They enjoyed that it was more of a "place to reflect". These findings suggest that a 'one size fits all' approach to church services may not be inclusive for neurodivergent people. Based on René's stated needs, I suggest that churches could experiment with low-sensory services with quieter volumes, dimmer lights, less rigid structures, and more space for quiet reflection.

6.9 Overall question and recommendations for families

> What does good family support look like for trans Asian young people in New Zealand?

This section answers the overall research question and serves as recommendations for families to support their young trans Asian family member.

From answering the sub-questions, it is evident that good family support for trans Asian young people in New Zealand involves supporting the young person's agency in their identity development, affirming their gender identity, standing up against transphobia, and supporting them holistically.

Supporting the young person's agency in their identity development means avoiding imposing beliefs onto them and giving them the freedom to explore their gender,

cultural, religious, neurodivergent, and/or other identities where applicable. It may mean that they orient some identities away from those of the family.

Affirming gender identity means listening to the young person when they state that they are trans. It means accepting different versions of reality, challenging ingrained beliefs, and being open to learning.

Standing up against transphobia means defending the trans young person and their identity when people inside or outside the family are unsupportive. This could involve calling out instances of transphobic rhetoric, misgendering and deadnaming, and jokes at the trans young person's expense. It can mean educating oneself on gender diversity and trans issues to help educate other family members.

Supporting a trans Asian young person holistically means supporting all their identities concurrently. This may mean affirming identities that family members do not understand or that make them uncomfortable. Supporting these identities concurrently means providing support that considers a young person's full range of needs. As described in sub-question three, family support that takes an intersectional approach might involve researching churches that fulfil a trans person's religious preferences while also being trans-affirming; or parents considering how to make cultural practices more accessible to their children's neurodivergence-based needs.

6.10 Implications & recommendations

6.10.1 For community engagement

A major finding of my study is that the trans Asian New Zealander young people had complicated relationships with their heritage cultures. I encourage community workers to take this into account when they consider practicing culturally appropriate care. Culturally appropriate care for some clients means implementing customs from their heritage culture. However, as my analysis has shown, young Asian people born in New Zealand may form a hybrid Asian-New Zealander cultural identity, where they adopt some Asian and some New Zealand customs. Assuming that they will want to be treated in an 'Asian' way can make them feel stereotyped. Comfort with physical proximity, touch, and eye contact can be modulated by culture as well as trans identity, neurodivergence, interlocutor genders, and relationship level. It is okay to ask whether

they prefer to say hello with a wave, handshake, or hug, and in fact asking about and sticking to their boundaries can honour their bodily autonomy and mana.

I echo Amerasinghe's (2018) call for culturally appropriate resources for Asian New Zealander parents and other older family members to help them understand their young person being trans. This is something that I hoped to contribute to as a product of my thesis. However, it raises questions. How many versions of a resource will need to be made to cover all the Asian communities in New Zealand? South Asians may not feel represented in a resource that overly targets East Asians, and vice versa. Even within a country, religious and ethnolinguistic groups form distinct cultures. The people who make such resources will need expertise in communication with adults from Asian cultures and multiple experts would need to be employed to work on the different versions.

6.10.2 For policy

My research indicates that access to gender-affirming healthcare is important to the wellbeing of trans Asian youth. For my participants, this included hormone replacement therapy (HRT), puberty blockers, and counselling. Participants reported full satisfaction with their interactions with gender-affirming healthcare practitioners, despite long wait times to see them. Regina reported a window of one year and four months between realising she was trans and starting HRT and says she "got very lucky". Tsuki expressed frustration that she was eligible for HRT at age 16 but did not gain access to it for almost a year after becoming eligible, due to administrative delays. Both participants explained that once they reached the stage of requesting HRT, they had already received gender identity counselling and were certain that they wanted to transition, indicating that client uncertainty did not contribute to these wait times. Extended wait times for access to HRT and other gender-affirming healthcare are concerning as they elongate the time that a trans person may experience distress.

Participants also engaged with healthcare surrounding mental health and neurodivergence. René discussed the psychological harm of experiencing racism, sexism, and judgmental attitudes from mental health practitioners. Increased diversity sensitivity training could be valuable for all mental health practitioners to avoid

alienating clients from backgrounds different from their own. René subsequently found more “culturally appropriate” care from a psychiatrist from their own culture who was also more respectful of women. Healthcare practices may consider asking clients if they prefer to match with a practitioner who shares identity categories with them, such as gender, culture, or being LGBTQ+.

Tsuki’s family described extensive wait times for services for trans youth and their grave concerns for their daughter’s wellbeing while she waited for that support. Undoubtedly, services for LGBTQ+ youth like Rainbow Youth, OutLine, and InsideOUT need more funding and resources to meet the needs of trans youth.

Tsuki’s father noted that Tsuki’s distress was assuaged tremendously once she had access to puberty blockers. I implore the New Zealand Government to reconsider the 2025 legislation restricting the prescription of puberty blockers to young people with gender dysphoria. The Government’s press release argued that “there is a lack of high-quality evidence that demonstrates the benefits or risks of the use of gonadotropin-releasing hormone analogues for the treatment of gender dysphoria or incongruence” (S. Brown, 2025). This indicates that there is a lack of research in this area, not that research has proven puberty blockers to be harmful. As this restriction is to be in place “while uncertainty persists” (S. Brown, 2025), I urge the Government to promptly fund research to examine the effects of puberty blockers on physical *and* psychological health of trans youth to fill the gaps in knowledge.

6.11 Strengths and contributions

6.11.1 Family support angle and strengths-based approach

This study’s family support angle, youth-centred approach, and strengths-based approach worked together to illuminate what positive family support can look like for young trans Asian New Zealanders.

Positive support from loved ones can be a protective factor against distress in the face of oppression (Barras & Jones, 2024; K. K. H. Tan, Treharne, et al., 2021). This work took an expansive idea of family, challenging the nuclear model (parents and children) and viewing family through the eyes of the trans young people. This angle worked with the

project's youth-centred approach. While much research in family support has centred the perspectives of family members, particularly for trans and neurodivergent youth, this work centred the trans young people's perspectives, complemented by their family's perspectives to fill out the picture of their family support experiences. The youth-centred approach worked to *whakamana* ("empower, encourage, and affirm"; Ara Taiohi, n.d.) the agency of trans youth in formulating their care by asking what support they need from family and institutions.

The family support angle of the research design allowed for novel findings, such as that the religious identities of family members helped make religion a salient identity category for the trans young people. By questioning whether participants were raised religious instead of just whether they are religious now, participants who were not religious revealed the influences of religion on their upbringings and experiences of family support.

The strengths-based approach contrasted with the approaches of much of the existing literature by chiefly looking for evidence of positive family support actions. It challenges deficit-based narratives sometimes found in trans- and neurodivergence-related literature. The strengths-based approach was useful as it helped produce actionable information on improving support for trans Asian New Zealand youth in their gender and holistically.

6.11.2 Focus on trans Asian New Zealand youth

This research is indebted to the immense work done in Counting Ourselves, the Adhikaar Report, and the Identify survey, which were instrumental in situating work with trans Asian New Zealand youth. However, none of these works focus primarily on trans Asian New Zealand youth: Counting Ourselves focused on trans New Zealanders with sections on Asian experiences; Identify focused on the broader LGBTQ+ community with sections on Asian experiences; and the Adhikaar Report focused on LGBTQ+ South Asians with less specificity on trans experiences. By focusing on trans Asian New Zealand youth, my thesis addresses an important gap not covered in depth by these existing works. I also noted that while existing work with trans Asian New Zealanders addressed a vital intersection of trans and Asian identities, there was less information

about how other identities affected their support experiences. Discussion of religion in the lives of trans Asians was often quantitative (e.g. K. K. H. Tan, Yee, et al. (2021) using data from Counting Ourselves) or did not specify religions (e.g. The Adhikaar Report), and I found no research discussing neurodiverse identities in trans Asians. Based on my review of the literature, I believe that my examination of neurodiversity as a factor in family support for trans Asian New Zealander youth is one of my biggest contributions to this research area, with the qualitative angle of examining religious upbringing in this population an additional contribution.

6.12 Limitations and recommendations for future research

With the limited scope of a master's thesis, the sample size of this study was very small. It does not reflect all the diverse experiences, beliefs, and identities of trans Asian New Zealander youth and families. Much as I have argued that cultural value research should not be used to essentialise all Asians as transphobic, I warn against generalising all trans Asian New Zealander experiences and perspectives with the findings from this work.

I will now discuss this work's limitations in its representation of diversity in different identity categories.

