**The meaning of ‘regular partner’ in HIV research among gay and bisexual men: Implications of an Australian cross-sectional survey**

**Abstract**

Estimates of the proportion of HIV infections coming from within regular sexual relationships among gay and bisexual men (GBM) vary widely. Research surveys use various partner type categories, but there is little understanding of how men classify their partners. We conducted an online cross-sectional survey of Australian GBM exploring sexual relationships, including 2,057 men reporting on 2,566 regular partnerships. Just over half of the partnerships were considered ‘relationships’, while the remainder were non-romantic ‘fuckbuddy’-style arrangements. In multivariable analysis, factors associated with considering the partnership a ‘relationship’ were: using a ‘romantic’ descriptor, partnership length, monogamous agreements, any condomless anal sex with each other, love, and commitment. The category of ‘regular partner’ can mask diverse partnership types, which have different meanings to GBM, associated behaviours, and HIV risks. Certain HIV prevention techniques may be more suited to particular types of partnerships. ‘Fuckbuddy’ arrangements need to be more explicitly acknowledged in HIV prevention.

**Keywords:** men who have sex with men; HIV; relationships; HIV prevention; regular partner

**Introduction**

In many countries, gay and bisexual men (GBM) are at high risk for HIV transmission and continue to account for the majority of new HIV infections (1). Conceptually, new HIV infections are often divided into groups on the basis of whether they have been acquired in regular relationships or from casual sexual partners. Estimates of the proportion of new HIV infections coming from within regular sexual relationships vary widely. Consecutive studies of newly diagnosed GBM in Australia estimated that 42% of the newly diagnosed men attributed their infection to a regular partner in 2003 (2); 29% described a high-risk event that they believed led to their infection that involved only a regular male partner in 2006 (3); and most recently, 34% described a high-risk event involving either a boyfriend or ‘fuckbuddy’ in 2014 (4). Additionally, modelling studies in GBM have produced various estimates from different countries including 68% of new infections coming from ‘main partners’ in the United States (5); 32-39% of infections occurring within ‘main partnerships’ in Peru (6); and 74-90% of new infections from ‘steady partnerships’ among homosexual men aged 30 years and under in Amsterdam (7). It is unclear as to why these estimates are so divergent: Do they represent genuine differences in sexual and relational practices of GBM, or could they be a function of how sexual relationships are framed in various research studies?

It is likely that the different ‘types’ of partnerships exist on a continuum, ranging from new, anonymous sex-only partners through to long-term romantic, committed relationships. In research, however, partner types have been categorised into a small number of groups (usually two, but sometimes three). Researchers have typically made cut-offs along the continuum depending on historical approaches taken by the research group as well as the main research question of interest. Research from some countries tends to use terms such as ‘steady partner’ or ‘main partner’, as distinct from ‘casual partners’ (8); whereas Australian research, as well as some from other countries, has typically used ‘regular partner(s)’ and ‘casual partners’ (9). There are conceptual differences between these approaches, as a term such as ‘steady’ may imply a degree of romantic commitment that the term ‘regular’ perhaps does not. Some studies use the regular/casual distinction within survey instruments, only to interpret ‘regular partners’ as ‘steady partners’ in the discussion of results (e.g. (10)). Another factor that varies widely between surveys is how these categories are explained to survey respondents. Sometimes colloquial descriptors such as ‘boyfriend’, ‘lover’ or ‘fuckbuddy/sex buddy’ are provided (e.g. (11)), or a sentence is given to describe which partners should be placed in which category (e.g. (12)). At other times, no explanatory text is provided beyond the main category names (e.g. (13)). In any case, men must subjectively decide how to classify their various sexual partners, and there is currently little understanding of how they do this.

