

Sub-Fems: An Exploration of the Intersectionality of Empowerment

Through Submissive Identity, Grounded in Feminist Theory

Kathryn Jones, MA

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of
The Chicago School of Professional Psychology
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Clinical Psychology

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Abstract

The BDSM/kink community has recently entered into mainstream consciousness and conversation through books and films such as *Fifty Shades of Grey* and other media portrayals. While this representation may have sparked a general conversation about alternative sexual practices, it remains a controversial topic. In a modern-day world where sexual liberation and empowerment are on the rise, it can be difficult to grasp how and why women of a modern society would willingly relinquish power within the BDSM/kink play scene. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to explore and understand the participants' perspectives on submission, within a Dominant and submissive relationship, as well as their motivation to engage in such actions. Results are analyzed through a feminist lens. Furthermore, a discussion of implications for clinicians working with individuals within this community is explored.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Nature of the Study	1
Background	1
Problem Statement	2
Purpose of the Study	3
Research Questions	4
Theoretical/Conceptual Framework	4
Scope of the Study.....	5
Definition of Key Terms	6
Significance of the Study	6
Summary	7
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature.....	9
Introduction	9
Research Strategy	10
Female Submission Within the Media	10
Narrative Empowerment.....	17
Feminism	20
Therapeutic implications of BDSM/kink	27
Psychology of BDSM/kink.....	29
Sexuality and BDSM/kink.....	35
Summary and Transition	36
Chapter 3: Research Design and Method.....	38
Chapter Overview	38

Research Questions	39
Research Design	40
Population and Sample.....	41
Procedures	41
Validity.....	43
Instrumentation.....	44
Data Processing	45
Assumptions	46
Limitations	47
Ethical Assurances	48
Summary	48
Chapter 4: Findings.....	50
Introduction	50
Setting.....	50
Demographics.....	50
Results	51
Themes from Participants.....	51
Communication	51
Consent	54
Safety	55
Defying Social Expectations and Norms.....	59
Acknowledgement of Misogyny	60
Validation and Authentic Self	62

Choice	65
Trust	67
Understanding Others' Perspectives	68
Satisfaction	69
Sexual Assault	72
Chapter Summary	73
Chapter 5: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations	74
Introduction	74
Interpretation of Findings	74
Recommendations	92
Implications	95
Conclusion	96
References	98
Appendix A: Open Ended Interview Questions	102
Appendix B: Terminology	103

List of Tables

Table 1. Communication	53
Table 2. Consent	55
Table 3. Safety	58
Table 4. Defying Social Expectations and Norms	60
Table 5. Acknowledgement of Misogyny.....	62
Table 6. Validation and Authentic Self.....	65
Table 7. Choice	67
Table 8. Trust	68
Table 9. Understanding Other’s Perspectives	69
Table 10. Satisfaction.....	71
Table 11. Sexual Assault.....	72

Chapter 1: Nature of the Study

Background

With the continued fight for equality and drive towards a more egalitarian society being thwarted with the continuous portrayals of gender inequality and female repression, it is hardly surprising that the BDSM (bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, sadist and masochist)/kink community is not considered the public mascot for feminism. Furthermore, the complex dynamics of the BDSM/kink world are often an unknown and hidden world from popular culture, with only mass media representations providing a hint regarding the inner-workings of this sexual subgroup. According to Wilkinson (2009):

The representation of minoritized sexual groups is an important area of study as these images undoubtedly have an influence on shaping popular attitudes towards alternative sexualities; for many people the only encounters they have with a sexuality such as sadomasochism is through the media and popular culture. (p. 181)

The idea of empowerment through submission can be a confusing and complex realm that seems to deviate from everything that women have been fighting for from the beginning days of the feminist movement. Feminists have been fighting to be seen as empowered and liberated, attempting to move away from the notion of femininity as a weak or helpless status.

In a critical analysis of the evolution of feminist theory Budgeon (2015) underlined that: Because of a perceived association with victimhood, feminism is also dismissed in favor of a narrative which emphasizes progress. The accusation that feminism has failed to move beyond a victim paradigm, and thereby refuses to engage with women's agency, is a foundational premise of choice feminism. (p. 306)

While many early feminist theories historically fought for women to have choice in their life, fighting for the right to make alternative choices to domestic duties, choice feminism ultimately

advocates for the ability to make any choice from an empowered stance. The perplexing notion occurs when women are consciously making the decision to engage in actions that reinforce limitations and perpetuate dynamics that appear to remove their power. Essentially, the question begs, in the midst of the continued fight for empowerment, why would women willingly choose to give up their power?

An exchange of power that is not enforced by the constraints of societal and environmental factors but entered into by consenting participants suggests an enlightened, sometimes even therapeutic journey of freedom. Literature surrounding this topic focuses on the societal impact that constraints can have on individuals, the detrimental effects of traditional gender roles, and the pressure to conform to idealized standards, as well as the negative connotations associated with individuals who do not subscribe to those specified standards (Musser, 2015). More positively orientated research speaks about how the kink community denotes the specific roles and identifications that can form between members and the dynamics of play that occur within scenes, as well as potential reasons for why individuals feel driven to engage in such practices, ranging from sexual orientation to pursuit of an extreme leisure activity.

Problem Statement

There remains a gap in the knowledge concerning the element of empowerment within submissive females who engage in BDSM/kink. While choice feminism celebrates and advocates for the rights of individuals to choose their position, identity, and life, there is still some confusion as to why individuals would choose to deliberately surrender their power within a kink play scene. Hirschmann (2010) noted the philosophical struggle that “when you make ‘free choice’ a central part of your philosophy, you will be forced to confront the fact that people

won't necessarily make the kinds of choices you want them to make" (p. 271). Essentially, there is a lack of knowledge regarding females who participate as submissives (a person who desires to give up control of themselves, or of certain aspects of their lives, to a Dominant partner), or switches (people who can vacillate between submission and a person who exercises control in a Dominant/submissive relationship), gain from such interactions. This lack of knowledge is magnified by the lack of understanding and misrepresentation of female sexuality and pleasure within both academic and popular literature (Studd & Schwenkhagen, 2009). Therefore, it is pertinent to explore and comprehend the elements of female pleasure, satisfaction and empowerment within this seemingly juxtaposing dynamic.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the current study is to explore the lived experience of self-identified submissives or switches within BDSM/kink communities, exploring their personal sense of gain through such interactions. Understanding the intersection of female empowerment alongside the decision to submit all power to a Dominant within the BDSM/kink community can illuminate how individuals perceive, experience and understand the dynamic of power. The aim of this research is to add to a growing body of literature that encompasses the diverse and complex phenomenon of human sexuality. Specifically, this research hopes to add to an understanding of female sexuality that is often overlooked and underrepresented in both academic and popular culture. By gathering narrative works, via remote interviews from self-identified females who engage in submissive actions, this research hopes to illuminate the lived experience of giving up power as a form of empowerment. In line with the third-wave feminist philosophy of choice feminism, this research aims to expand the concept of submission from the state of victimhood and acknowledge the empowerment of autonomy and ownership over lived experiences.

Implications for therapeutic intervention and understanding of resilience and overcoming lived experiences within the therapy setting are discussed.

Research Questions

The overall question guiding this study was: How does giving up power within a BDSM/kink play scene become an empowering position for women? This study was further grounded by two subquestions:

1. Do participants' experiences align with third-wave choice feminism theory?
2. Do participants' experiences of submission and femininity interact?

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

This study aims to explore and understand the intersecting identity of submission and femininity within the BDSM/kink community. Specifically, this research aims to broaden the understanding of female empowerment and sexuality by understanding the element of choice in submission and how this can translate into a state of empowerment within the play scene. Utilizing feminist theory to ground the understanding of participants' narratives, this research will examine the element of choice and how this interacts with other dynamics of sexuality and power.

The variances between political choices related to expression and sexuality between males and females continue to be a source of divide. As Gill (2007) noted, "While boys' clothing choices are framed within a discourse of free speech, girls' satirical decisions are subject to scrutiny from a variety of ideological positions that situate them as – in various ways – problematic or inauthentic and as requiring intervention" (p. 69). Hence, female identified projections of sexuality and identity are examined as a phenomenon that requires attention and debate, while the male counterpart tends to be simply observed and noted. This concept of

scrutinizing female expressions of sexuality is also highlighted in the responses that individuals elicit after viewing pornography or other mediums that display female sexuality in a “promiscuous manner” (Ferguson et al., 2005). Antevska and Gavey (2016) examined the opinions of males who consume pornography, both with and without violent overtones. The results of their study concluded that participants “spoke about pornography that depicts male sexual dominance and female submission as normal and untroubling” (Antevska & Gavey, 2016, p. 623). These studies illuminate the dichotomy of the Madonna and the whore complex that continues to perpetuate within mainstream culture and the view of women. Women who are seen to be actively engaging in sexual activities are seen as promiscuous, while those who are submissive are viewed as normal and in line with expected gender norms.

Throughout these studies, the focus of observation is framed in an understanding of the onlookers’ view of women and female sexuality. Feminist theory, specifically choice feminist theory allows us to refocus the examination on the individual and understand the drive of the self in relation to sexuality and expression. “Feminist dis-identification allows women to practice femininity according to the logic of postfeminism, that is, as the product of individually empowered choice guided by an ethic of self-fulfillment” (Budgeon, 2015, p. 306). Therefore, the choice feminist lens can allow this research to focus on the concept of self-fulfillment within the role of submissive identity from the understanding of female identification and embodiment. This theoretical orientation will allow the research to analyze the element of choice within this dynamic and explore the intersecting ideologies of mainstream expectations with these identities.

Scope of the Study

This study is grounded in feminist theory and conceptualization, specifically pulling from choice feminist theory. As a result, the findings of this study focus more on the individual

response, narrative and lived experience of the participants, and what significance this identify holds for the self. It is possible that with an alternative conceptual theory, this study could have delved into the dynamics of relational interactions of submissive identity and how those intersect with the societal values and norms placed on females. However, given that prior research has focused on male perspectives of female sexuality and the observations of female sexual behavior, it was decided that this initial research should remain focused on the narrative of the participants and the element of autonomy in this dynamic.

It was further decided that the intersecting complexity of trans and other gender identities was beyond the scope of this study. Participants were all female assigned at birth, and presented and read as female in public. All participants identified as a form of submissive or switch within the BDSM/kink community and were primarily from the Midwest of America. Participants ranged in age from 26 to 52 years old.

Definition of Key Terms

The capitalization of certain roles identified within the BDSM/kink community refers to the power dynamic and structure assigned those roles, often with the abbreviated encompassment of capital letter roles referring to Dominant positions, and lower-case letter roles referring to submissive positions. The BDSM community has a language and terminology that is often unknown to those who are not involved or are new to the scene. In an effort to maintain simplicity, terminology that may not be immediately recognizable or may need clarification is provided in Appendix B.