This study worked with trans women and non-binary participants, but no trans men. To secure other aspects of diversity, such as ethnicity, it was unfortunately not feasible to recruit three participants with three different gender identities.

Due to only being able to interview three families, the ethnic diversity of this study was inherently limited. Though there is one family each with heritage from East Asia, South-East Asia, and South Asia, I was unable to explore the perspective of a West Asian family.

This study was limited in scope to participants with relationships to Christianity. I hope that future work will look at the religion-based support experiences of Asian New Zealander trans youth with connections to other religions, such as Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism.

My participants discussed having autism and/or ADHD, but none discussed experience with other forms of neurodivergence, such as dyslexia, learning disabilities, and OCD. Trans people with neurodivergences other than autism and ADHD are profoundly understudied in the literature, and gaining their perspectives should be prioritised in future research.

I also hope that researchers will look at other identity categories and factors in family support for trans Asian New Zealander youth, including disability, geography and socioeconomic status.

Though I hoped to research the interaction of disability with trans identities, none of my participants identified as disabled. Work such as To Be Ourselves indicates that there is a significant sub-community of disabled trans and non-binary people (de Bres & Morrison-Young, 2025), and I hope future research attends to their needs.

Although Project Village aimed for a diversity of geography in participant selection, I had to sideline this criterion in favour of the more pressing criteria of diversity of heritage and gender identity. My participants all grew up in the North Island in urban areas. Future research could explore the experiences of rurally raised trans Asian New Zealanders and consider the impacts of reduced institutional resources and differing levels of conservative values, religiosity and education on family support for trans Asian young people.

I was also regrettably unable to examine socioeconomic status as a factor in trans Asian New Zealander youths' identity development and experiences of family support and institutional support. For example, when the waitlists for public support services are too long, private services may be financially accessible to some families and not others. For example, some young transmasculine New Zealanders fundraise to pay for 'top surgery' (removal of breast tissue) because the private cost is in the tens of thousands, and public services are inaccessible, with extensive waitlists nationwide and no availability in some regions (Murphy, 2024; Veale et al., 2019).

My research indicated that my trans second-generation Asian New Zealander participants' foundational understanding of gender was based in Western frameworks. They discussed learning about gender diversity through the internet and peer networks

and did not learn about cultural gender identities from their families of origin. So far, I have only met Asian-born people who use Asian gender terms such as *hijra*. However, some Asian activists for decolonisation are embracing their cultural gender and sexuality terminology (Bal, 2024, p. 25), and we may see a growth in New Zealand-born Asians who use these terms. It would be novel to research the experiences of trans Asians in New Zealand who identify with such gender identities, particularly how their culture interacts with their gender, and how family support experiences compare to those with Western-based gender identities.

Overall, I recommend that future research continues to prioritise marginalised voices and embrace complexity in research design. I look forward to seeing more novel intersectional work that examines the support needs of multiply marginalised groups using multiple theoretical frameworks and creative methodologies.

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Appendices

Appendix A: General flyer seeking participants

Note: Ethics approval details are at the end of this document.



Do you want to participate in a research project about family support for transgender young people in Aotearoa?

We know that support from family and whānau helps transgender young people be healthy and happy, but we don't know as much about how family members support transgender young people in practice. Our community-led research project aims to find out more about what good family support looks like for transgender young people in Aotearoa, from their own perspective.

We are looking for people to take part in our research who:

- are transgender (*for this project 'transgender' refers to a person's gender being different than the gender they were assigned at birth. This includes people who are non-binary, takatāpui, fa'afafine, gender fluid, etc.)*
- are aged between 16 and 24
- are Pacific, Māori, Asian, or Pākehā
- live in Aotearoa/New Zealand; and
- have experienced support from at least some of their family.

Taking part in the project involves participating in an interview with a transgender or queer member of the research team from your cultural background (Pacific, Māori, Asian, or Pākehā). In this interview, you would draw a picture about your experience of family support and talk about how your family has supported you. No drawing skills are required!

Next, with your permission, a researcher would also interview some of the family or whānau members you consider to have supported you the most. The researcher would ask them to draw a picture of their experience of supporting you and to talk about this.

Note: for this project family or whānau is whatever this means to you, and can extend beyond biological family.

You would have control over which quotes from your own interview and those of your family or whānau members would appear in the results of the project, and the results would be presented in such a way that none of you would be identifiable.

You and your family or whānau members would each receive a $50 supermarket voucher as thanks for participating, and you would be offered a personal illustrated summary of how your family or whānau members express their support for you, in their own words.

If you are interested in potentially taking part, we would love to talk to you about whether this would be a good fit for you. With your permission we can contact you, or you can contact us at projectvillageaotearoa@massey.ac.nz

You can read more about the research on the project website www.projectvillageaotearoa.com

If you have any questions about the research, feel free to contact the project lead Dr Julia de Bres (Massey University) on j.debres@massey.ac.nz

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 2, Application OM2 23/62. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Associate Professor Fiona Te Momo, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 2, email humanethics2@massey.ac.nz.

Thank you for considering this invitation!

project village

picturing family support for transgender young people in aotearoa

Appendix B: Targeted flyer seeking Asian participant



Do you want to participate in a research project about family support for Asian transgender young people in Aotearoa?

We know that support from family and whānau helps transgender young people be healthy and happy, but we don't know as much about how family members support transgender young people in practice. Our community-led research project aims to find out more about what good family support looks like for transgender young people of different cultural backgrounds in Aotearoa, from their own perspective.

We are looking for someone to take part in our research who:

- is Asian, or part Asian
- is aged between 16 and 25
- is transgender (*for this project 'transgender' refers to a person's gender being different than the gender they were assigned at birth. This includes identities referred to using Western terms such as non-binary, genderfluid, and genderqueer, and Asian terms such as hijra, Kinnar, and Khawaja Sara)*
- lives in Aotearoa/New Zealand; and
- has experienced support from at least some of their family.

Taking part in the project involves participating in an interview with our Asian research team member, who is a queer, Indian, cisgender woman. In this interview, you would draw a picture about your experience of family support and talk about how your family has supported you. No drawing skills are required!

Next, with your permission, a researcher would also interview some of the family members you consider to have supported you the most. The researcher would ask them to draw a picture of their experience of supporting you and to talk about this.

For this project, family is whatever this means to you, and can extend beyond biological family.

You would have control over which quotes from your own interview and those of your family members would appear in the results of the project, and the results would be presented in such a way that none of you would be identifiable.

You and your family members would each receive a $50 Prezzy card as thanks for participating, and you would be offered a personal illustrated summary of how your family members express their support for you, in their own words.

If you are interested in potentially taking part, we would love to talk to you about whether this would be a good fit for you. With your permission we can contact you, or you can contact us at projectvillageaotearoa@massey.ac.nz

You can read more about the research on the project website www.projectvillageaotearoa.com

Continued on next page →

If you have any questions about the research, feel free to contact the project lead Dr Julia de Bres (Massey University) on j.debres@massey.ac.nz

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 2, Application OM2 23/62. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Associate Professor Fiona Te Momo, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 2, email humanethics2@massey.ac.nz.

Thank you for considering this invitation!

project village

picturing family support for transgender young people in aotearoa

Appendix C: Information and Consent Form (Youth)

Research on Family Support for Transgender Young People in Aotearoa New Zealand

Information sheet for participants

Transgender young people aged 16-24

Thank you for showing an interest in this project. Please read this information sheet carefully before

deciding whether to participate. If you decide not to take part, there will be no disadvantage to you.

What is the aim of the project?

In this project, we aim to learn about what good family support looks like for transgender young people in Aotearoa New Zealand.

What type of participants are we seeking?

We are looking for people to take part in our research who:

- are transgender (see note below)
- are aged between 16 and 24
- are Pacific, Māori, Asian, or Pākehā
- live in Aotearoa/New Zealand
- have experienced support from at least some of their family or whānau.

Note:

- For this project 'transgender' refers to a person's gender being different than the gender they were assigned at birth. This includes people who use terms such as non-binary, takatāpui, fa'afafine, gender fluid, etc.

What will participants be asked to do?

If you choose to participate in this study, you will take part in an interview of up to 90 minutes with a transgender or queer member of the research team from your cultural background (Pacific, Māori, Asian, or Pākehā). In this interview, you will draw a picture about your experience of family support and talk about how your family or whānau has supported you. No drawing skills are required. The interview uses an open-questioning technique, with the exact topics depending on the way the interview develops. If any questions make you feel hesitant or uncomfortable, you have the right to decline to answer them.

Next, with your permission, a member of the research team will also interview up to five of your family or whānau members who you consider to have supported you the most. The researcher will ask them to draw a picture about their experience of supporting you and talk to them about this.