Whatever specific terms and explanations are used, in many jurisdictions, the general regular/casual distinction is central to all analysis, as sexual risk behaviour questions are typically asked separately for (at least) these two partner groups. This has led to greater understandings of HIV risk among GBM – particularly that much condomless anal sex (CAS) within regular partnerships presents low or no risk for HIV transmission (that is, in HIV-negative concordant and HIV-positive concordant serosorting (14)). However, due to the lack of clarity and consistency about what exactly a ‘regular partner’ is, estimates of new HIV infections coming from these partners are often assumed to be from romantic, committed partners (that is, ‘boyfriends’, ‘husbands’) rather than other types of regular partners (such as ‘fuckbuddies’, ‘friends with benefits’), and thus, the number of infections coming from ‘boyfriend’-type relationships may be overestimated. Indeed, recent analysis from the Australian *Seroconversion Study* of newly diagnosed GBM suggested that, of the infections perceived to be from regular partners, two-thirds were actually from ‘fuckbuddies’ rather than ‘boyfriends’ (4).

Using data from a large cross-sectional survey of GBM’s relationships, the present analysis aimed to explore what kinds of partnership types fit into the category of ‘regular partner’, and examine differences between types of ‘regular partners’. The analysis aimed to further explore whether the number of HIV infections attributed to ‘boyfriend’-type partners may be overestimated, as well as to form the basis for further research and the development of partner categories to be used in future behavioural research.

**Method**

*Procedures*

The *Monopoly Study* was a cross-sectional survey of Australian GBM conducted over two months in December 2013 and January 2014, using an anonymous online survey platform (SurveyGizmo 3.0). *Monopoly* was part of a broader mixed-methods study of monogamy and gay men’s relationships (15). Participants were recruited via promotions on gay community websites and online media, Facebook, and gay sexual networking websites, along with a small number recruited from mobile phone applications. The survey was promoted with advertisements using the text, ‘Monopoly: A study of gay men’s relationships. We all play by different rules.’ No compensation for participation was provided. Ethics approval was provided by the Human Research Ethics Committees of the University of New South Wales and La Trobe University.

*Measures*

The online questionnaire included respondent-level items such as: demographic items, questions on sexual identity and social engagement with gay men (16), HIV testing history (where serostatus was by self-report), current partnerships and relational arrangements with those partners, and sexual behaviour with men. Men were asked to indicate if they currently had any type of regular male partner(s) in a series of items: being ‘in a relationship’ with a man or more than one man; currently having sex with a boyfriend, lover, husband, partner, fuckbuddy, ‘friend-with-benefits’, or any other man they had on ‘ongoing relationship’ with; and the number of current regular male partners of any type. Discrepancies in responses to these items prompted further questioning to ascertain as best as possible if the respondent had any type of regular partner. Those men who did report currently having any type of regular partner(s) were invited to answer partner(ship)-level items on up to three regular male partners, including items on how they viewed the partner(ship): how they described the partner, whether they considered themselves to be ‘in a relationship’ with the partner, how much they loved and trusted the partner, how much they considered the partnership to be ‘romantic’ and ‘committed’, and partnership length. Sexual behaviour and HIV-related items included: condom use with the partner, partnership agreements, HIV testing and serostatus of the partner, and frequency of sex. While some men may have had more than three regular sexual partners, they were limited to describing three in the survey. This three partner limit was based on the findings from qualitative data from the broader study.

*Participants and Sample*

Men who lived in Australia, aged sixteen or above, were eligible for participation if they were gay- or bisexual-identified or had sex with another man in the previous year. Overall, 5,486 people accessed the online survey (meaning that they clicked on the ‘Start the Survey’ button on the study homepage), while 4,272 men (77.9%) responded to any questions. The analyses presented here are restricted to: (a) men who provided responses to the critical variables of relationship status and length of partnership, and (b) men who provided data on at least one regular partner. Overall, 2,724 men commenced giving data on a first partner, 444 men on a second partner, and 94 men on a third partner. However, 667 individuals were subsequently excluded due to incomplete data on critical variables, leaving 2,057 men. In this restricted sample, all 2,057 men reported on a first partner (75.5% of those that started giving data); 418 reported on a second partner (94.4%), and 92 on a third partner (95.7%). Thus, 2,057 individuals reported on a total of 2,566 regular sexual partnerships.