Significance of the Study

The goal of this study was to contribute to a growing body of literature surrounding alternative human sexualities. Clinicians and researchers who focus their academic interests on

alternative sexualities could benefit from expanded knowledge of how individuals within this community understand themselves and the dynamics that they enter into. Furthermore, this research aimed to expand an understanding of female sexuality and empowerment that is typically overlooked both in academic and popular culture. Individuals who work within the fields of gender issues, human sexuality, feminist theory and alternative sexual practices may benefit from the continued work of understanding female empowerment from alternative practices.

The individuals who engaged in this study can often feel marginalized and pathologized by academic and popular culture communities (Hebert & Weaver, 2014). This study aimed to give voice to those individuals who are often silenced through fear of judgment and shame. Through narrative examples, this study provided an opportunity for marginalized individuals to feel empowered and to be heard within their own community and within the academic circle.

This study also aimed to expand the conversation of empowerment and the dynamics of power in general. In exploring the seemingly juxtaposing experiences of giving up power as a form of empowerment, this study aims to articulate the complexities of power and control, as well as the dynamics of relational empowerment. This study aimed to widen the concept of how hierarchical structures of power are understood and reframe notions of how individuals can feel a sense of satisfaction, pleasure and autonomy within themselves.

Summary

This study aimed to contribute to and expand the current literature on alternative sexualities, specifically focusing on two underrepresented populations; BDSM/kink communities and female sexuality. Grounded in third-wave choice feminist theory, this study used narrative approaches to explore and understand the seemingly juxtaposing, yet unique position of

empowerment through the actions of submissive identities. Through these accounts, this study aimed to expand an awareness of relational dynamics of power, question the hierarchical structures of control and dominance, and give voice to a marginalized group of sexual minority individuals. Chapter 2 will expand on the literature surrounding this topic thus far, exploring the current research available on BDSM/kink communities and how research has understood these actions. Moreover, Chapter 2 will give a historical understanding of the evolution of feminist theory, specifically differentiating between second- and third-wave theories.

Chapter 3 will present a detailed outline of the construction of research methods utilized within this study, including recruitment styles, interview protocols and procedures for data handling. Chapter 4 will highlight the data analysis process, demonstrating how key themes and concepts were pulled from the interview protocols. Chapter 5 will conclude with a discussion of findings as they relate to this study, as well as how these results can be implemented within the field. Implications for clinicians working with members of the community as well as other broader applications of this research will be discussed.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction

The focus of this research covers two main research points: feminism and BDSM/kink. While these are the overarching areas of interest that this research will focus on, it is pertinent to also explore and understand some background of these areas. Essentially, the aim of this chapter is to give an overview of the rise and formation of these populations so that readers will be able to understand the link between these theories and practices, and power. As a result, the following section is divided into these areas of focus: female submission within the media, narrative empowerment, feminism, therapeutic implications of BDSM/kink, psychology of BDSM/kink and sexuality of BDSM/kink.

Female submission within the media aims to give an outline and understanding of how female representation is portrayed within media sources, as well as exploring the implications of internalized messages of gender identities on viewers. Narrative empowerment expands the concept of ownership for the individual, exploring how self-expression and autonomy can influence individuals' concept of their sense of self within their environment. The therapeutic implications of BDSM/kink illuminate some of the ways in which this community has been utilized as a healing process for individuals. Examples of both male and female forms of healing are represented, as well as the variances in such applications for gendered healing. The psychology of BDSM/kink gives an overview of the personality traits of individuals who are identified as members of the community and also examines how the psychological community as a whole approaches this area of research. Finally, sexuality of BDSM/kink examines the concept of sexual orientation within the scope of this community.

Research Strategy

All research articles were sourced from The Chicago School of Professional Psychology library. Key word searches included “kink,” “BDSM,” “BDSM in the media,” “feminism,” “second-wave feminism,” “third-wave feminism,” “choice feminism,” “representations of female sexuality,” “personality of BDSM,” “BDSM and feminism,” “female submission,” and “sex positive.” Articles were chosen based on their relevance to the topic being researched and how well the content informed the current study. For example, articles that covered female submission had to relate to either the concept of reinforced values of female submission within society as a gendered construct, or female submission as the result of BDSM/kink activities. The initial search process focused on generalizable areas such as BDSM/kink, which then informed the more defined search process. The topic of therapeutic implications of BDSM/kink, for instance, was the result of an initial search process that illuminated some research areas on this topic. Further search processes uncovered more articles that represented this specific area of interest and necessitated a more specific search.

Female Submission Within the Media

In order to appreciate the rise and call for female empowerment, it is necessary to understand the history and context that has suppressed this movement. Essentially, the traditional roles which link passivity and subservience to femininity and female identity must be explored. Passivity has long been linked to the ideal feminine role, with subservience to a patriarchal society dictating the position and place of female members (Budgeon, 2015). “Traditionally passivity and dependence has served as points of reference for performing socially validated femininity” (Budgeon, 2015, p. 304). Fundamentally, societal messages dictate the accepted way to be feminine and therefore accepted within larger society; this is often perpetuated by media sources, which can propagate the idealized and traditional gender roles within society. This

standard of conformity to certain societal expectations has been linked to the idea of an imposed structure of a dominant group, enforcing power over those who fall into minority population statuses. “The dominant ideology of White supremacy maintains and legitimates the power of White males over females and other races in our society” (Hazell & Clarke, 2008, p. 6). This domination is achieved through the perpetuated stereotypes of minority individuals being portrayed in unfavorable lights (Hazell & Clarke, 2008). This dialogue becomes internalized by viewers, and can ultimately impact not only their view of others, but also their view of the self.

As outlined earlier, these concepts of traditional gender roles and conformity to such standards are utilized as a guide for how members of society are expected to behave in order to gain a level of acceptance. How these messages are viewed, received and enforced can vary, but it has been noted that media sources are commonly utilized for this purpose. An especially powerful tool of the media is that of advertising, which can manipulate not only the underlying message being broadcast, but also how the message is received based on the audience. Hazell and Clarke (2008) outlined how the use of advertising not only enforces these gendered normatives, but encourages viewers to engage, enforce and succumb to these values. Effectively, the subconscious messaging that is translated is a narrative for how to align with societal expectations of gendered norms, as well as how to embody attractive qualities that align with those genders.

If men purchase the product, they can hope to become more appealing to women possessing the characteristics of the ideal woman ... In selling products to women, the image of the ideal woman serves as a role model – by purchasing the product, the female consumer can become closer to the ideal woman and thus become more desirable to men. (Hazell & Clarke, 2008, p. 6)

While it should be noted that this portrayal of the ideal is framed within the heteronormative standards of monogamous relationships, the context refers to the generalized standard for what is considered not only idealized, but acceptable within gender roles and portrayals. “Ads perpetuate and reinforce traditional gender roles and gender inequality by portraying how ideal men and women act and present themselves” (Hazell & Clarke, 2008, p. 6). It should also be noted that this observation not only emphasizes how traditional standards are exemplified within such media sources, but also how viewers interact with these subconscious messages. Messages geared towards males are focused on attracting women who embody the ideal standards, suggesting no need to alter or change their own behaviors. However, women are encouraged to embody these characteristics, ultimately adapting themselves in order to attract a male.

The idealized versions of gender roles can be conceptualized as a delicate balance between control, power, submission, and dominance. “In our society, ideal men are dominant, strong, successful, and sexually appealing. Ideal women are physically beautiful, submissive, and sexual objects” (Hazell & Clarke, 2008, p. 6). Yet these standards are not confined to advertising outlets and the promise of reaching a gendered optimum through the purchase of material objects. Submission is often portrayed across various forms of media and can have significantly negative consequences. For example, in a study focused on the effects of exposure to pornography that depicted women as sexually submissive, researchers found that “relative to controls, participants exposed to massive amounts of such pornography tended to be more callous toward women and were more likely to trivialize rape” (Ferguson et al., 2005, p. 478). It is important to note that the participants in this study were not identified by gender, which could speak to not only how men are introduced to the idea that women are sexual objects to dominate, but also to the concept that women view visual representations of themselves as submissive.

These findings illuminate how such gendered idealizations are not only sexualized and internalized within cultural norms, but also how they can lead to a rejection of those who do not appear to conform to such standards.

Sexual submission portrayed within the media is not always as overt as pornography. Often, explicitly sexual scenarios depict women embodying submissive positions, which can be seen in advertising and other media outlets, such as music videos (Ferguson et al., 2005). A study by Ferguson et al. (2005) focused on the impact that rap videos, which feature women in submissive and promiscuous roles, have on viewers. Findings suggested that “exposure led to increased acceptance of dating violence against adolescent girls” (Ferguson et al., 2005, p. 478); hence, the idealization that women should embody the submissive position is found in a variety of platforms but appears to trend towards the same destructive attitudes. Conclusions from the study by Ferguson et al. (2005) expanded on how these portrayals of female sexuality can impact viewers’ attitudes and understanding of negative sexual encounters, such as sexual harassment.

The authors noted:

Activating the promiscuous female stereotype through exposure to a popular television show can affect subsequent judgments of other women (including those in a nonsexual domain) ... those who were exposed to clips of women involved in promiscuous behavior reported perceptions of less victim trauma and attributed greater responsibility to the victim in a sexual harassment case. (Ferguson et al., 2005, p. 485)

Consequently, the underlying stereotypes that reinforce the gendered sexuality and dominance are perpetuated by the portrayal of perceived conformity to these normative standards.

Ultimately, these criteria reinforce the concept that women should not express their sexuality but should embody the passive role of sexualized object. Furthermore, such findings indicate that

women who indeed embrace their sexuality, veering from the societal constructs of dominance and power between genders, are inviting danger in the form of sexual harassment.

The portrayal of female submission within the media is not always an underlying, passive metaphor that is veiled in advertising or music videos. The world of Hollywood film often portrays dynamics that continue to perpetuate normative standards of gender roles, understanding female inequality as not only the status quo, but as a romanticized version of an ideal dynamic. Most recently, film has begun to use the titillating world of BDSM as a way to draw in viewers and play with the concept of alternative relationships. The most recent controversial visual representation of such engagements was the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy adapted from book form (James, 2011) to film (De Luca, James, Brunetti, & Taylor-Johnson, 2015). This series has initiated not only an increase in media attention, focusing on the material portrayed, but also sparked a general increase in conversation and interest in the exciting world of BDSM/kink. Evidence of this phenomenon is seen in the utilization of *Fifty Shades*-themed sex toys, with starter kits for couples, including the Christian Grey tie and a pair of handcuffs, neatly packaged for introductory involvement. While it may appear that such media outlets are advocating for a growth in understanding of the alternative world, the message that is wrapped around this invitation remains dichotomous. In reviewing *Secretary* (Fierberg, Hobby, & Shainberg, 2002), another film portraying the dynamics of a BDSM relationship, Weiss (2008) argued:

They allow the mainstream audience to flirt with danger and excitement, but ultimately reinforce boundaries between protected and privileged normal sexuality, and policed and pathological not normal sexuality. These mechanisms solidify the ideological dichotomies that animate American understandings of sexuality, where normal is

heterosexual, monogamous, romantic, private, married, and suburban, while abnormal is non-heterosexual, non-monogamous, unromantic, public, unmarried, and urban. (p. 105)

Essentially, the mechanisms that are utilized to exemplify the dichotomous view of sexuality mirror that of “Don’t ask, don’t tell,” with the privileged and protected elements of sexuality continuing to be those aspects that conform to normative standards of expected relational standards, while anything that delineates from these standards is accepted as long as it is not seen or spoken of. Hence, the excitement of a darker underworld is brought to the public eye through the mechanics and safety of traditional and normalized life, wherein everything is safely contained within the heteronormative, patriarchal system that continues to dominate and dictate what is deemed acceptable.