Note:

- For this project, family or whānau is whatever this means to you, and can extend beyond biological family.

After your family or whānau members have been interviewed, the researcher will ask them if we can share some quotes from their interviews with you. You will then be invited to take part in a further discussion of up to 30 minutes, where you can tell us which of these quotes you agree for us to use in the results of the project. We will only use quotes from your interview and the interviews with your family or whānau members that you give us permission to include.

Will participants receive an incentive for participating?

All participants will receive a $50 supermarket voucher to acknowledge their participation in the research. You will also be offered a personal illustrated summary of how your family or whānau members express their support for you, in their own words.

What information will be collected and what use will be made of it?

We will collect information in the form of a drawing and an interview. We will audio-record the interview. After the interview, we will transcribe the audio recording. You will be given the opportunity to check and edit the transcript of your interview. We will analyse the interview transcripts alongside the drawings.

Before we write up the results, we will share with you quotes from your family or whānau members' interviews (with their permission), to check if you agree with us using these quotes in our writing up of the research.

We will prepare academic articles, media articles, conference presentations and other forms of community outreach based on the results, with the aim of increasing awareness of what good family support looks like for transgender young people in Aotearoa.

We may use quotes from the interviews to illustrate the results of the research, as well as photos of the drawings made in the interviews, but we will not include any names of people, places, or any other details that would make it possible to know who you are.

At the conclusion of your interview, we will ask you if you would like to receive a copy of any articles or other outputs we publish as a result of the research.

How will the data be stored?

The audio file, interview transcript and drawing will be securely stored so that only the research team will be able to gain access to it. Data obtained from the research will be retained for ten years in secure storage and then securely destroyed.

Can participants change their mind and withdraw from the project?

You may withdraw your consent for the collection and use of your information at any time up until the writing up of the results, by informing a research team member. If you withdraw your consent, your study participation will end, and the study team will destroy all data relating to you. Any data that has already been included in analyses and presented or published prior to your withdrawal cannot be removed.

Who is carrying out this research and who is funding this research?

Researchers from Massey University and the University of Waikato are carrying out this research project. This research has been funded by a grant from the Marsden Fund of The Royal Society/Te Apārangi.

What if participants have questions?

If you have any questions about our project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact the Principal Investigator:

Dr Julia de Bres

School of Humanities, Media and Creative Communication

Massey University

j.debres@massey.ac.nz

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 2, Application OM2 23/62. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Associate Professor Fiona Te Momo, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 2, email humanethics2@massey.ac.nz.

Consent form for participants

I have read the Information Sheet concerning this project and understand what it is about. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to request further

information at any stage.

I know that:

1. My participation in the project is entirely voluntary;

2. I am free to withdraw from the project at any point before the writing up of the results;

3. Data (audio recordings of interviews, interview transcripts and drawings) will be retained in secure storage for ten years and then destroyed;

4. The interview involves an open-questioning technique. The exact questions will depend on the way in which the interview develops. If any questions make me feel hesitant or uncomfortable, I have the right to decline to answer any question.

5. I will be given the opportunity to check and edit the transcript of my interview.

6. I will receive a $50 supermarket voucher for taking part in the interview as thanks for my time;

7. If I agree, a researcher will also interview up to five of my family or whānau members who I consider to have supported me the most.

8. I will have the opportunity to see quotes from the interviews with my family or whānau members, if they give permission to share these with me.

9. Only those quotes from my family or whānau members that I approve can be used in writing up the results of the research;

10. The results of the project may be published in the form of academic articles, media articles and other community outreach initiatives. Every attempt will be made to ensure that I will not be identified.

I agree to take part in this project.

....

(Signature of participant) (Date)

.....

(Printed Name)

.....

Name of person taking consent

Appendix D: Information and Consent Form (Family Member)

Research on Family Support for Transgender Young People in Aotearoa New Zealand

Information sheet for participants

Family and whānau members

Thank you for showing an interest in this project. Please read this information sheet carefully before

deciding whether to participate. If you decide not to take part, there will be no disadvantage to you.

What is the aim of the project?

In this project, we aim to learn about what good family support looks like for transgender young people in Aotearoa New Zealand.

What type of participants are we seeking?

We are seeking two groups of participants.

The first group of participants we are seeking is 12 young people who:

- are transgender (see note below)
- are aged between 16 and 24
- are Pacific, Māori, Asian, or Pākehā
- live in Aotearoa/New Zealand
- have experienced support from at least some of their family or whānau.

Note:

- *For this project 'transgender' refers to a person's gender being different than the gender they were assigned at birth. This includes people who use terms such as non-binary, takatāpui, fa'afafine, gender fluid, etc.*

The second group of participants are up to five family or whānau members of each of these young people.

Note:

- *For this project, family or whānau is whatever this means to a young person, and can extend beyond biological family.*

Why am I being invited to participate?

When we interviewed your family or whānau member who is a transgender young person, they identified you as one of the people who has supported them the most. They agreed for us to invite you to an interview about your experience of supporting them, if you wish to do so.

What will participants be asked to do?

If you choose to participate in this study, you will take part in an interview of up to 90 minutes with a researcher. In this interview, you will draw a picture about your experience of supporting your transgender family or whānau member and talk to the researcher about your experience of supporting this person. No drawing skills are required.

The interview uses an open-questioning technique, with the exact topics depending on the way the interview develops. If any questions make you feel hesitant or uncomfortable, you have the right to decline to answer them.

After the interview, the research team may select some quotes from your interview to use in writing up the research. If so, we will ask for your permission to share these quotes with your transgender family or whānau member. Only the quotes that your transgender family or whānau member approves for use will be used in the writing up of the results.

Will participants receive an incentive for participating?

All participants will receive a $50 supermarket voucher to acknowledge their participation in the research.

What information will be collected and what use will be made of it?

We will collect information from you in the form of a drawing and an interview. We will audio-record the interview. After the interview, we will transcribe the audio recording. You will be given the opportunity to check and edit the transcript of your interview. We will analyse the interview transcripts alongside the drawings.

We will prepare academic articles, media articles, conference presentations and other forms of community outreach based on the results, with the aim of increasing awareness of what good family support looks like for transgender young people in Aotearoa.

We may use quotes from the interviews to illustrate the results of the research, as well as photos of the drawings made in the interviews, but we will not include any names of people, places, or any other details that would make it possible to know who you are.

At the conclusion of your interview, we will ask you if you would like to receive a copy of any articles or other outputs we publish as a result of the research.

How will the data be stored?

The audio file, interview transcript and drawing will be securely stored so that only the research team will be able to gain access to it. Data obtained from the research will be retained for ten years in secure storage and then securely destroyed.

Can participants change their mind and withdraw from the project?

You may withdraw your consent for the collection and use of your information at any time up until the writing up of the results, by informing a research team member. If you withdraw your consent, your study participation will end, and the study team will destroy all data relating to you. Any data that has already been included in analyses and presented or published prior to your withdrawal cannot be removed.

Who is carrying out this research and who is funding this research?

Researchers from Massey University and the University of Waikato are carrying out this research project. This research has been funded by a grant from the Marsden Fund of The Royal Society/Te Apārangi.

What if participants have questions?

If you have any questions about our project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact the Principal Investigator:

Dr Julia de Bres

School of Humanities, Media and Creative Communication

Massey University

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This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 2, Application OM2 23/62. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Associate Professor Fiona Te Momo, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 2, email humanethics2@massey.ac.nz.

Consent form for participants

I have read the Information Sheet concerning this project and understand what it is about. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to request further information at any stage.

I know that:

11. My participation in the project is entirely voluntary;

12. I am free to withdraw from the project at any point before the writing up of the results;

13. The interview involves an open-questioning technique. The exact questions will depend on the way in which the interview develops. If any questions make me feel hesitant or uncomfortable, I have the right to decline to answer any question.

14. I will be given the opportunity to check and edit the transcript of my interview.

15. Quotes from my interview may be shared with my transgender family or whānau member, but only with my prior permission. A researcher will ask for my agreement before sharing these quotes with my transgender family or whānau member. Only the quotes my transgender family or whānau member approves for sharing more widely will be used in the writing up of the results;

16. Data (audio recordings of interviews, interview transcripts and drawings) will be retained in secure storage for ten years and then destroyed;

17. I will receive a $50 supermarket voucher for taking part in the interview as thanks for my time;

18. The results of the project may be published in the form of academic articles, media articles and other community outreach initiatives. Every attempt will be made to ensure that I will not be identified.

I agree to take part in this project.