*Analysis*

Data were analysed with Stata (version 12). First, the demographics and personal characteristics of the included men were explored. Second, we report the labels that men used to describe partners. Each descriptor, including those provided in the free-text response option, was classified as ‘romantic’ or not. We use the term ‘romantic’ here to refer to relationships in which concepts like love, trust, and commitment underpin the notion of the relationship as special, both in the intensity of the emotions involved, and commitment to the special or unique character of the partnership. Under ‘romantic’, we included: ‘partner’, ‘boyfriend’, ‘husband or fiancé’, ‘lover’, and ‘dating’. (It was expected that some men would use the terms ‘husband’ and ‘fiancé’ despite same-sex marriage not being legal in Australia.) Non-romantic descriptors included: ‘fuckbuddy’, ‘friend or friend with benefits’, and ‘ex-partner or ex-boyfriend’. Third, the characteristics of the partner(ship)s were examined according to those who considered themselves to be ‘in a relationship’ versus ‘not in a relationship’ with the partner. Given that each respondent could report on up to three regular male partners, statistical associations were determined using bivariate and multivariable generalised estimating equations to control for within and between-subject variability. Associations with a p-value of less than 0.1 in univariable analyses were block-entered into the multivariable model.

**Results**

The 2,057 men included in the analysis were compared to the 667 men who were excluded. Those included were more likely to: identify as gay (86.7% vs 75.8%, χ2=86.9, degrees of freedom (df)=3, p<0.001); be university educated (51.9% vs 45.8%, χ2=15.1, df=1, p<0.001); be of Anglo-Celtic background (58.7% vs 54.3%, χ2=7.6, df=1, p=0.006) and born in Australia (77.1% vs 74.4%, χ2=4.0, df=1, p=0.046); be employed full-time (61.7% vs 57.4%, χ2=7.0, df=1, p=0.008); ever have been tested for HIV (80.7% vs 75.8%, χ2=13.9, df=1, p<0.001); be older (mean age of 38.2 vs 35.0, t=−7.6, df=4,024, p<0.001); and be more socially engaged with other gay men (mean score of 3.4 vs 2.9, t=−10.8, df=4,202, p<0.001). When examining the characteristics of the partnerships, those included in the analysis were more likely to: be ‘in a relationship’ with the partner (54.1% vs 31.8%, odds ratio [OR]=2.6, 95% confidence interval [CI]=2.22-3.09, p<0.001); know the partner’s serostatus (68.0% vs 47.8%, OR=2.29, 95%CI=1.27-4.13, p=0.006); and use a romantic descriptor (e.g. boyfriend, husband) to describe the partner (54.1% vs 38.0%, OR=2.04, 95%CI=1.73-2.40, p<0.001). Overall, those not included in the subsequent analyses were less likely to be ‘in a relationship’ and partnerships were more similar to those not considered to be ‘relationships’ by the respondent.

Among the 2,057 men included in analyses, 51.0% came to the survey via advertisements on the Manhunt dating website and 40.5% from advertisements or posts on Facebook. Smaller proportions were referred by organisations, friends, or via search engines. The respondents’ mean age was 38.2 years and the median was 36 years. Most respondents (n=1,659, 80.7%) reported ever having had an HIV test, and 1,119 of these reported having had a test within the last year (54.4% of all men; 67.5% of those ever tested). The majority (n=1,493, 72.6%) reported being HIV-negative, 5.8% (n=120) HIV-positive, and 21.5% (n=443) did not know their serostatus (either due to never being tested or not receiving the test result). All respondents in the restricted sample had at least one regular male sexual partner, while of these, 17.1% (n=352) reported having two regular partners and 19.2% (n=395) reported having three or more. Over two-thirds considered themselves to be ‘in a relationship’ with at least one regular male partner: 60.8% (n=1,251) with one partner, and 5.8% (n=119) with two or more. In the previous six months, 4.2% (n=86) of men had one casual partner, 20.7% (n=137) had two to five, 11.4% (n=234) had six to ten, and 14.6% (n=301) had more than ten.