Weiss (2008) further criticized such media sources by declaring, “Instead of promoting politically progressive forms of acceptance via understanding, these representations offer acceptance via normalization, and understanding via pathologizing”. Weiss’s (2008) emphasis on how acceptance and understanding are accomplished further emphasizes how such media is brought back to the heteronormative view of relational dynamics, perpetuating anything that falls into the category of otherness. In both movies, *Fifty Shades of Gray* (De Luca et al., 2015) and *Secretary* (Fierberg et al., 2002) viewers are bought back to the safety of normalization, with the main characters getting married and living a monogamous relationship. Another example of this divisive understanding of acceptance and understanding is seen in the film *A Dangerous Method* (Thomas & Cronenberg, 2011), which again focuses the desires for engagement with BDSM as the result of a pathological and uncontrollable urge by the main character, only to be resolved by intensive psychological intervention. Again, the conclusion of this story wraps up the thrill and

excitement of such an affair with the main characters finally submitting to a life of monogamy and ultimately claiming to be cured of their prior desires.

This dichotomizing mentality is also evidenced in the *Fifty Shades of Grey* (De Luca et al., 2015) movie during the scene when Christian is explaining his introductory path into the world of BDSM, ultimately labeling himself as “fifty shades of fucked up” (De Luca et al., 2015). In contrast, the movie *Secretary* (Fierberg et al., 2002) ends with the explanatory monologue from the heroine of how her life has adapted to a traditional lifestyle: “All of our activities melted into an everyday sort of life, until we looked like any other couple.” The emphasis on “activities,” which refers to BDSM/kink engagements, reinforces the abnormality and deviance of these acts. Once again, one can see how the almost dangerous promise of excitement and titillation of BDSM/kink is safely held within the normalizing structure of acceptable relationship standards.

Critics of the BDSM community have further argued that the play scenes and relational dynamics that can occur within Dominant/submissive interactions is a continuation of these systemic forces of oppression, often being labeled as the eroticization of violence. Bennet (2015) outlined the radical feminist conceptualization of sexual sadomasochism, referring to the utilization of societal symbols within the relational dynamic as a way to “replicate and propagate narratives of oppression” (p. 96). Bennet (2015) further stressed the radical perspective of sadomasochism as replication, stating:

These narratives of oppression are always necessarily gendered; heterosexual male sadists literally replicate the conditions of patriarchy, whereas gay male sadists and female sadists of all sexual orientations figuratively replicate the conditions of patriarchy. These narratives of oppression can also work along vectors of race and religion. (p. 96)

From this theoretical understanding of BDSM, the act of consent between participants does little to undo the systemic violence that is implanted in the hierarchical understanding of dominance and violence between the Dominants and submissives of society.

However, Bennet (2015) argued that instead of simply replicating these same underlying dynamics of oppression, the BDSM play scene utilizes these symbols of power and differentiation as simulation:

While sadomasochistic activities may draw on everyday power differentials, rather than replicating them, sadomasochists instead recontextualize or redeploy them in alternative ways. The presence of consent and mutual pleasure divorces the power differentials in sadomasochism from any meaningful link to the cultural histories of oppression that sadomasochistic activities explicitly evoke or implicitly negotiate. (p. 98)

Hence, the borrowed terms, identities, and power differentials are bought into the play dynamic as a tool, a prop, that does not pertain to the same systemic oppression. Instead, such symbols are reinvented and used as a new toy that is incorporated into the scene between the participants. It is this reclaiming of meaning that strips away the essence of oppression and power once assigned to such roles.

Narrative Empowerment

Watson (2005) discussed how feminist theory has similarly influenced upcoming movements such as queer theory to re-empower the community by redefining the meaning behind such historical sentiments: “Reclaiming the word ‘queer’ empties the category of its effects” (p. 73). As we can see, a once oppressive and derogatory word has been reclaimed by a community and reframed to encapsulate a more encompassing meaning. It is in this same way

that BDSM players can transform a dynamic that represents oppression and reclaim it into something that speaks to their experience and meaning.

In understanding the nature of BDSM, Musser (2015) addressed the problem with dichotomous approaches to such activities: “When the focus of our response dwells on whether or not this expression of sexuality is good or bad, it obscures the ways in which agency and subjectivity are intertwined with sexual expression” (p. 134). Hence, in order to understand the meaning derived from these exchanges of power, it is not necessary to understand the overarching dynamic of man versus woman, or Domme versus sub. Instead, what must be explored is the unspoken dynamic that is unfolding between the characters, what they gain from the experience, and what it is that they ultimately seek. Biklen, Marshall, and Pollard (2008) explained how it is possible to examine the meaning making process of social and personal changes via the narratives of women who have been influenced by second-wave feminism, and how this movement has influenced their individual journeys through academia:

Working to articulate the connections between the personal experiences of women and social structures that encouraged particular interpretations of those experiences, many feminists used this form of analysis and writing to make visible those aspects of social life that were missing from public texts to underscore how the personal is political. (p. 452)

Here one can see how the narratives of women are not dismissive of the structural systems of oppression, but are perhaps informed by how they have been able to work through them and utilize their understanding of such dynamics as a means of empowerment.

Musser (2015) opened up this discussion of individual gain through a comparison of the different routes towards empowerment and validation seen within both *The Story of O* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*:

O wants access to power, but the structures of patriarchy mean that submission is her route towards it. Likewise, Anastasia's participation in BDSM is framed not as a move towards exploring her sexuality but as a way to foster greater intimacy with Christian and to stabilize their status as a couple, which camouflages her own lack of agency. (p. 133)

While it can be argued that each individual in this example is simply playing into the systemic, patriarchal structure that currently oppresses them, it cannot be ignored that each character utilizes this system as a means of personal gain and empowerment, within the constraints of their respective societies. This intricate and complex play of power dynamics is the focus that is often overlooked in lieu of the oppressing structural standards. Hence, the question remains, how in the face of such larger constitutions can individuals take the same forces that oppose them and make them a source of empowerment, enlightenment and liberation?

Musser (2015) quoted Jessica Benjamin's (1988) theory on submission in relation to power through recognition, specifically underscoring that within *The Story of O*, it is the juxtaposition of submitting to slavery that gains O her freedom. "It is not her journey with Sir Stephen to different psychic space, but her move towards recognition in a way that (again) highlights the paucity of choices available to women and under-scores the impossibility of mutuality under these circumstances" (Musser, 2015, p. 127). In this analysis of the Dominant/submissive relationship, one can see that the systemic oppressions and structural hierarchy of larger society are still in place; however, O has been able to utilize this system in a manner that empowers her through recognition. Essentially, by submitting to a system that she

cannot change, she gains individual power and autonomy through recognition of those who control it and subsequently, her. It is this recognition that releases O from the invisibility of simply existing within the systemic oppression, transforming her into an object and entity of her own accord.

Feminism

The dynamic of power and sexuality specifically linked to the behaviors and consequences of female identity has not just been a subconscious message indoctrinated into societal expectations of gendered norms. This construct of expected femininity has been the building block for feminist theory, calling for a dismantlement of such standards and ultimately fighting against such norms. Schippers and Grayson Sapp (2012) argued that “femininity is defined as a set of embodied characteristics and practices that are imposed on women and result from or signify their status in relation to men” (p. 28). According to this perspective, not only can femininity be understood, but also female sexuality as the result of an enforcement of a patriarchal system that benefits men and continues to oppress women.

While the history of the feminist movement has been noted to predate the sexual awakening of society, tracing the origins of feminist movements to the French revolution in the late eighteenth century (Osborne, 2001), the focus of this study will concentrate on the distinction between the second- and third-wave feminist movements. Osborne (2001) attributed the rise of the second-wave feminist movement to the suffragettes, noting that there was a significant rise in media attention during the 1960s after demonstrators identified as the Redstockings protested the degradation of women in a beauty contest. Through street performance, protestors were noted to throw symbols that represented the oppressive patriarchal system into a trash can, which included wired bras. Osborne (2001) drew attention to the fact that

while none of the items were set on fire, this image was the source of the unflattering stereotype of the “bra-burning feminists,” which continues to be a negative connotation of the feminist ideology in mainstream society.

Stereotypes and misconceptions of feminist ideology fail to encapsulate the diverse sects that have emerged from feminist theory, which Maynard (1995) outlined includes three classic positions: liberal feminism, Marxist feminism and radical feminism. Liberal feminism, as the title eludes, is focused on the liberation of individual rights. This philosophy views social policy and legal stances as tools to aid in progression towards equality between men and women. Marxist feminism, as explained by Maynard (2005), focuses on the impact of labor division, both paid and unpaid, as a means of continued oppression for women within a capitalist economy. In contrast, radical feminism is grounded in the relational dynamic of men and women, viewing this dynamic as one which continues to propagate the violent control of women by men. As noted, there is a great deal of diversity in the second-wave feminist movement, however much of the literature focuses on what Osborne (2001) denoted as radical feminists. This group was noted to ascribe the definition of “the problem as one of patriarchy in which male domination in all areas of life had resulted in wholesale oppression of women. This faction mounted women-only campaigns which focused on the effects of male violence, rape and pornography” (Osborne, 2001, p. 29). Radical feminism is therefore viewed as a more militant rejection of anything that simulates and propagates the patriarchal system that oppresses women, calling for a safe place for women by women.

Second-wave feminism has often been criticized for a lack of intersectional understanding of various oppressive circumstances that may be impacting minority-status individuals. Biklen et al. (2008) noted that many women were often forced to align with either

their gender or racial identities, but did not feel as though this was a simultaneous choice. It was noted that with the rise of second-wave feminism, which advocated for more representations of women in power, a level of perhaps naïvety failed to understand how established systems of power and dominance, such as slavery and colonialism, in fact benefited certain women. The assumption that the inclusion of women in power would translate to equality for minority status individuals, including women from all SES, racial and ethnic locations, as well as sexual and gender identities, has been a major critique of second-wave feminist theory. As the scope of the feminist movement has expanded, the recognition and drive to be more inclusive has called for a more intersectional understanding that incorporates all these factors.

The origins and necessity of the original second-wave feminist movement were grounded in historical context, and many authors attributed the ability of growth within research and observations of societal change to the success of this movement: “Without second-wave feminism, most women would be worse off” (Biklen et al., 2008, p. 451). While there continues to be an appreciation for the historical origins of the theory, feminism has continued to evolve to encompass more individuals who are impacted by the structures of oppression in society.