…… ……

(Signature of participant) (Date)

……

(Printed Name)

……

Name of person taking consent

Appendix E: Drawing Instructions (Youth)

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Drawing instructions

Draw your experience of family support as a trans person

For this project:

- Family or whānau is whatever this means to you, and is not limited to biological family. You don't need to put anyone in the drawing that you don't want to include.

Appendix F: Drawing instructions (Family Member)



Drawing instruction:

Draw your experience of supporting [name] in [his/her/their] gender

Appendix G: Getting Support sheet

project village

picturing family support for
transgender young people in aotearoa

Getting support

<u>Your safety and wellbeing comes first</u>, so please stop and take care of yourself if you notice things are feeling too much before, during, or after our chat together. If you or your family need to talk with someone please contact these free, nation-wide, confidential support services:

Outline provide a support line every evening from 6-9 pm for rainbow people and their friends and family who want to speak to a trained volunteer from rainbow communities.

Call 0800 688 5463

Chat Online outline.org.nz/chat

1737 Need to talk? is a free service for any time support from a trained counsellor.

text or call provided to you

Text or Call 1737

Lifeline offers 24/7 support for any issue, they are there to listen.

Call 0800 543 354

Text 4357

Suicide Crisis Helpline is operated by Lifeline, with trained and experienced social service practitioners who have undergone suicide prevention training.

Call 0800 828 865

Be There is a website and awareness campaign that aims to support the parents and whānau of trans, non-binary, takatāpui, queer, intersex, and rainbow young people to be more inclusive, affirming and safe.

Visit www.be-there.nz

RainbowYOUTH provides 1:1 peer support to queer, gender diverse, intersex and takatāpui youth and their whānau across Aotearoa, with peer support groups and in-person support available in Northland, Auckland, Taranaki, Bay of Plenty and Wellington. They can help with housing, support for parents and whānau, transitioning, accessing gender affirming care, coming out, information and resources.

Visit ry.org.nz

Gender Minorities Aotearoa is a nationwide transgender organisation. It is run by and for transgender people; including binary and non-binary, intersex, and irawhiti takatāpui. GMA supports transgender people of all ages, cultures, and backgrounds, and provides one-to-one peer support and information nationwide. GMA has a peer support line, email, and video call 10am-6pm weekdays and a counsellor and social worker by appointment.

Visit https://genderminorities.com

NZ Parents and Guardians of Transgender and Gender

Diverse Children is a parent-led group that provides information, guidance, advice and companionship to help parents and guardians who have trans or gender diverse children. They provide support through a secret Facebook group (not searchable on Facebook).

Email nzparentsoftransgenderchildren@gmail.com for support or to join the group.

Appendix H: Sample interview schedule (youth)

Note: the interview schedules were tailored to each person; this is the schedule for Regina.

Interview schedule: YOUNG PEOPLE

- ***How are you today?***
- Would you like to go over the information and consent forms?
- Ask if there are any further questions
- ***Nothing you say will be shared without your permission. I will send you the transcript of what we may use in our research, and you can cross out anything you don't want us to use. That being said, we will do our best to anonymise the data, including giving you a pseudonym, which you can choose.***
- ***You can take a break any time.***

- ***Tell me about yourself.***
- ***Background questions***
    - *Where were you born and raised? Where are your parents from? Has that affected your developing experience of your gender identity?*
    - *Are you out to everyone you know and meet? Are there people in your family who don't know that you've changed your name and pronouns?*
    - *Do you identify as neurodivergent or as having a disability? How does your neurodivergence/disability relate to your gender?*
    - *Were you raised religious? Are you religious now? Are your family religious? Did you ever go to church? How has your relationship with your religion and your religious community affected your experience of your gender identity? Are you/were you 'out' at church?*

- ***Can you tell me about your drawing?***
    - *(Ask questions based on drawing)*

  How did you choose the name [Regina]? (I already know that her name choice has a cultural component) Oh? Tell me about your cultural identity.

- *Since this project is about family support, we're interested in hearing about how your family members have supported you.*
    - ***Can you tell me about the people who have supported you the most in your gender?***
    - *(Note again that family is whatever it means to them, not just biological)*

- *(Prompt if needed: parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts/uncles, cousins, chosen family, friends, pets….)*

- *For each person:*
  - ***Tell me about your parents/[brother]/[best friend] (supportive family members that participant indicated prior) Anybody else?***
  - ***How has this person supported you?***
  - *(Goal is to discuss up to five people, but it's fine if they can't think of five)*

- ***Follow up questions if necessary: How have family members supported you in your…***
  - *Relationship with other family members (parents, siblings, extended family, etc)*
  - *Interactions with social institutions (school, medical settings, government services, etc)*
  - *Dealing with broader social messages about transgender people you come across (e.g. in media and politics)*
  - *Neurodivergence? (already know that participant identifies as neurodivergent)*

- ***Support needs:***
  - *Have you faced any challenges in the area of family members supporting you in your gender? What kind of support would help you with this?*

- *We are hoping to interview some of your top family supporters to hear about how they support you from their perspective*
  - ***Would you be OK with us contacting some of the people you've talked about to see if they would be willing to be interviewed too?***
  - *(Note confidentiality – won't tell them anything you have talked about today)*
  - *(Discuss arrangements for interviews, how to make contact with family members)*

Appendix I: Sample interview schedule (family member)

Note: the interview schedules were tailored to each family member based on information from the young person; this is the schedule for May, Tsuki's friend.

Interview schedule: FRIEND

- Thanks so much for doing this interview with me. Tsuki talked a lot about you.

- Would you like to introduce yourself? E.g. name, age, pronouns, where you're from, your interests.

- Draw your experience of supporting Tsuki in her gender.
- Can you tell me about your drawing?
    - What have you drawn? (go through each element of the picture)
    - Is there a reason why… XYZ is this colour or this size? These two elements are next to each other? You've included XYZ but not ABC?

- When and how did you meet Tsuki? She said that you met through your shared interest in YuruYuri.
- Tsuki is very interested in Japanese language and culture, are you as well?

- How has your relationship changed over time?

- As I said, Tsuki mentioned that you're a great source of support for her. From your perspective, how do you support Tsuki?
- Any specific examples/stories you can give?
- What sort of things do you do together? Tsuki mentioned that you are pen pals, and you play games, write stories and make music.

- You and Tsuki both said that Tsuki helped you pick your name. Can you tell me about that? If you're comfortable, would you like to talk about how Tsuki has supported you with your own gender identity?

- Tsuki said she sees you as her best friend, and like a sibling to her. How does your relationship feel to you?

- Did Tsuki come out to you as transgender during your friendship, or did you meet her when she had already started transitioning? If she did tell you, what was it like for you when she told you?

- How has Tsuki's gender transition affected your relationship with her, if at all?

- What broader social messages do you come across about transgender people (e.g. in media and politics?)
- How does this affect you, if at all?

- Have you faced any challenges supporting Tsuki?

- Have you noticed Tsuki going through challenges relating to her gender?

- Do you have any thoughts on how support services could be improved to help trans young people and their family and friends?

- What are the good parts of supporting Tsuki? What does this experience bring to you personally?

- What advice would you have for other people about how to support their trans friends with their gender?

- Is there anything I haven't asked you about that you'd like to share? If you think of anything later, feel free to message me.
- I won't publish anything you've said without your permission. I will type up your transcript and send you quotes that I might use in my project, and once you're happy with the quotes, I will then show Tsuki to see if she's happy with them.

Appendix J: Data poem

Gender is a Playground

Gender is a playground

I’m just here to vibe and have fun.

There's people who play on the playground too

My partner, my friends, that kind of thing

We're all just vibing.

You use the playground how you want

As long as we're all safe and having fun.

Some people are just not playground people

But you can see them on the park bench

They're still just like sitting there, enjoying the vibes

Maybe they can't use the playground as much

Or they don't really feel a need to

But everyone's just having fun.

You don't have to get on the playground

A good starting point is just to be a park bench person

But some people just don't want to be park bench people.

It's okay if you're curious and open to learning

But if you're determined to villainise it

When it's something that actually brings a lot of people joy

Then I can't help you

I can't let you hang out on my playground

I can't tell you about my pronouns

I can't play with you

So you have to stay on the other side of the fence.

People outside the fence feel like they have a right to question your right to exist

To constantly undermine you and push their views on you

When it's kind of like, I'm just trying to exist.

If I can't share my successes with them

How am I supposed to share my struggles with them?