Respondents reported on a total of 2,566 partnerships. The most common descriptor chosen by respondents to describe each partner(ship) was ‘fuckbuddy’, followed by ‘partner’ and ‘boyfriend’ (Table 1). Overall, 53.9% (n=1,382) used a ‘romantic’ label to describe the partner. When comparing those who considered themselves to be ‘in a relationship’ with the partner to those that did not, clear differences emerged. For example, nearly three-quarters of ‘non-relationship’ partners were labelled ‘fuckbuddies’ (compared to only 5% of relationship partners). Conversely, those in relationships were much more likely to use the labels ‘partner’, ‘boyfriend’ and ‘husband/fiancé’. Men in partnerships of less than one year were most likely to use the term ‘fuckbuddy’ (51.6%), followed by ‘boyfriend’ (21.2%). By contrast, men in longer partnerships were almost equally likely to use the term ‘partner’ (33.3%) and ‘fuckbuddy’ (28.8%), followed by ‘husband/fiancé’ (12.8%) and ‘boyfriend’ (12.7%).

Approximately half (n=1,388, 54.1%) of respondents considered themselves ‘in a relationship’ with the partner (irrespective of the descriptor used). There was a relatively broad spread of partnership lengths: 23.0% (n=591) had been in the relationship for six months or less, 10.9% (n=280) for 7-12 months, 38.5% (n=989) between one and five years, and 27.5% (n=706) for six or more years. The majority (n=1,499, 58.4%) reported that the partner was HIV-negative, 5.9% (n=151) HIV-positive, 30.3% (n=777) did not know their partner’s serostatus, and 5.4% (n=139) did not report it. Half (n=1318, 51.4%) of the partnerships were seroconcordant-negative, 3.0% (n=77) were seroconcordant-positive, 4.8% (n=124) were serodiscordant, and 40.8% (n=1,047) were serononconcordant, in that one or both of the partners’ serostatuses were unknown. A larger proportion of non-relationships were serononconcordant compared to relationships (54.2% vs 29.5%). Nearly two-thirds of partnerships (n=1,675, 65.3%) were reported to have relationship agreements allowing sex with outside partners (i.e. ‘open’), while 30.1% (n=772) had monogamous agreements. In terms of condom use, 40.2% (n=1,031) never used condoms with the partner, 11.5% (n=296) sometimes did, 24.0% (n=615) always did, and 11.3% (n=289) did not have anal sex with the partner.

‘Relationship partners’ and ‘non-relationship partners’ were compared (Table 2). The vast majority of relationship partners were described with a ‘romantic’ label (92.6%) compared to only 8.2% of non-relationship partners. ‘Relationships’ tended to be longer than ‘non-relationships’: the greatest proportion of relationships were six or more years in length (40.0% vs 12.8%), and a smaller proportion of relationships were less than six months in duration (13.3% vs 34.5%). Two-thirds (64.3%) reported that they knew the partner’s HIV status, and this was more common of relationship partners. Almost half of respondents (42.4%) reported sex more than once a week with relationship partners (versus 10.1% of non-relationship partners). Overall, 30.1% reported having a monogamous agreement with the partner, whereas 69.9% were open. There were substantial differences between partner types: 51.7% of relationships had monogamous agreements, compared to only 4.6% of non-relationships. Half reported having any CAS with the partner. In relationships, 65.1% reported any CAS, whereas 35.9% of those in non-relationships reported CAS. (Respondents reported having CAS with 38.5% of those partners specifically described as ‘fuckbuddies’.) Respondents were more likely to ‘love’ and ‘trust’ relationship partners compared to non-relationship partners, and to see the partnership as ‘romantic’ and ‘committed’. In multivariable analysis, factors independently associated with considering the partnership a ‘relationship’ were: using a ‘romantic’ descriptor to describe the partner, longer relationship duration, having a monogamous agreement, having any condomless anal sex with each other, love, and commitment.

**Discussion**

Gay and bisexual men’s sexual partnerships are diverse and complex, and the category of ‘regular partner’ often used in HIV research can mask an assortment of different partnership types, which can have different meanings to gay men, patterns of associated behaviour, and HIV risks. Australian research has consistently shown that approximately 55-60% and 70% of gay men have a regular partner at any given time and within the last six months, respectively (9), and it is often assumed that these represent romantic, committed relationships such as ‘boyfriends’. However, our data demonstrated that only about half of the regular partnerships may be what we might consider ‘boyfriend’-type relationships (since 53.9% of partnerships were described with a ‘romantic’ descriptor, and 54.1% considered themselves to be ‘in relationships’ with the partner). This suggests that the proportion of men in relationships, as determined by questions about ‘regular partners’, is likely to be an overestimate. This study thus identified over one thousand non-romantic regular partnerships, or ‘fuckbuddy’-type arrangements, constituting 45.9% of all reported regular partnerships, and indicated that this style of partnership is very common amongst GBM. While the majority of men reported on only one boyfriend or one fuckbuddy, it was not uncommon for men to have multiple simultaneous regular partnerships of various combinations of boyfriends and fuckbuddies.