The third wave aims to move away from the domination of feminism by white middle class women to a more inclusive movement which addresses inequalities aggravated by attitudes toward racial minorities, sexual orientation and physical disablement. Attitudes towards men have softened providing they play their part in aiming for a more egalitarian society. (Osborne, 2001, p. 35)

Third-wave feminism has spurred the theory of choice as an empowered position for women to make, encouraging a sense of autonomy and enlightened acceptance of difference in circumstances.

Osborne (2001) explained the still very demanding social pressures and systemic oppression of a male-dominated society; it simultaneously celebrates and focuses on the choices that were made in order to gain a sense of empowerment and autonomy.

Where second-wave feminism focused on the constraints women faced in making free choices, choice feminism more recently reorients feminist politics with a call for recognition of the choices women are actually making. From this perspective the role of feminism is to validate women's choices without passing judgment. (Budgeon, 2015, p. 303)

In this understanding, one can recognize and credit the success of second-wave feminists, in their accomplishment to gain the power for minorities to make choices, but simultaneously celebrate individuals' right to make their own final decision. Budgeon (2015) further explained, "Versions of choice feminism have been used to justify numerous behaviors including women's participation in sexualized culture, consumption of pornography, the adoption of a gendered division of labor and the celebration of beauty culture" (p. 307). Hence, while the availability of choices for women has expanded, it remains riddled in complications associated with the balance between traditional femininity and the search for autonomy.

Another element that has arisen in this debate and advocacy for autonomy and choice is the topic of sexuality. Hatton and Trautner (2013) examined portrayals of male and female celebrities on the cover of Rolling Stone magazine. Results indicated that there was a significant increase in the sexualization of women, which was argued to be the result of political control and backlash against women's gains in power. Hatton and Trautner (2013) argued that such imagery is veiled by third-wave feminist commentary to allow the continuation of objectification of

women, ultimately reinforcing a patriarchal system that removes the power of choice from women:

The debate over whether such portrayals of women are objectifying or empowering must move beyond the question of individual choice. This is because, whether or not women “chose” to be sexualized, the sheer repetition of their sexualization in combination with the intensity of their sexualization (but not that of men) suggests that there is very little that is “individual” about such choices. (p. 74)

Hence, there is an insinuation that the representation of female sexual expression is not the result of a reclaiming and celebration of liberated choice, but is in fact the perpetuation and reinforcement of a systemic problem that suppresses and controls women through objectification.

Critiques of third-wave feminism have claimed that choice feminism dismisses the continued need for political discussion and critical analysis of perceived freedom for women. Thwaites (2017) argued, “It is important to take responsibility for one’s actions, but equally significant to interrogate and challenge the structural factors which contribute to them, instead of allowing an unhelpful individualism to take hold” (p. 59). Hence, while the allure of making a choice is seductive, it is essential to understand the structural oppressions that have given women these options, and the motivation to ascribe to certain decisions. Thwaites (2017) further argued that often women make choices that are more traditionally rooted, such as taking a man’s name after marriage, because individuals all inherently desire acceptance from society. Essentially, Thwaites (2017) argued that there is a level of satisfaction that is gained from being seen as accessible and understandable in our choices. By identifying the element of choice in a decision that is rooted in patriarchal meaning, women are able to maintain their camaraderie with the equality movement, while also feeling comfortable and accepted in the norms of greater society.

Further critiques of choice feminism argued that such a stance moves the understanding of feminism away from political discussion, ultimately limiting the ability to create social change. Ferguson (2010) argued that choice feminism not only ignores how individuals arrive at the choices that they are faced with, but it also relieves them from taking responsibility for the implications of their choices.

It discourages us from forming judgments about the value of different choices, it discourages us from giving a public account for the choices we make, it shuts down critical discussion about which choices should be valued and which choices are mere illusions. (Ferguson, 2010, p. 250)

While the argument that different options have different values, and that choice should not be a source of compliance within an unequal system is valid, it does not indicate or distinguish how such values are ascribed. Moreover, such a critique suggests that certain options should be taken in efforts to progress the greater good, disregarding the needs or limitations of the individuals in their personal circumstances.

Third-wave feminists have advocated that individual choice is not inherently distant from the origins of earlier feminism. As Snyder-Hall (2010) stated, “The contention that ‘feminism was supposed to be about making my own choices’ may sound trite, but it speaks to the issue of self-determination that forms the foundation of feminism” (p. 256). It could be argued that third-wave feminism has resulted in the earlier work of advocacy that has led to the ability to enable women the choice to live a more authentic and autonomous life that makes sense for their circumstances. Snyder-Hall (2010) further illuminated the concept that simply scrutinizing a woman’s final decision does not attribute any value to the thought process behind an individualized evaluation of her circumstance. Furthermore, Snyder-Hall (2010) argued that

regardless of the continued suppressive factors that may limit an individual's ability to choose from unlimited options, feminism should not take away from the respect that should be placed on a woman's right to make that choice.

Swirsky and Angelone (2015) examined women's decision to identify as a feminist and the contributing factors behind this alignment. Results indicated that women who claimed "empowerment" and "activism" as reasons for their identification with feminism described "feminism as the source from which they derived strength to live their own lives, make their own choices, and empower themselves and others to defy gender stereotypes" (Swirsky & Angelone, 2015, p. 455). Furthermore, it was noted that these women showed insight and awareness of the continuing problems related to discrimination and inequality. Contrary to the critiques of third-wave feminism, these results suggest that women are not simply aligning with feminist identity through solidarity, but because they are aware of the continuing and complex social issues; this also emphasizes a shift in the feminist movement that has embraced a more individualistic understanding of how feminist theory can be applied to personal choice. This flexibility in applicability has expanded feminist theory from a conversation of how things should be done, to a more universal understanding of individual circumstances and autonomy.

While the acknowledgement of perpetuating social issues may be commonly understood by those who identify as activists within the feminist movement, the experience of this was noted to be a potential reason for why women seek out such a community. Mackay (2015) interviewed over 100 feminists in attempts to understand the progression of the movement as a whole. It was noted that, "Sadly the motivations for participation in feminist activity remain remarkably similar; women recounted experiences of sexual harassment, discrimination at work, isolation in pregnancy and child rearing, as well as incidences of rape and other forms of male violence"

(Mackay, 2015, p. 333). Thus while the third-wave movement is calling for more autonomy and individualist choice, there is evidence that the issues that first ignited the feminist movement are still at large.

Therapeutic Implications of BDSM/kink

The battle against sexual violence and the desire to regain a sense of empowerment over female sexuality are topics that appear to be debated both within feminist movements and society as a whole. This complexity was outlined in Hammer's (2014) study, which examined the dynamic of rape play within BDSM scenes as a tool for women who have been victims of sexual assault:

While in rape play survivors relive the trauma, thus experiencing the powerlessness all over again, the stress on negotiation and the "scriptedness" of the BDSM encounter (the survivor dictates the scene) provides that necessary measure of control and safety such that the ineffectuality felt during the sexual assault gets interrupted. (p. 76)

Therefore, the felt sense of power that is experienced through the consensual dynamic, even within a play scene that acts out a complete removal of power, is the key to reliving experiences in a positive manner. A common phrase that Hammers (2014) collected from respondents was, "I'm doing it on my own terms" (p. 79), further stressing the sense of choice and authority that women in this study have experienced. Hammers (2014) also emphasized the importance of the rape scene being public, and the element of healing that comes from such a witnessing of private and personal pain. "BDSM takes a private, atomizing affect (i.e., pain) and externalizes it – making it public – not so much through words but rather extra-verbal (senses, touch) channels and the body-to-body communication central to BDSM play" (Hammers, 2014, p. 80). Here Hammers was referencing the bodily reintegration of somatic symptoms that are often the result

of sexual violence, creating the ability to once again feel where the body was left numb in response to the trauma.

Lindemann (2011) explored the dynamic of therapeutic healing within the professional dominatrices ('Pro-Dommes') community. Extensive interviews with female Pro-Dommes working with male clients revealed the following: "Respondents indicated that clients not only came to their dungeons to atone for things they had done but to work through wrongs which has been inflicted upon them – relieving traumatic experiences in order to gain control over them" (Lindemann, 2011, p. 156). The accounts of the Pro-Dommes paint a picture of a safe, consensual space wherein a form of dynamic adult play therapy can unfold. Individuals who enter into these scenes utilize the space to relive their past traumas, gain a sense of mastery over the experiences and create a new, more tolerable narrative; this was also evident in perpetuated systemic issues such as race:

Respondents also described race play as a mechanism through which clients could gain symbolic power by acting out the role of the dominant party in the racially-charged scenario. A common observation was that, while Black men prefer to see White dominatrices, in "sub" or "switch" sessions (sessions in which the woman becomes the submissive for all or part of the session), Black men prefer to dominate Black women ... this observation about racial trends in D/s partner selection suggests that clients experience race play as revitalizing in two opposite ways that operate under the same basic principle: either by reproducing racial hierarchies on their own terms or subverting them on their terms. (Lindemann, 2011, p. 160)

Here one can see how the element of control within the scene transcends the role of Domme or submissive, but is more solidly rooted in the metaphorical meaning within the dynamic.

This element of publicizing pain trapped in somatic symptoms echoes the necessity for validation through recognition evidenced in Musser's (2015) critical review of *The Story of O* and *Fifty Shades of Gray*. In describing one participant's experience of rape play, it was noted, "This public performance is a public witnessing to her trauma, de-atomizing and thus validating the pain associated with the rape" (Hammers, 2014, p. 80). Hammers (2014) also explained that this public performance and witnessing of events enables both the submissive and the Dominant, who acts as the rapist within the scene, to share in the responsibility of the event and engage in the raw vulnerability of the action. In this sense, it is not just the physical witnessing of the events that validate the experience, but also the lived and shared emotions that offer validation of expression to the scene.

Psychology of BDSM/kink

The release of psychological pain and overcoming trauma, however, is not the only motivation for involvement within BDSM activities. Newmahr (2010) suggested that outside of the sexual construct, BDSM "can be more fully understood as a serious leisure pursuit, alongside other serious leisure hobbies such as kayaking and mountain climbing" (p. 314). Newmahr (2010) suggested that the level of time, dedication, and persistence needed to not only become an active participant within this community, but also learn how to play within scenes, is the criteria that distinguishes BDSM as a serious leisure pursuit. A core element of this learning curve for those who identify as submissives was outlined as follows, "Bottoms 'learn' how to process, navigate and negotiate pain or unpleasant sensation. Unlike the formalized, technical learning process in becoming a top, this is a meaning making process" (Newmahr, 2010, p. 322). It is apparent that the correlation to other serious leisure activities includes a pursuit of physical and emotional resiliency, which must be built over time and practice. The element of meaning

making may not be unique to the submissive training, however, with meaning making in the pursuit of any dedicated effort remaining intrinsically individual.