I feel the most supported when people just have fun with me

And play, poke fun at gender

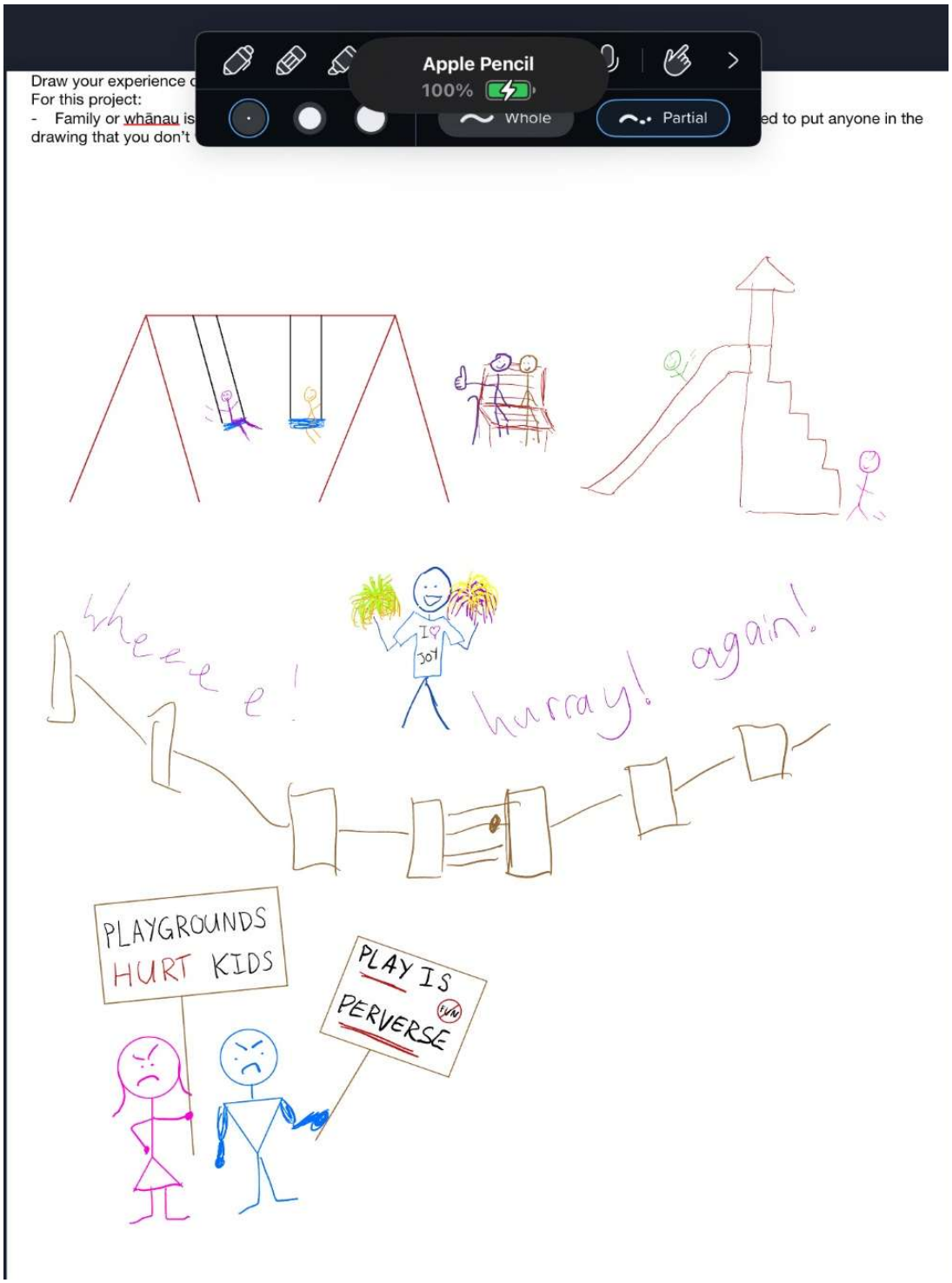
No one's getting hurt

We’re just having fun.

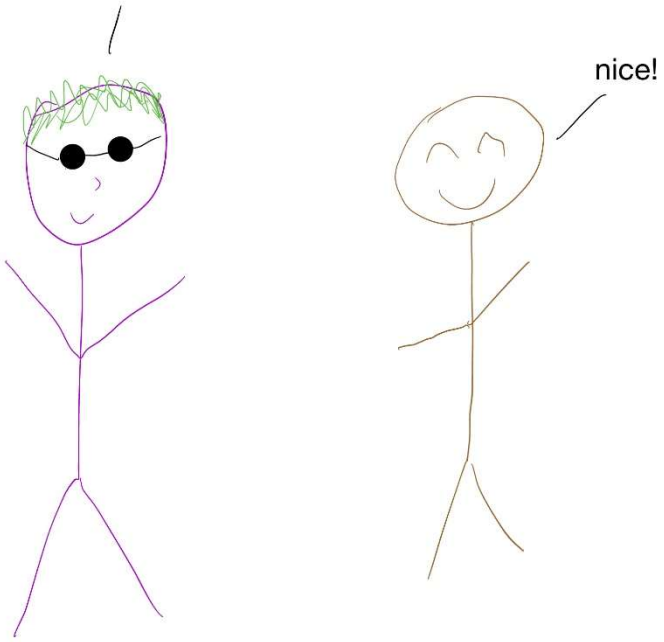
Appendix K: Full drawings

Family 1

René (young person) (2 images)



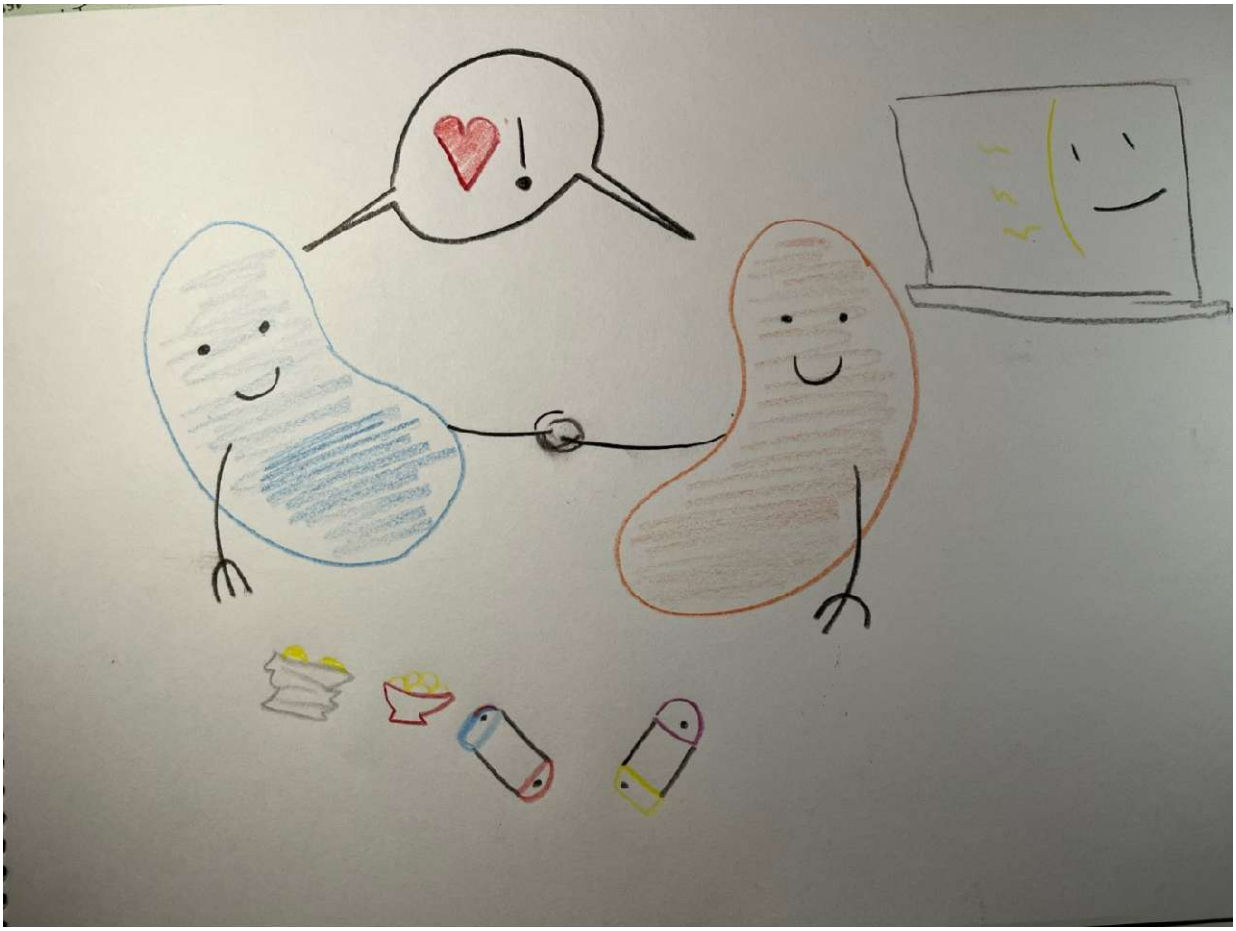
I feel really cool with these glasses!