Importantly, the fuckbuddy-style partnerships appeared to be meaningfully different to romantic, committed 'relationships'. Other studies have shown that fuckbuddy partnerships are also likely to be different to new or anonymous casual partners (12). In our study, most of the differences between boyfriends and fuckbuddies aligned with common-sense expectations: In boyfriend-type relationships, monogamy was more prevalent, knowledge of partner’s serostatus was higher, sex was more frequent, and psychosocial/emotional factors such as love, trust, romance and commitment were all higher. For most GBM, the relative lack of many of these factors is precisely what defines the partnership as a fuckbuddy arrangement rather than as ‘something more’ (15).

There is very limited research regarding fuckbuddy relationships, and quantitative research has typically conceptualised fuckbuddies as a type of casual partner rather than as a type of regular partner (12). Consequently, most HIV prevention education aimed at GBM has targeted either (a) men in committed relationships, or (b) men having casual sex, with very little overlap between these two imagined populations. For example, Australian community-based HIV education campaigns focusing on men in committed relationships have focused primarily on issues of trust, intimacy, and communication, and often exhibit images of loving couples (see [www.issuu.com/positivelifensw/docs/serodisco2](http://www.issuu.com/positivelifensw/docs/serodisco2) and www.ourteam.org.au). By contrast, campaigns targeting men having casual sex have focused primarily on sexual practices such as condom use or risk reduction, and have used far more sexually explicit imagery (see [www.knowtherisk.org.au](http://www.knowtherisk.org.au) and www.thenewdeal.org.au). A key distinction between the two types of campaigns is that those focusing on casual sex typically challenge assumptions of trust and familiarity by calling upon men to consider how much they really know the sexual partner and thereby encourage condom use (for example, see (17), page 13), whereas those focusing on relationships have tended to emphasise and rely on trust (e.g. negotiated safety).

Thus, there appears to be a distinct lack of educational campaigns targeting GBM that recognise the distinct features of fuckbuddy partnerships, where there may be greater familiarity, trust and care for each other (which they have more in common with romantic relationships), but potentially less emotional commitment and the promise of sexual excitement with a less familiar partner (which they have more in common with casual partners). From the perspective of GBM trying to protect themselves and their partners from HIV, prevention strategies that may be viewed as highly appropriate for romantic, committed relationships may not be deemed as suitable for fuckbuddy arrangements (for example: negotiated safety agreements between HIV-negative men, and relying on undetectable viral load in serodiscordant partnerships). Conversely, other approaches, such as a ‘condom every time’, may be seen as feasible by gay men for new or anonymous casual hook-ups, but may be perceived as far less suited to fuckbuddy arrangements, due to the greater trust, familiarity and intimacy present. A key finding from our data was that knowledge of HIV status was far more common among relationships compared to non-relationships, highlighting that certain HIV prevention methods may be more or less feasible depending on the partnership type. Furthermore, given the recent research indicating that when looking at regular sexual partners, HIV infection is more likely to come from fuckbuddies than boyfriends (4), these arrangements should be more explicitly acknowledged in HIV prevention work, along with recognition that it appears to be quite common for men to have either multiple simultaneous fuckbuddies, or a primary boyfriend plus one or more other fuckbuddies. Similarly, the evidence that men in partnerships of less than one year were most likely to use the term ‘fuckbuddy’ (51.6%), followed by ‘boyfriend’ (21.2%), to describe their partner suggests that early-dating relationships among GBM might in fact be ordered according to the principles of fuckbuddy relationships (i.e. intimacy and trust mediated by flexibility), rather than more conventional social norms regarding commitment and fidelity in heterosexual dating norms. If the principles of greater flexibility inform relationships of less than one year, then this suggests that there is a specific need for research to better understand these relationship behaviours and their meanings, to support targeted HIV prevention strategies.