Newmahr (2011) further expanded on this understanding of the meaning-making process with her work on edge play and limit pushing within BDSM play, outlining that “the lines between life and death, consciousness and unconsciousness, sanity and insanity, and order and chaos can constitute the boundaries of edgework” (p. 683). Thus it would seem that the meaning is derived from pushing the limits of physical, psychological, and physiological boundaries. Newmahr (2011) also discussed the fact that so far the research on risk-taking leisure activities has been sourced primarily from male representatives, suggesting that most notions of edge work are derived from a male perspective and experience. Newmahr (2011) clarified that “while it exposes a gender issue, it does not necessarily mean that all edgework can or should be understood as masculine performance” (p. 684). Newmahr’s (2011) review details how the work collected so far on edge work, focused on a masculine frame, has emphasized that such endeavors are typically seen as physical control and dominance, with the thrill residing in the triumph over something that once threatened danger to the self. However, expanding the understanding of edge work to incorporate a feminist perspective has encouraged other experimental outlets, which include emotional and psychological limit testing and risks. Newmahr (2011) explained, “A feminist model can recognize a wide range of skills, including social-psychological and interpersonal skill sets, such as trust, expressiveness, emotion management, perceptiveness, self-awareness, introspection, and self-restraint” (p. 691).

Newmahr (2011) explored how the boundaries of edge work as well as the experience of edge work differ from more mainstream serious leisure activities, as edge work requires a collaborative element that co-constructs what and where the edge is, decided upon by players.

The boundaries being negotiated in SM are only sometimes physical, but they are always emotional and psychological. They are also always collaboratively constructed and negotiated. SM participants do not merely engage in these activities alongside one another or in the company of one another, but because of and through one another.

(Newmahr, 2011, p. 696)

Consequently, while the boundary of the edge can theoretically exist within one participant, it cannot be reached without the collaborative involvement of another. The core element to this participation is trust between players:

SM participants also trust one another's integrity; they trust that neither will intentionally harm the other. This evidences confidence in the mental state of the players before a scene begins, but players also must trust one another to remain reasonable and rational throughout the scene. (Newmahr, 2011, p. 701)

Again, this sentiment relates back to earlier sources that speak about the beneficial psychological effects of such collaboration in an effort to gain autonomy and dominance in a system of hierarchical oppression. While not all submissives are women, and not all Dominants are men, (also equating to the fact that not all play scenes involve a male and female player), this element of trust helps distinguish the boundary between female oppression and male dominance within the larger society. Within the BDSM play scene, a female submissive trusts that a male Dominant will restrict himself to the boundaries of the play scene; she cannot, however, trust that the structural oppressive factors within the larger system will follow the same guidelines.

Even though this understanding of trust and mutual co-construction is the core of consensual BDSM play, there remain critiques that those who engage in such activities are doing so due to some kind of prior psychological trauma or damage. Richters, De Visser, Rissel,

Grulich, and Smith (2008) explained that individuals who are identified as part of the BDSM/kink community “have long been seen by medicine, the law, and the caring professions as at best damaged (in need of therapy) and at worst dangerous (in need of legal or social regulation)” (p. 1660). Thus, the establishments that have been erected as a symbol for protection and healing condemn BDSM practice as the result of broken individuals. The psychological community similarly views such actions from a pathological understanding:

The psychoanalytic approach suffers from confusion between a very broad psychological notion of the sadist or masochistic personality on one hand and sexual proclivities on the other. The forensic approach is more often empirical, but chooses as its object of study people who have been charged with criminal offences (Richters et al., 2008, p. 1660)

Again, it can be seen that in a field that is built on the explanation and understanding of human behavior and motivation, BDSM/kink is unfairly deemed the actions and consequences of pathological personas and even presented as a criminal case study. A study conducted by Damm, Dentato, and Busch (2018) focusing on therapeutic intervention with self-identified BDSM participants concluded that “by recognizing BDSM practices as an important facet of other identities – people who participate in BDSM are humanized” (p. 35). This initiative to view individuals from an inclusive and intersectional lens reiterates the importance of understanding people as a whole within their context. Damm et al. (2018) reminded the reader of the important need to continually expand one’s understanding of diversity within human behavior, accenting the dangerous ease and comfort of falling back in pathologizing the unknown.

Perhaps due to the overwhelming male representation in the literature thus far, combined with the overarching societal structure of male dominance, there is often concern that males who engage in BDSM are doing so due to pathological motivations. Richters et al. (2008) conducted a

survey to examine this theory that individuals who engage in BDSM had a history of sexual or psychological problems. The results indicated that participants who had engaged in BDSM activities:

Were not more likely to have been coerced into sexual activity, and were not significantly more likely to be unhappy or anxious – indeed, men who had engaged in BDSM scored significantly lower on a scale of psychological distress than other men. Engagement in BDSM was not significantly related to any sexual difficulties. (Ritcher et al., 2008, p. 1665)

While these results do show that there is no significant correlation between BDSM practices and psychological distress, again the focus was on male participants and did not necessarily address generalized concerns that such actions result from sexual pathologies.

A study conducted by Quinsey, Chaplin, and Upfold (1984) comparing the arousal levels of rapists and non-sex offenders when viewing various scenarios gives some insight into this topic. The various scenes that participants were exposed to included both male victim/partner in a neutral situation, consenting sex, rape and nonsexual violence, as well as a female victim/partner in all the above scenes, as well as consenting bondage and spanking, masochistic bondage and spanking, and non-consenting bondage and spanking. Results revealed the following:

Rapists did not respond more than non-sex-offenders to the sadistic or masochistic bondage and spanking stories; perhaps more surprisingly, rapists did not respond differently than normal subjects according to whether the victim/partner consented or not. Although the fact that the bondage and spanking stories involved girlfriends and the rape stories involved strangers may explain these data in terms of our earlier finding that non-

sex-offenders' sexual arousal is inhibited by victim pain, whereas rapists' arousal is not.
(Quinsey et al., 1984, p. 657)

The results of this study are ambiguous in relation to the nature of consensual pain and pleasure, indicating that more research understanding this dynamic is necessary.

Hebert and Weaver (2014) compared personality traits of individuals who identified as Dominants compared to those who identified as submissives, hypothesizing that Dominants would score higher on factors such as desire for control and extraversion. Results indicated that Dominants scored significantly higher than submissives in desire for control; however, reports also revealed that within the actual play scene, participants allocated equal power to both parties. Further findings indicated that “both groups were still within the normal range for extraversion, indicating that dominance does not require abnormally high levels of extraversion, nor does submission suggest abnormally low levels ... dominants and submissives did not differ on conscientiousness” (Hebert & Weaver, 2014, p. 112). There were few noted differences among the personality traits, which were explained by extraneous circumstances. Firstly, Dominants were noted to have higher self-esteem than submissives; however, it was suggested that this was due in part to the role of after-care that occurs, requiring the Dominant to care for the submissives' needs. While both groups fell into the normal ranges for empathy, honesty and humility, it was noted that Dominants scored lower on emotionality, explained by the necessity for Dominants to remain level-headed within the play scene (Hebert & Weaver, 2014). These differences in personality traits appear to be relative to the individuals' alignment with identification of Dominant or submissive; however, the determination of whether these traits have led to an alignment with Dominant or submissive remains unclear.

Sexuality and BDSM/kink

In discussing the concept of personality traits and the organic origin of such elements, the question and inquiry of sexual orientation is also illuminated. Jillian Keenan (2014) wrote a self-disclosing article that argued the position that kink/BDSM is a sexual orientation, which would suggest that the former personality differences may be the result of organic drives to a certain position or orientation. While her position on the subject was purely introspective and not conclusive, it does open up the potential for new research and the concept of how sexual orientation is viewed. Better and Simula (2015) studied the importance of gender identification in sexual orientation within BDSM communities; results revealed the following:

Many individuals reported experiencing gender as having little – and in some cases no – bearing on their choices of sexual and/or romantic partner. Individuals in both the sex-store and BDSM samples frequently foregrounded the importance of personal connection rather than gender. Additionally, BDSM participants frequently reported that BDSM role (i.e., Dominant, submissive) was as or more important of a choice of sexual and/or relationship partners in comparison to gender. (p. 671)

This understanding of what qualities make a partner attractive expands the definition from merely physical attraction to connecting with another person's identified orientation and how it fits with one's own proclivities, thus creating a more enmeshed understanding of attraction as a symbiotic dynamic between individuals.

Furthermore, unraveling the understanding of sexual orientation past the idea of pure sexual attraction allows a more holistic view of the dynamic of individuals who identify as asexual BDSM participants. Sloan (2015) explained that “while identifying as asexual enables informants to articulate their lack of interest in sexual relationships, participating in BDSM helps

them form partnerships based on attractions they do feel and fantasies they do wish to realize” (p. 553). Once again, not only must the dynamic of BDSM be considered, but also that of sexual identity and/or orientation as an individualized and complex entity of self.

Summary and Transition

The literature surrounding the topic of BDSM/kink thus far is divided by gender. The concept of male submission is spoken of in terms of a cathartic space of healing, facilitated by female Dommies. Furthermore, this narrative is told vicariously through the voice of female Dommies, which suggests that the concept of male submission remains a taboo construct. Female submission however is told through the voice of the participants, again focused on a space of cathartic healing, but focused on the emotional healing of the individual and less on the relational interaction of all players. Similarly, the concepts of edge play and danger are presented as physical feats that must be skillfully mastered by men, whereas edge play for females involves a subtler and more nuanced emotional dance. The research continues to perpetuate this concept that gender divides experiences of power, pleasure, pain and healing. Men have been researched in terms of how they are able to utilize others as a means of satisfaction or healing, or how they are able to overcome physical challenges, whereas women have been studied in terms of how their relational dynamics contribute to healing. Broadly, men continue to be portrayed as strong and dominant, whereas women continue to be portrayed as emotional in nature. Due to the focus on women as healers and emotional laborers, there is a lack of understanding with regard to how women even view themselves as independent or powerful within these relationships. The research continues to illuminate how women’s roles aid or assist others, even when the female embodies a position of power such as a Pro-Domme. Thus the current research concentrates on

how women are empowered not within a relational dynamic, but from an individual position of self-fulfillment.

Existing literature that focuses on the concept of female representation and submission within the media is substantial; however, it continues to be framed from the perspective that viewers are merely absorbing these messages without any ability to interact with them; this paints a bleak picture of female identity, sexuality and attractiveness as a prescribed notion that is fed subconsciously to an audience helpless to change it. Little research has focused on how aware women are of these representations, how much they truly embrace such standards, and how much they feel empowered to fight against them. Narrative empowerment and feminist theory have begun to examine how these standards of femininity are being challenged and how women are responding to challenges of gendered norms. Similarly, feminist theory has accentuated the importance of self-actualization and autonomy as key elements in the ability to overturn traditionally gendered oppression. These intertwining concepts of narrative embodiment and feminist theory have formed the crux of the current research, which focused on giving voice to a traditionally oppressed minority group, focusing on how they view their sense of choice as an empowered position.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Method

Chapter Overview

This study explored the lived experiences of cisgender women who identify as submissives or switches within the BDSM/kink community. Previous research has focused on the lived experiences of women who identify in more dominant roles, or males who embrace the more submissive elements of this community. This prior research has highlighted the interest in individuals who defy social norms and adopt characteristic roles that are not typically ascribed to their gender. However, little research has been done on the motivation of women who engage in submission as a form of satisfaction or empowerment. This current study was spurred by the seeming juxtaposition that surrounds the concept that by giving up power, females can in fact become empowered. The results are a culmination of the voices of six women who self-identified as engaging in submissive actions within the BDSM/kink community, illuminating their own perspective of empowerment within this identity. It is acknowledged that some of the language and terminology may not be readily understood by readers who are unfamiliar with the BDSM/kink community; therefore, Appendix B provides an in-depth glossary of terms and language that may be useful for clarifying certain items.