René's mother ("Margaret")



Timothy (René's partner)

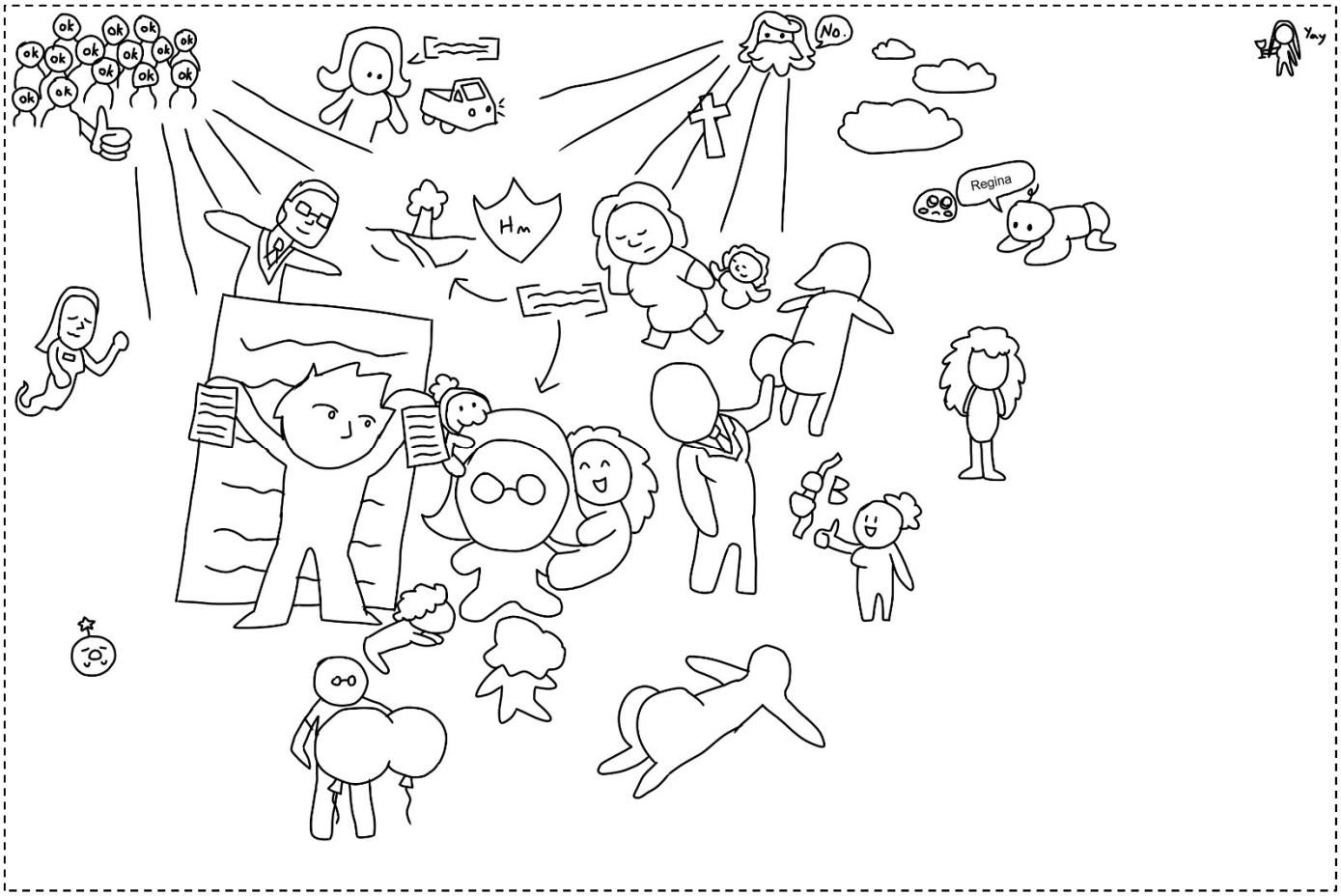


Annalise (René's childhood friend)



Family 2

Regina (young person)



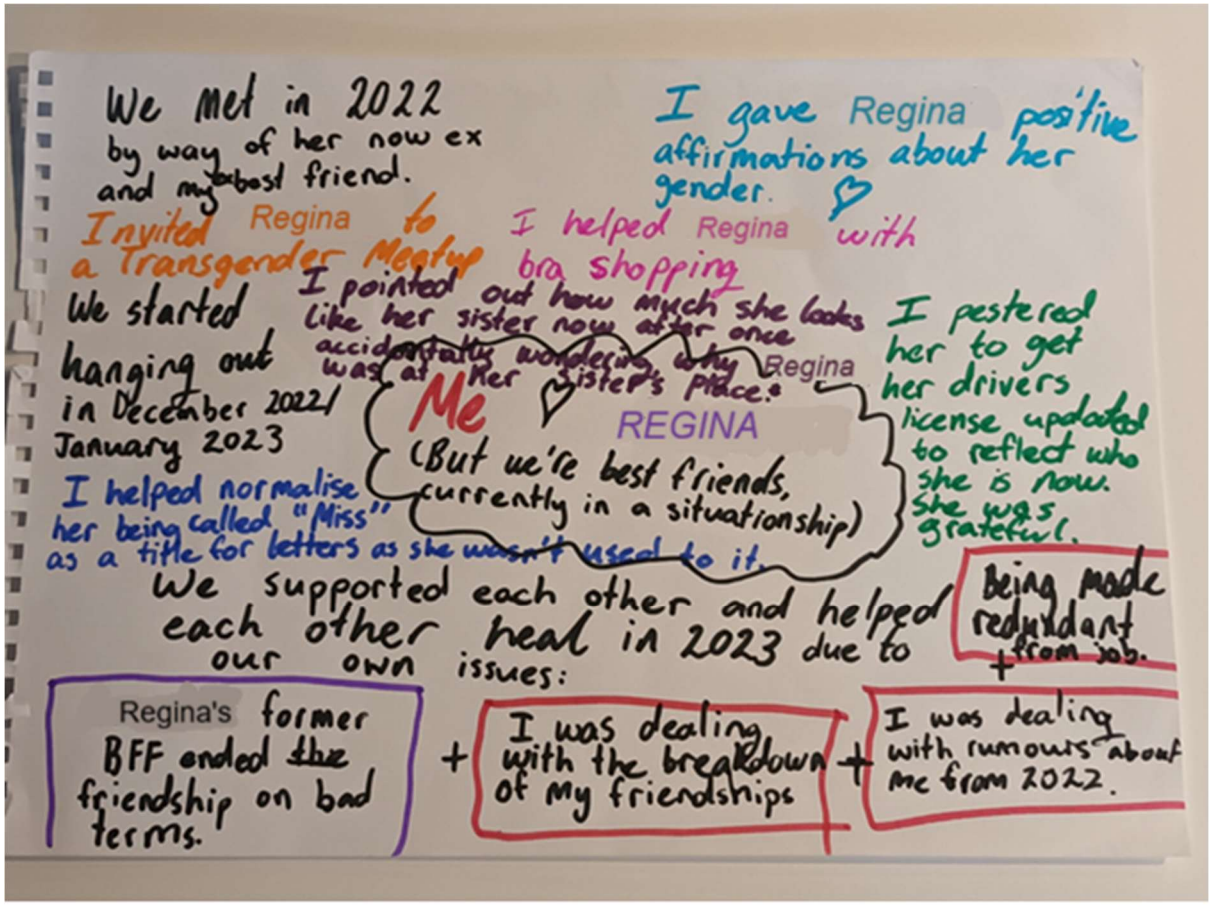
Bartholomew (Regina's brother) (2 images)