There are several key implications of these findings. First, further research is needed to explicitly investigate and directly compare the differences between boyfriend-type partners, fuckbuddies, and casual sex partners. Such research should explore factors known to differentiate some of these partner types in the existing literature (such as trust, intimacy, agreements, and sexual behaviour) as well as ask men explicitly about the HIV prevention strategies they perceive to be more or less appropriate given the partner type. Second, this research should lead to a fuller understanding of fuckbuddy partnerships, which can then be taken up by health promotion practitioners to work within their communities to design appropriate educational responses. At this stage, knowledge of the distinct features and risks associated with fuckbuddies is not yet developed enough to make specific suggestions as to the potential content of such materials. Third, where possible, future HIV research on sexual risk behaviour should use three categories of partner (boyfriends, fuckbuddies, casual partners) rather than two (regular and casual partners). However, the precise definitions and labels used for the three categories is still a somewhat open question. The data presented in this analysis form a useful basis for building such definitions.

Participants in this study were broadly similar to other samples of Australian GBM.However, it was a volunteer, online convenience sample and is unlikely to be entirely representative of all homosexually active men in Australia. Generalising these findings to other contexts may be limited by differences between Australia and other locations: Australia may have lower or at least different levels of overt homophobia and systemic discrimination and abuse compared to other countries; and relationships between same-sex partners are generally afforded legal protection in Australia. This was a cross-sectional survey and as such it is not possible to determine any causative relationships in the data. As with many online surveys, there were some missing data resulting in a reduced sample for analysis. The men who were included did show some systematic differences from those excluded. Those excluded were less gay-identified, less likely to be Anglo-Celtic, younger, less engaged with HIV testing, less community-attached, and they tended to not be in relationships. On the other hand, it was still a large sample. The effect of these missing data may be that the full number of non-romantic regular partnerships was underestimated. Finally, since the study was focused on relationships and not on HIV risk, there were few items in the survey relating to HIV risk behaviour such as sexual positioning or other risk reduction practices.

**Conclusion**

Regular sexual partnerships are very common among Australian GBM. However, only about half of regular partnerships are boyfriend-type relationships, while the other half are ‘fuckbuddy’-type arrangements. It also appears that it is common for men to have multiple fuckbuddies, or one primary partner along with other fuckbuddies.Certain HIV prevention techniques may be more suited to particular types of partnerships, due to the many key differences between boyfriends and fuckbuddies such as using ‘romantic’ descriptors, longer partnership duration, monogamy, having CAS with each other, love, and commitment. However, despite this, fuckbuddy arrangements have largely been ignored in HIV prevention education and need to be more explicitly acknowledged. In addition, more research is required on the differences between casual, fuckbuddy and boyfriend partnerships so as to inform HIV prevention work.

**Compliance with ethical standards**

Ethical approval: All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional human research ethics committees and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed consent: Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.**References**

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**Table 1. Descriptors chosen by respondent to describe partner(ship)s.**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***n (%)*** | **Total Partnerships** | | **Respondent considers self ‘in a relationship’ with this partner** | | | | **Partnership length** | | | |
|  | **(n=2566)** | | **Yes (n=1388)** | | **No (n=1178)** | | **Less than 12 months (n=871)** | | **More than 12 months (n=1695)** | |
| Fuckbuddy | 937 | (36.5) | 69 | (5.0) | 868 | (73.7) | 449 | (51.6) | 488 | (28.8) |
| Partner a | 624 | (24.3) | 611 | (44.0) | 13 | (1.1) | 60 | (6.9) | 564 | (33.3) |
| Boyfriend a | 401 | (15.6) | 380 | (27.4) | 21 | (1.8) | 185 | (21.2) | 216 | (12.7) |
| Husband or Fiancé a | 226 | (8.8) | 225 | (16.2) | 1 | (0.1) | 7 | (0.8) | 217 | (12.8) |
| Lover a | 109 | (4.2) | 64 | (4.6) | 45 | (4.6) | 41 | (4.7) | 68 | (4.0) |
| Friend or Friend with Benefits | 110 | (4.3) | 13 | (0.9) | 97 | (8.2) | 52 | (6.0) | 58 | (3.4) |
| Dating a | 17 | (0.7) | 1 | (0.07) | 16 | (1.4) | 16 | (1.8) | 1 | (0.06) |
| Ex-partner or Ex-boyfriend | 16 | (0.6) | 1 | (0.07) | 15 | (1.3) | 3 | (0.3) | 13 | (0.8) |
| Other – ‘romantic’ b | 5 | (0.2) | 4 | (0.3) | 1 | (0.1) | 2 | (0.2) | 3 | (0.2) |
| Other – ‘non-romantic’ b | 121 | (4.7) | 20 | (1.4) | 101 | (8.6) | 56 | (6.4) | 65 | (3.8) |