The purpose of this research was to explore the lived experience of self-identified submissives or switches within kink activities, exploring their personal sense of gain through such interactions. Understanding the intersection of female empowerment alongside the decision to submit all power to a Dominant within the kink community could illuminate how individuals perceive, experience and understand the dynamic of power. Implications for therapeutic intervention and understanding of resilience and overcoming lived experiences within the therapy setting are also discussed.

The significance of this study is to explore, understand, and contribute to the growing knowledge of the kink community, as well as the intersectionality of under-privileged or under-represented populations. Often, activities that are evident within kink scenes are overly pathologized or deemed inappropriate, yet the exploration of individual choice within the engagement of submissive roles could help clinical understanding of power dynamics. The current study aimed to explore the motivations and desires of women who engage in submissive activities within a kink identity. In order to fully conceptualize this phenomenon, it was necessary to understand the participants' perspective of power and submission within the kink scene, as well as the action of relinquishing that power for the purposes of the play performance. Furthermore, gaining an understanding of and differentiating the dynamic of the play activity was necessary: Do participants understand or identify kink as a sexual orientation, leisure activity, and/or healing tool/coping skill? Essentially, this study utilized a feminist theory approach to understand hierarchical and societal structures, while simultaneously exploring the intersectionality of femininity and power dynamics to ascertain why women engage in submission within kink play and what positive results they gain from this lived experience.

Research Questions

The primary question that this study aimed to answer concerns the individual experience while in a submissive role. This researcher was concerned with understanding exactly what it is that women who willingly enter into a state of complete submission to another individual can gain through that interaction. This approach shaped the form of questions in several ways (Creswell 2013). First, questions were asked to gain an understanding of the lived experience of marginalization as a woman within society, providing an understanding of how participants conceptualize their lived experience with this ordeal. Questions were then aimed to explore what

submission means to the participants, both inside and outside of the kink scene/role play scenario. Further questions focused on understanding and exploring participants' distinction between the perceived societal pressures of female submission and their identified benefits of involvement as a submissive or switch within the kink scene.

Research Design

A phenomenological research design was utilized for the approach to the current research. This method was determined to be the most beneficial for the parameters of this study, as it expands the understanding of this experience into a more generalizable and universal phenomenon, which could assist in future application of findings. Creswell (2013) highlighted that the foundations of a phenomenological study are grounded in philosophical components which include the lived experience of the participants, the essence and not the explanation of these experiences, and the intentional consciousness of the experience being examined. This intentionality of consciousness was a key factor in the choice to utilize a phenomenological approach for the current study, as it emphasizes that the lived experience the researcher is examining is not the societally enforced hierarchy of systemic patriarchy, but the conscious choice to relinquish power within a specific time and place.

For the purposes of this study, a transcendental phenomenological approach was taken. The procedure for this involved analyzing data collected from in-depth interviews with participants and reducing the information to significant themes or statements in order to develop a descriptive text to express the essence of the participants' experience. In order for this to be achieved, it was necessary for the researcher to bracket her prior understanding or personal beliefs about the experience being examined, allowing for an organic, unbiased and accurate narrative of the participants. This bracketing was achieved through journaling at the conclusion

of interviews to help identify the interviewer's personal responses from participants, as well as highlight any bias that may have arisen.

Population and Sample

Participants recruited identified as cis-female, aged 21 to 99 years old, and were able to speak and understand fluent English. The limitation of recruiting cisgender individuals was aimed at reducing any potential intersecting experiences of marginalization that individuals who do not identify as cisgender may experience. No further limitations on age or ethnicity were deemed necessary for the purposes of this data collection. Education levels and social economic status (SES) was not recorded as part of the demographic information for this study. However, it was disclosed through the recruitment and interview process that three of the six participants held graduate level qualifications. Participants were recruited via a purposive sampling method for this study and identified as either a submissive or switch, or a subset of these submissive identities. Active or current involvement within the kink community was not a prerequisite for this study. A total of six participants were recruited for the purposes of this research. Due to the sensitive nature of this topic and anticipated difficulty with recruitment, there were no limitations on number of participants who could be included as part of this process.

Procedures

A website (<https://kxj5371.wixsite.com/dissertation>) dedicated to this study was erected with details of the study, including the questions prepared for the purposes of the interview, requirements for engagement in the study, and a copy of the informed consent form. Due to the sensitive nature of this topic, as well as the nature of informed consent within the BDSM community, it seemed fitting to allow for a transparent interview process that allowed potential participants to have full understanding of the study prior to engaging with the interview.

Therefore, the interview questions were included on this site as a means of creating a completely open experience for participants, allowing individuals to make a fully informed decision to participate prior to having to identify with the researcher. Details of how to reach the researcher and her dissertation chair were also provided, with the invitation to reach out to either individual to ask clarifying questions if desired. The purpose of this website was to provide any potential participants with all the information that was involved in the study so that individuals could make an informed decision to engage. Any individual who wished to participate in this study had the ability to reach out to the researcher directly through the link on the website, which emailed the researcher directly. Participants were then contacted through a secure application, called *Signal* and were given the opportunity to discuss the content of the consent form, ask any clarifying questions with regard to the study, and go over in detail how the data would be handled post interview. As a means of ensuring privacy and protection for all participants, each individual gave a pseudonym as well as oral consent only before engaging with the interview, ensuring that no identifying information was recorded. Once original recorded data were transcribed and the information has been deidentified, all recordings were destroyed. All transcripts of the interviews are stored on password-protected documents, which will be deleted after 5 years, per APA requirements. Participants also retained the right to withdraw from the study at any time, with no consequence.

Participants were interviewed one-on-one by the researcher via a secure messaging service called *Signal*. Participants were given the option to engage in video calling or voice-only options based on their level of comfort with the medium and the interview process. All interviews were designated a 90-minute time frame to allow for detailed responses. All interviews were based on an open-ended questionnaire designed by the researcher.

Validity

The prospect of internal validity proposes that the results of the research are credible from the perspective of the participants involved in the study. In an effort to maintain this level of internal validity, the focus of participant narratives was central. Results were formulated from participants' direct quotes and answers, with the consistent aim to give a voice to the participants who engaged in this study.

The aim of this research was to be able to transcend the concept of female submission within the BDSM/kink community and expand an understanding of female sexuality and empowerment in general. By exploring participants' understanding of female marginalization and experiences of societal disempowerment, this study aimed to be able to generalize results into a larger understanding of female autonomy and self-efficacy. The essence of this research was grounded in the current understanding of female experiences and perceptions of disempowerment within society. It was outside of the scope of this study to make assumptions or predictions regarding how or if these factors may change in the future. However, it is plausible to say that replication of this study may illuminate different results based on the political climate or changing dynamics of gender roles at the time of replication.

In an effort to maintain objectivity, this researcher engaged in bracketing in an attempt to organize and separate her own thoughts, bias and perspective on the topics of human sexuality, BDSM/kink communities and feminism. Consultation with dissertation chair, Dr. Berkey, was also utilized as a means of assessing for potential bias and distortion of the results. It was determined that due to the nature of the research design, which attempted to portray an essence of the participants' voice and experience, a foundational understanding of the community and those activities was necessary in order to interpret the results. Due to this limitation, the option to

involve an additional researcher to cross examine the results and independently review data was not available. It is acknowledged that replications of this research could be strengthened with the addition of another researcher who could engage in cross-examination and independent analysis of the results to enhance objectivity of results.

Instrumentation

Nine questions were developed based on the collected literature on the topic thus far, drawing from theoretical perspectives on submission and experiences within the kink community as a whole. Questions focused on an exploration of the participants' lived experience of submission and identifying as a female. The first question asked participants to explain their identity within the BDSM/kink community and extrapolate on how they understand the nature of this role. The following question asked participants to disclose certain elements of their identity: gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity and kink identity. The purpose of asking participants to identify their kink identity was to understand if this was separate or intertwined with how they saw their role. For example, while a person's role in BDSM may be identified as a submissive, their identity may more closely align with sadomasochist; conversely, an individual's identity and understanding of their role may be one and the same. The significance of understanding the individual identification in these realms is in line with the feminist theory outlined by Biklen et al. (2008), wherein the power of the narrative comes from the individual voice.

The next question asked participants to outline their personal meaning of kink, with some examples of identifications found in the literature being provided as examples (Hammers, 2014; Keenan, 2014; Newmahr, 2010). It was noted that there was a risk for these examples impacting the participants' responses; therefore, an invitation to elaborate on any new meanings that were not included was necessary. The fourth question asked participants to speak of their experience

of marginalization in society due to their identity as a woman. While this question was specific in its context of female marginalization, it allowed the participants to speak freely about experiences that occur in various scenarios, both in and out of the BDSM/kink scene. The fifth and sixth questions pertained to submission both within the BDSM community and in general society, and attempted to create an introspective understanding of what drew participants to such roles. The seventh question pertained to potential levels of satisfaction felt by participants based on their interactions and involvement with their submissive roles. Given the understanding that such activities can be engaged in through the pursuit of various outlets, such as leisure activities or sexual orientations, this researcher wanted to understand how participants understood their level of satisfaction from such engagements. The eighth question asked participants to engage in an introspective exploration of their experiences as a woman and a submissive, giving participants the ability to express their understanding of how or if these factors interact. The final question asked specifically about participants' sense of empowerment as a submissive, again asking for an introspective understanding of their position and role within this dynamic. At the conclusion of the interview, participants were offered the ability to add anything that they felt was not covered by the interview questions but felt was pertinent to the narrative.

Data Processing

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. All deidentified transcripts were then analyzed line-by-line for reoccurring themes or poignant statements. While analyzing the data, the researcher utilized memoing (Creswell, 2012) while reviewing the deidentified transcripts to highlight major themes or ideas within the content of the data collected; this involved the process of reading each individual transcript multiple times, making annotations of what stood out as significant or important. This process was repeated for each

transcript to ensure that salient information was not missed and to become familiar with each narrative. After the initial annotation was completed on the first transcript, themes were pulled from the notes created. This process involved transforming the initial notes into words or phrases that captured the essence of the narrative (Smith & Osborne, 2007). This process was repeated for all transcripts, with the main topics becoming formulated into categories and the transcripts reread in order to search for any data that may support this perspective. Important themes or perspectives were then cross-referenced with all transcripts to see if there was evidence for similar themes or data that correlated with the meanings. An interpretation of the data, which provided an interpretative description of the found themes or categories, was then formulated. This stage provided a narrative understanding of the findings, translating the data into a collective and meaningful understanding of participants' responses.