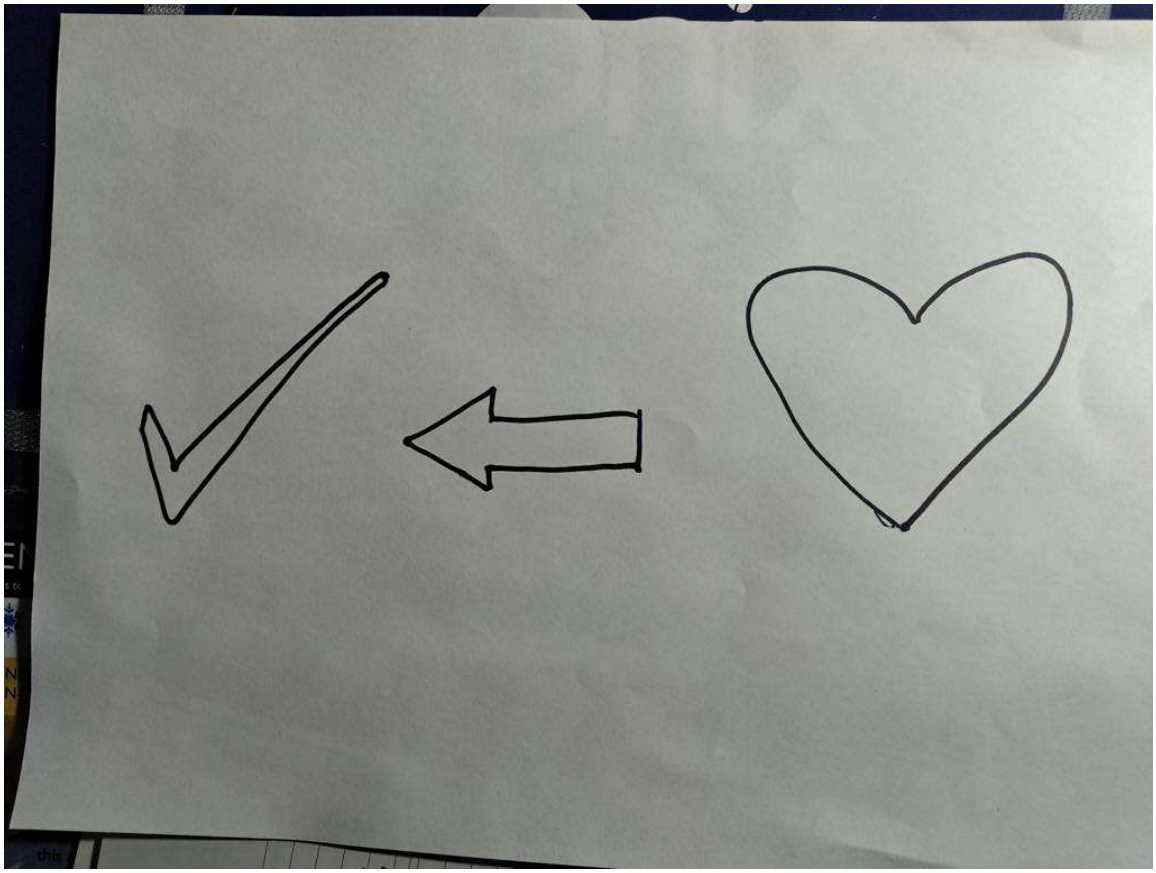



I See No Difference
Regina
IS Regina

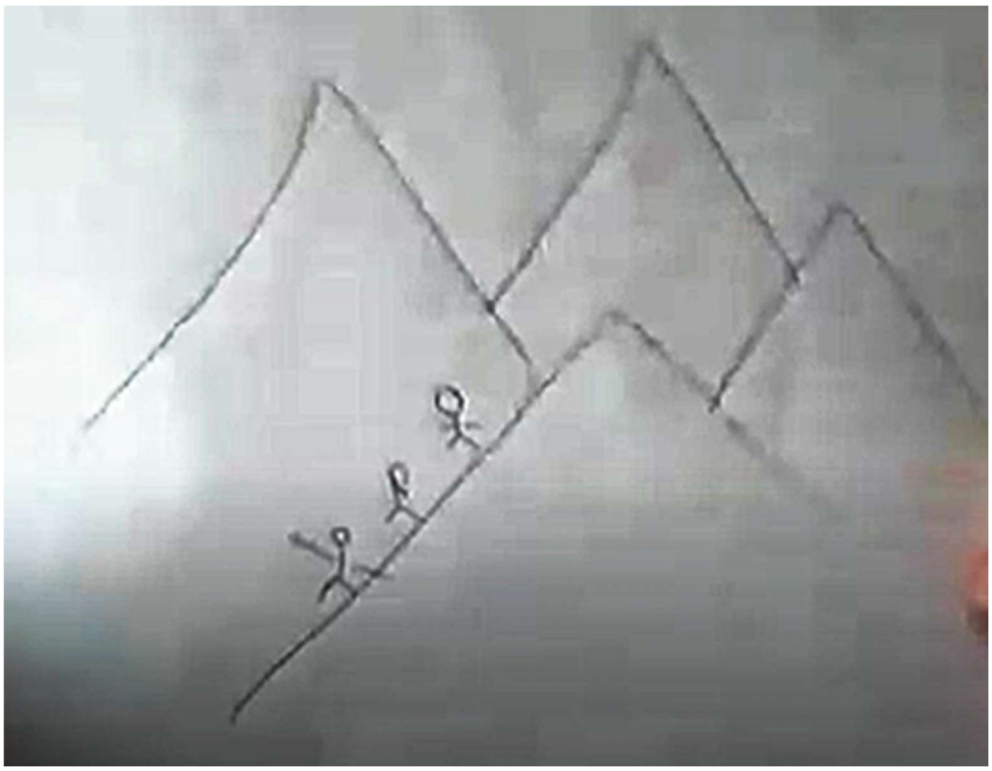
Jordan (Regina's best friend)



Regina's father ("Ayah")

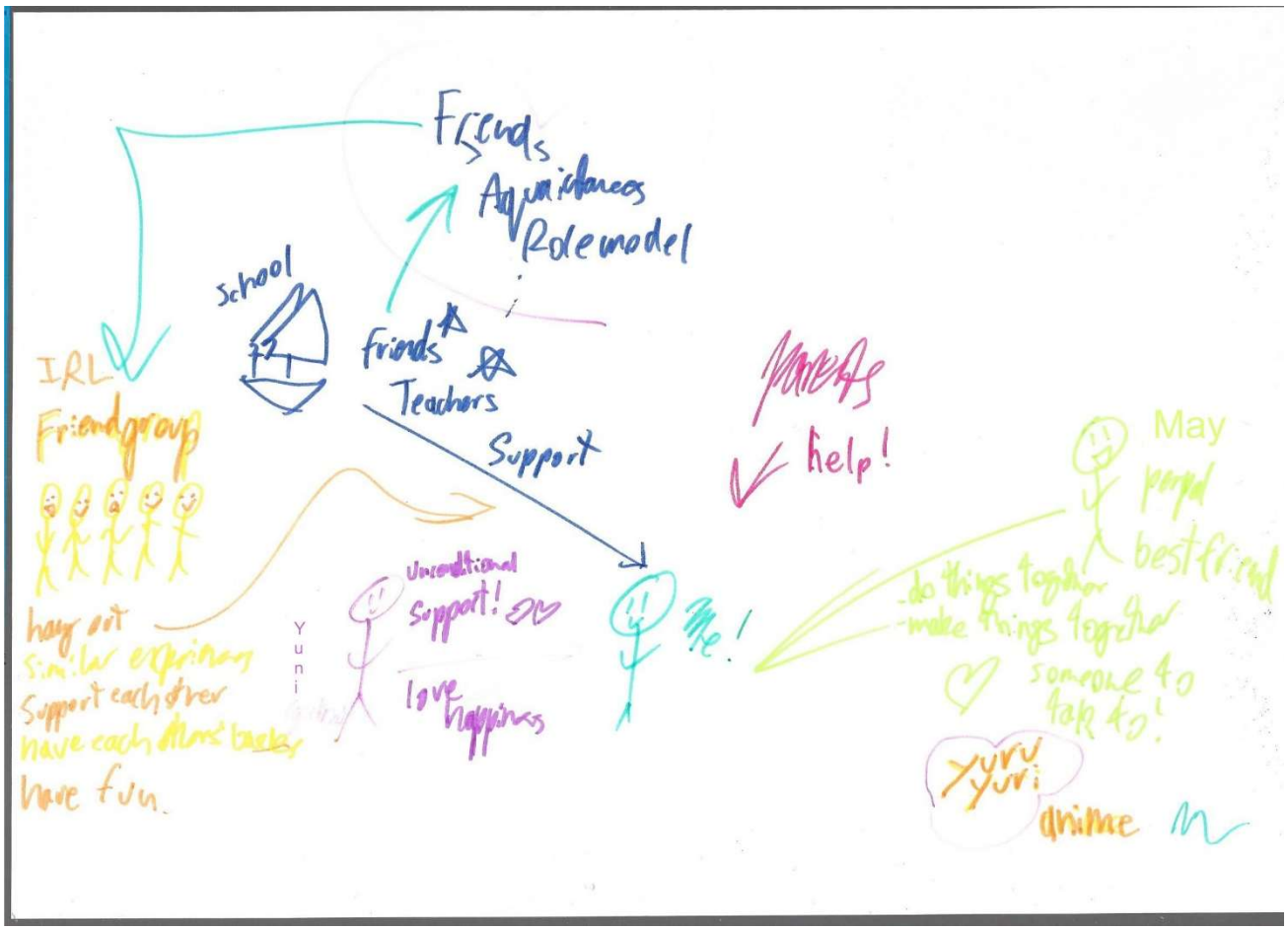


Regina's mother ("Leah")