a Descriptors denoted are classified as ‘romantic descriptors’.

b Each individual descriptor in the Other category was qualitatively classified as ‘romantic’ or ‘non-romantic’.

**Table 2. Predictors of considering oneself ‘in a relationship’ with a partner**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Respondent considers self ‘in a relationship’ with this partner** | | | | **OR** a | **95%CI** b | **p-value** | **aOR** c | **95%CI** | **p-value** |
|  | **Yes**  **(n=1388)** | | **No**  **(n=1178)** | |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| ***n (%)*** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Used ‘romantic’ descriptor for partner | 1285 | (92.6) | 97 | (8.2) | 132.6 | 98.4-178.6 | <0.001 | 14.60 | 9.37-22.74 | <0.001 |
| Relationship length |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Less than six months | 185 | (13.3) | 406 | (34.5) | Ref. |  |  | Ref. |  |  |
| Seven to 12 months | 110 | (7.9) | 170 | (14.4) | 1.40 | 1.06-1.85 | 0.019 | 1.46 | 0.77-2.78 | 0.243 |
| One to five years | 538 | (38.8) | 451 | (38.3) | 2.51 | 2.02-3.11 | <0.001 | 1.71 | 1.05-2.81 | 0.033 |
| Six or more years | 555 | (40.0) | 151 | (12.8) | 8.47 | 6.48-11.08 | <0.001 | 3.25 | 1.79-5.91 | <0.001 |
| Knows partner’s HIV status | 1055 | (76.0) | 595 | (50.5) | 3.17 | 2.67-3.75 | <0.001 | 1.13 | 0.73-1.74 | 0.580 |
| Sex more than once per week with this partner | 588 | (42.4) | 133 | (11.3) | 5.72 | 4.57-7.17 | <0.001 | 1.10 | 0.66-1.84 | 0.707 |
| Monogamous relationship agreement | 718 | (51.7) | 54 | (4.6) | 22.0 | 16.3-29.7 | <0.001 | 2.58 | 1.58-4.21 | <0.001 |
| Reported any condomless sex with this partner | 904 | (65.1) | 423 | (35.9) | 3.53 | 3.0-4.2 | <0.001 | 1.59 | 1.08-2.35 | 0.018 |
| ***mean (standard deviation)*** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Respondent feels towards partner |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Love (scored 0 to 4) | 3.24 | (0.94) | 1.03 | (1.07) | 5.34 | 4.64-6.15 | <0.001 | 1.73 | 1.38-2.18 | <0.001 |
| Trust (scored 0 to 4) | 3.25 | (0.92) | 2.15 | (1.05) | 3.02 | 2.69-3.39 | <0.001 | 1.14 | 0.92-1.42 | 0.228 |
| Respondent considers partner(ship) |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Romantic (scored 0 to 3) | 2.18 | (1.03) | 0.58 | (0.82) | 4.08 | 3.70-4.50 | <0.001 | 0.92 | 0.71-1.20 | 0.544 |
| Committed (scored 0 to 3) | 2.41 | (0.99) | 0.31 | (0.66) | 5.78 | 5.19-6.44 | <0.001 | 2.46 | 1.93-3.15 | <0.001 |

a OR = odds ratio; b 95%CI = 95% confidence interval; c aOR = adjusted odds ratio.