Assumptions

The major assumption of this study was regarding the level of involvement that participants have with the BDSM/kink community. While the prerequisites of this study did not quantify a level of involvement within the community, it was assumed that participants viewed their involvement as part of the community as a central part of their identity. Another assumption of this study was that all participants were identifiable as female presenting. While the prerequisite of this study requested that all participants be identified as cisgender female, it is not possible to identify how all individuals present in public or are subsequently perceived by society. Therefore, it is possible that some individuals present with an identity that does not align with cisgender female and therefore have differing experiences of gender stereotypes, discrimination or bias.

Given that the nature of this study was designed to be open-ended questions, a large assumption of this research was that participants answered honestly to all questions. It was assumed that because participation in this research was purely voluntary and initiated by the participants themselves, individuals would have no motivation to give answers that were inconsistent with their experiences.

Limitations

A limitation that should be addressed within this study includes researcher bias. It is important that the researcher engage in bracketing before entering into data collection and analysis in order to not allow for personal ideas and views pertaining to kink activities or feminist values to interfere with the results or even sway the answers of participants. The researcher made all attempts to bracket her own personal feelings towards the kink community and alternative sexualities in general. In order to do this, it was important to recognize and acknowledge her own positive biases and acceptance towards alternative sexualities and the kink community. Furthermore, the researcher made efforts to recognize and bracket her own understanding and identity as a feminist when conducting this study. In order to achieve this, it was advisable to cross-check all findings and results with designated literature and consult with peers, fellow researchers and other professionals who have knowledge of this area. Consultation with dissertation chair Dr. Berkey, who is well versed in the field of human sexualities, provided a valuable resource regarding any potential biases that arose. Furthermore, fellow students and peers whose professional interests fall into the field of human sexualities offered helpful insight into researcher bias regarding potential positive bias. In efforts to maintain subjectivity, the researcher journaled after each interview session with participants, as well as during the analysis process, identifying reactions and responses to the data collected.

Ethical Assurances

Per Institutional Review Board restrictions, it was not possible to post recruitment fliers or information on this study on public forums. Therefore, snowballing method was utilized in order to gain interest from prospective participants. The researcher constructed a website that contained all the details of this study, including introduction of the researcher, purpose of the study, interview questions and ways to contact the researcher and dissertation chair. This website was then shared with individuals who self-identified to the researcher as being members of the BDSM/kink community, and these individuals were asked to pass along the website address to anyone who might have been interested in learning more about the research. To ensure complete confidentiality and anonymity for all participants, this researcher requested that any potential participants contact the researcher on a secure messaging service called Signal using a pseudonym. To further ensure confidentiality of all participants, oral consent for engagement was obtained to reduce any identifiable information that could link them to the study being conducted.

All interviews were recorded on a digital recording device and transcribed verbatim after the interview. All original recordings were then deleted, and each transcript was stored as a locked file on a password-protected computer. Printouts of the transcripts were utilized for the purposes of data processing only; all physical copies of transcripts were then shredded after this process was completed.

Summary

This research was designed to explore the individual experience of empowerment while embodying a submissive role. Questions were designed to expand how the element of choice and autonomy within this dynamic impacted the individuals' experience of submissive actions. A

phenomenological approach was utilized for the purpose of this study as a means of capturing the essence of the participants' narratives. In-depth interviews were utilized as a means of exploring participants' stories and giving a voice to a marginalized community. Requirements for participation included that individuals be female identified and/or presenting, between the ages of 21 and 99, identify as either a submissive or a switch in the BDSM/kink community and able to speak and read fluent English.

Participants contacted the researcher directly via a website constructed for the purposes of this study, giving a pseudonym and oral consent to ensure confidentiality. A secure messaging service called *Signal* was utilized for all interviews. Bracketing was utilized as a means to ensure validity of this study and reduce researcher bias. Interviews consisted of nine questions formulated by the researcher to explore the various elements of female identity, submission and empowerment. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was utilized to process the data and capture the essence of the narratives. Acknowledgment of the assumptions related to participants' level of involvement in the BDSM/kink community are noted, as well as the limitations of access to willing participants due to the sensitive nature of this topic. In an effort to maintain participant confidentiality, no identifiable data were recorded or linked to the interviews, and pseudonyms were utilized for the entirety of data collection.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

The following chapter reviews the results and findings of this study. An outline of the setting that data were collected in as well as demographics of participants is provided. Finally, results are discussed.

Setting

In an effort to maintain anonymity for all participants, remote interviews were offered via the secure messaging service *Signal* to all participants. Video or voice only calls were the interview options, dependent on the participants' level of comfort with the platform, as well as their own personal desires to physically see the researcher or not be visible during this process. No other influences were noted as a result of the setting in which the data were collected.

Demographics

Six women primarily located in the Midwest region of the United States agreed to engage in an interview for the purposes of this study. A description of the identifying factors that were asked for the purposes of this study, in their own words, follows:

- Daja – 26-year-old, Caucasian, demi-sexual, pan-sexual, cisgender female, sub-leaning switch.
- Strava – 29-year-old, Caucasian, bisexual, female assigned at birth, switch.
- Bebe – 52-year-old, Caucasian, straight, cisgender female, service sub.
- Iskra – 31-year-old, Caucasian, bisexual, cisgender female, masochistic-sub.
- Sadia – 46-year-old, Caucasian, straight, cisgender female, service sub in leather.
- Lamia – 26-year-old, Black, A-sexual, A-romantic, femme creature, sadomasochistic-switch.

Results

Utilizing a phenomenological reflective process, as outlined by Creswell (2013), each transcript was read line-by-line to identify significant statements or points of interest that the participants provided regarding their experience. It was important to reread each transcript several times in order to ensure that salient information was not missed and to ensure that I was familiar with each transcript. After this process was completed for each individual transcript, a list of overarching themes or important meanings that conveyed the essential meaning of each participant's meaning was written out. Each transcript was then reread to cross-compare themes, to see if the data correlated to the overall themes found across all the interviews.

Main themes were noted to be evident if data were found across three of the six narratives. For example, three of the six participants independently spoke about their own experiences of sexual assault as part of their narrative, indicating that this was an important part of the experience for these individuals. Eleven main themes were pulled from the data; Communication, Consent, Safety, Defying Social Expectations and Norms, Validation and the Authentic Self, Choice, Trust, Understanding Other's Perspective, Acknowledgement of Misogyny, Satisfaction and Sexual Assault.

Themes From Participants

Communication

The first theme that was highlighted was communication, which emphasizes the importance participants placed on the value of effective communication with their partners in order to get their needs met in their interactions. According to Daja, "It's a place that we have to talk a lot about communicating wants, desires, what we feel comfortable with, what we don't feel comfortable with, how, we do things safely." Participants placed value on being able to have a

dialogue with partners in order to understand the boundaries of roles and play scenes, as well as players' comfort and overall safety. It is important to note that participants also commented on the relational dynamics of their interactions/roles outside of the play scene or kink dynamic, speaking to a level of autonomy within their everyday lives as well. Iskra stated, "You can call me a slut or whatever, but you have to do it like you like it, and I don't want you to do it in front of my parents." In commenting on communication, there were also overlapping themes that pertained to a sense of safety and respect that ran through participants' commentary. Participants viewed communication as a tool to voice not only their wants and desires within the interaction, but how they were able to achieve this in a way where they felt secure, comfortable and valued throughout.

Table 1

Communication

Communication
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “It’s well negotiated” (Strava). - “Right, well, and a lot of us who are involved in BDSM, we’re not perfect people, we all have baggage, you know there’s always going to be something that doesn’t sit right, and that’s why negotiations are so huge, and communication is so important, because that’s how you understand personal boundaries” (Sadia). - “I really like being able to negotiate” (Iskra). - “We’ve discussed what words and things mean in a scene” (Lamia). - “I have to get to know somebody, very, very well before I will turn over that kind of power to them. And we kind of practice it lightly a lot before we enter into any kind of relationship like that” (Bebe). - “There’s so much involved that you have to really think about and that you really have to use your words about” (Iskra). - “You have to specifically ask for that” (Iskra). - “My main partner and I actually had a whole discussion when our relationship was getting formed on, this is a thing that’s only done in scene space and only when we’re both in that space of we both want it going on. Outside of that, he doesn’t want me to be submissive, he likes that I have a mind that will speak things” (Daia). - “Negotiations are so huge, and communication is so important, because that’s how you understand personal boundaries” (Sadia).

Consent

Consent was a theme that, while similar to communication, was distinct in its essence. The theme of communication spoke of negotiated details that can vacillate depending on the needs of the players and thus can alter in their limitations. Consent, however, speaks more so to the participants' own limitations that are non-negotiable; in BDSM terminology, this would often be considered a "hard limit." Consent speaks to the idea that participants agree willingly to the activities and have the ability to withdraw at any given time. This theme highlights the participants' level of individual choice and control that is independent of their counter-parts, and in many ways is differentiated from the communication process. It was noted that participants discussed their own boundaries when speaking of consent and did not speak to this aspect as a fluid notion, suggesting that participants were aware of their hard limits that were non-negotiable. Salvia also highlighted how the nature of consent continued to be a two-way approach that did not supersede or remove the importance of consent for all players:

Some people do it to please their Top or please their Domme. That's not what it's been like for me. Generally speaking, I'm more into, again a little selfishly, getting what I want out of a situation. Not that I'm ever going to negate someone else getting pleasure from a sexual or a kink activity, that's not the point.

Sadia discussed how consent interacts with the idea of pleasure, and speaks more so to the concept that the actions that participants engage in are done so willingly:

So there was this one experience with Sir, and we had played and he wanted to talk to me, and he was all like, "I really want to know what you liked, what you didn't like and all that." And I was confused, because to me it didn't matter, you know? My question

was, “Well, did Sir like it? Ok then.” You know, it doesn’t matter what I like. My Master is actually pretty sadistic, so I’m not necessarily going to like what he wants.

In this role, consent is not about the pleasure that one receives from the actions that are being performed; it is more in line with the act of allowing another to perform such behaviors. As Sadia highlighted, the actions that she engages in with her Master may not be pleasurable, however, it is the dynamic of consent within the relationship that results in a pleasurable sensation. Here one can begin to understand how the quantifiable experience of pleasure is not strictly tied to physical sensations or even sexual satisfaction, but can be linked to more of a relational dynamic of safety, trust and consent between players.

Table 2

Consent

Consent
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “I feel like I have consent in a scene” (Lamia). - “I think that’s the really important part is the trust and the consent” (Strava). - “I still have some control” (Iskra). - “They’re not going to do things that you talked about not doing” (Iskra). - “Getting to be like, “No, I can have sex on my own terms,” is really empowering” (Iskra). - “Respect my limits” (Iskra). - “It’s a group of people, a community wherein I can trust that if I’ve got an issue with people being too forward, too touchy whatever, it will be taken seriously, and it will be fucking resolved before it goes too far” (Daja).