Family 3

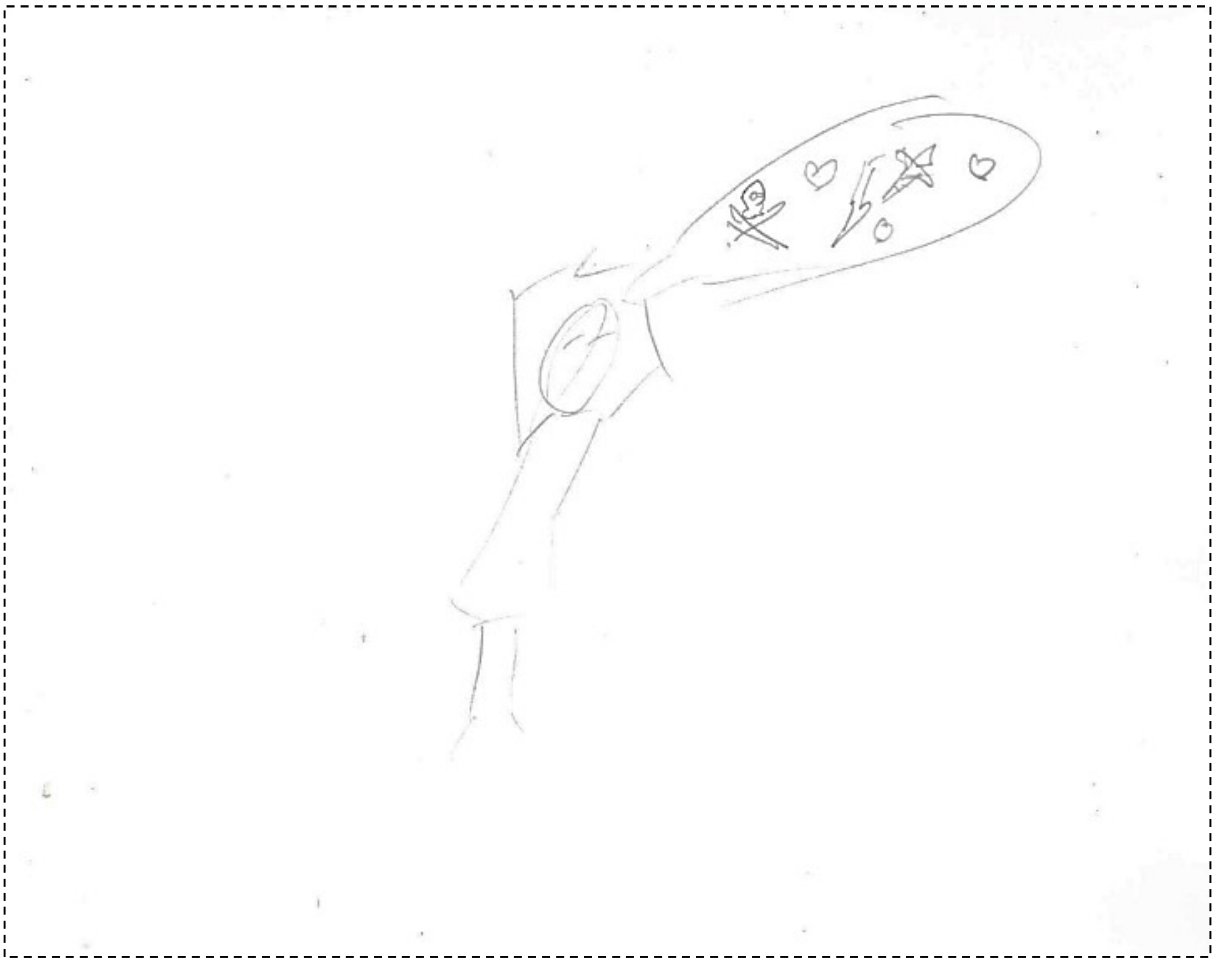
Tsuki (young person)



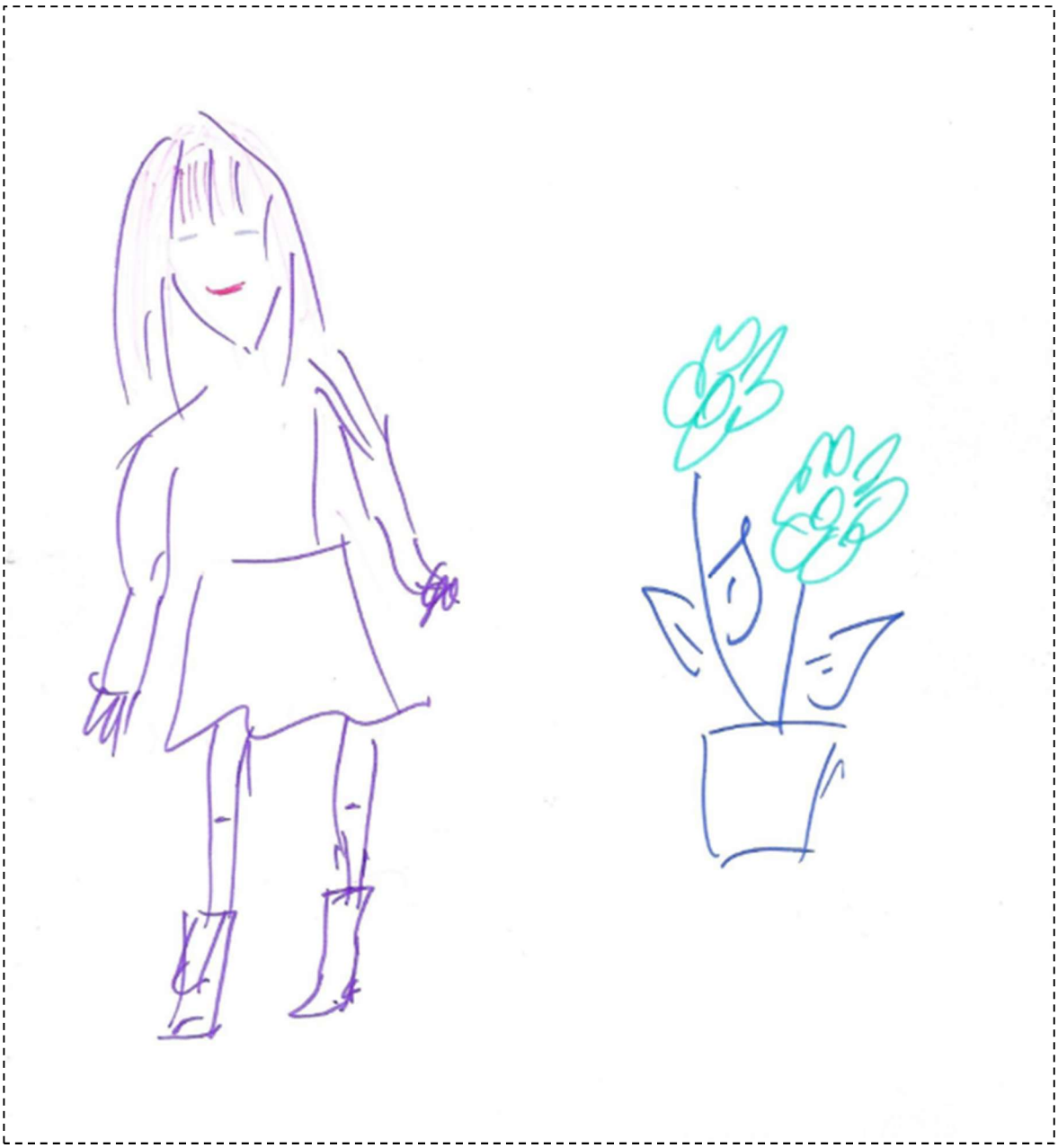
Tsuki's grandmother ("Aaliyah")



Tsuki's father ("Ajit")



Tsuki's mother ("Manjula")



May (Tsuki's best friend)