Safety

Safety was an element that was spoken about in two distinct ways: the physical element of safety and the emotional concept of safety. In speaking of the physical elements of safety,

participants illuminated some of the more creative methods that they have encountered as a means of accomplishing certain desires. Daja stated, “Vivisection is a thing that a couple of people in the community do, there’s no way to safely do that, but it’s something that they want to play with. Hypno-play lets them do that.” As Daja highlighted, there is a common understanding and acceptance of the limitations of safety and the ability for the body to withstand certain procedures; this echoes the community’s acronyms of SSC (Safe, Sane, and Consensual) and RACK (Risk Aware, Consensual Kink), which highlight the need for safety and planning for activities.

Another area of safety that was noted within this theme was that of emotional safety; this was evident in participants’ vocalization of their need to feel safe with and trusting of their partner. Bebe spoke about her experiences of witnessing newer people within the community and the risks that arise with such situations, stating:

People who are new starting out in this world get caught up in that intoxication of that power or turning over that power, and tend not to make decisions to safe guard themselves. They don’t quite know how to handle it yet, and they tend to turn that power over to anybody that, you know, that they get that tingle about, which is not always the best thing to do, but that comes from a lot of self-learning. And I do a lot of introspection. That’s the one thing that I think people need more education about, which is how to be safe with it. Unfortunately, we see that a lot.

An interesting element to Bebe’s observations is that she underlined how the intoxication of a new relationship can be the dangerous element in this scenario. As she explained, it is that natural attraction to another that can become overpowering and ultimately impact one’s judgment. As Bebe noted, in order to balance this desire with unadulterated decision making, she

must engage in self-reflective processes; this suggests that entering into a dynamic with another in a safe manner requires a level of reasoning and insight that is independent from the power dynamic of the relationship.

This idea of personal safety established prior to engagement with others was also evident in Iskra's transcript regarding the partners that she chooses to engage with in a play scene. She stated, "I've had some not great experiences with cisgender men, so I have been sort of steering clear. Like, I still get attracted to men, cismen, but I usually avoid them in actual practice." What is apparent here is that Iskra is aware of her natural attraction to male identified individuals; however, her experience has led her to feel a level of discomfort and distrust with certain members of the community. Essentially, her past experiences and interactions have led to a reflective decision that allows her to meet her needs while still maintaining her own sense of safety.

Table 3

Safety

Safety
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “To safe word and have that respected and heard when that hasn’t been the experience in ‘real life,’ like, that is powerful. It’s not in the same way that we tend to conceptualize power in our culture, like as a whole Western society, but it’s a power of its own and it’s just a powerful experience. And it’s just, like, healing experience when you’ve had really bad experiences in the past, and really bad experiences before you’ve even had relationships” (Lamia). - “There are some real safety concerns and as someone who has been assaulted, you know, when I was growing up and everything, and as someone who’s Ace, I have to be really careful of the way I present myself and who I play with as a sub and who I give that power to” (Lamia). - “The ability to let my walls down safely, that’s really what first drew me. The fun kinky sex was the second part” (Sadia). - “Like, the world can still be a scary place and I can still be, like, but I’m going to be okay at the end of it, so it’s also a comfort” (Strava). - “It took me some exploring to realize that it’s possible to find people that you trust and that won’t take advantage of you” (Strava). - “...going somewhere kind of in your lizard brain, where you’re like, ‘This should be really terrifying,’ and it is, but it’s also not because it’s safe” (Strava). - “I feel more comfortable talking about it within the kink scene than I do a lot of other places” (Iskra). - “The community’s response was pretty strong” (Iskra). - “Wow, that was a sexual experience that we shared, and it didn’t hurt, and I wasn’t scared, and everybody’s happy” (Iskra).

Defying Social Expectations and Norms

The concept of social expectations was a topic that was specifically asked within the interview questions with regard to experiences of marginalization as a woman. However, participants spoke about this concept in a way that warrants dividing it into two themes: defying social expectations and norms, and fighting against misogyny. Through the idea of defying social expectations and norms, participants spoke about the concept of the binary structure that appears in society and how their engagement with kink can dismantle those norms. In speaking of her power structure with partners Lamia offered, “Yeah it’s not necessarily gendered. Like, I very much believe that a King does not have to be a dude, like a King does not have to be male identified.” Here one can see how the elements of power play are independent from gender identification. This concept is also noted in Iskra’s transcript, wherein she outlines how gender is secondary to the role of her partners in their dynamic: “Somebody’s gender doesn’t matter to me as much as if I’m going to be attracted to them, as if I think they could dominate me.”

Participants also noted how there was a degree of freedom in this concept, with the idea that they are not bound to certain roles or dynamics. Daja stated:

General society does not like people who don’t pick one side or another. And I have more flexibility to do that in the kink world. And that’s really nice, and it lets me embrace all the parts of who I am, rather than just the parts that I feel passionate enough about standing up for, or that society deems are acceptable.

Daja’s account highlights how play within BDSM/kink roles can not only transcend the binary standards of gender, but also allows an individual to embrace all the elements of gender that individuals identify as part of their authentic self. It is suggested that an individual can find comfort in those dichotomous elements, whether it be male and/or female, Dominant and/or

submissive, and they can feel comfortable in the fluidity of those elements as authentic parts of the self. Basically, a person does not have to choose between these factors, but can in fact embrace them all simultaneously, while utilizing one factor for the purposes of a play scene, fantasy or persona.

Table 4

Defying Social Expectations and Norms

Defying Social Expectations and Norms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “It’s different whenever you choose to do it, as opposed to whenever someone tries to say you’re not as worthy because you’re female” (Sadia). - “Like, there’s sort of, sort of a script for if you’re a ciswoman going on a date with a cisman and like, these are the expected things that you are going to do” (Iskra). - “It’s a community where sexual things aren’t a taboo topic, so they get talked about in ways that the general society won’t do that, but really needs to start doing” (Daja). - “An expectation can lead to a resentment, whereas to everyone else, that’s being helpful and that’s what you’re expected to do” (Daja). - “General society does not like people who don’t pick one side or another” (Daja).

Acknowledgement of Misogyny

The other element of dismantling social expectations and norms referred to the acknowledgment of misogyny. It was necessary to separate this category from the overarching theme of defying social expectations, not only because of gendered element of this theme, but also because of the language participants used in recalling these experiences. This theme

specifically differs from the previous comments on societal expectations of binary standards and highlights the continued perception of pervasive traditional gender roles enforced by male identified individuals. On this topic, Daja stated:

With the exception of a few older White guys, erm, that's just how it was. Some of the ... almost exclusively old White guys had this assumption, at least in my experience, that, erm, all young women are subs, period. End of discussion. All women are subs, and if they say otherwise, they just need the right Top to show them that they are wrong.

Iskra had a similar sentiment:

I've run into a lot of especially cisgender men who are like, "Well, of course you're submissive because you're a woman and that is woman's natural state, to be submissive to man," and I'm like. "Yeah, nope, that's not where I want to go with this at all."

Strava offered the following: "A lot of gross Dommies who are, I would definitely use the word misogynistic, will use kind of this community and people's interests, erm, in a very selfish and unhealthy way." The accounts of Daja, Iskra and Strava highlight how they have not only experienced this perception of male dominance as a projected expectation from more traditional societal expectations, but how this has been manifested primarily by males within the community.

Table 5

Acknowledgement of Misogyny

Acknowledgment of Misogyny
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “Every now and then there is kind of this subset of Domme who think they have control over everyone, especially females” (Sadia). - “If you’re a woman who’s interested in men, you have to look kinda hard to find a man whose thought about these things and is critical of his own desires. It’s hard” (Iskra). - “I think female submissives have a much easier time in the community than male submissives do, because it, unfortunately, people do look on male submission sometimes as a weakness, and I think that that’s a disservice” (Bebe). - “I won’t sleep with MRAs, so I set that boundary” (Iskra). - “The guys who are like, ‘Men are being destroyed by feminism and what we need is to be stronger and manlier and bring back patriarchy,’ and [I’m] like, ‘Oh calm down.’ I end up, I had a guy practice whipping on me and then I went and looked at his profile and was like, ‘Eww’” (Iskra).

Validation and Authentic Self

Validation was noted in various ways throughout participants’ interviews. First and foremost, it was evident in the sense that individuals could feel a sense of comfort and acceptance in their own identity and sexuality. Lamia stated, “Kink was the first place where I found people who were cool with my Ace-ness, it’s where I got the terms actually: A-Sexual.” As Lamia highlighted, for her, kink has provided a space wherein her asexuality is not only valid as an identity, but also respected. Lamia’s experience suggests that she has not only found a place where she can feel comfortable in her sexual identity, but has also been able to find a

language that communicates her experience; this was also noted in others' testimony, such as Bebe, who spoke of kink as a place where she was able to reconcile desires that she otherwise felt were abnormal:

I didn't know it was out there, but it's been out there for decades and decades, you know centuries. But I didn't know that it really existed. I had read some fiction, but to know there were people who lived these lives and that I wasn't, you know, those things that roll around in your head, "I'm sick, I'm perverted, I'm whatever." 'Til you realize that it is a thing, that there's a reason and that there's a driving force behind them. So, it was very self-validating.

As one can see, the fear of not conforming to the normative expectations of sexuality impacted Bebe's view of herself, resulting in anxieties of being labeled "sick." However, the sense of community, acceptance, and solidarity that she has found within this community not only allowed her to reconcile her own desires, but accept them as being normal. This sense of community and solidarity regarding specific desires or fantasies was also apparent in other's testimonies. Iskra stated, "No matter what weird thing I'm into, there's someone else who's into it too."

Another way in which authenticity emerged was noted in the sense of participants feeling more themselves. According to Iskra:

Well, it's in some ways, it's the real, like, satisfaction, if you know what I mean. Like I have actually orgasmed just from being beaten, so there's the sexual satisfaction, and then there's also ... like a couple of months after I started getting involved in the kink community, I actually went back to visit my parents and my mom was like, "You just seem just so much happier and so much more like yourself, than I've seen you in ages.

What have you been doing differently?” And I had to make something up real fast, because I didn’t want to be like, “Well, mum, I’ve been having kinky sex. Why don’t I tell you all about it?” Because I don’t think she would like hearing all about that.

Here, Iskra speaks of not only the sense of satisfaction that she felt after becoming involved in the community, but the general sense of happiness that she felt in her overall life. Iskra highlighted how this change in her emotional state and persona was observed by her family members, and while she did not feel comfortable sharing the source, the validation from outside the community still appeared meaningful. This was also echoed in Daja’s response, when she stated, “You’re more you now.”

This sense of validation was not only apparent from the constructs of internal acceptance, but also from the notion that outside acceptance provided participants the ability to be seen, heard and genuinely validated in their lived experiences. Lamia said, “Having people to, like, just witness the experience and say, ‘Yeah, that happens. You’re not crazy, it happens. It’s pervasive, but it’s still wrong.’ It’s nice.” Similarly, Iskra offered, “People believed me.” Here, Lamia and Iskra spoke of experiences of marginalization that they have felt as women in society, again a question that was specifically asked as part of the interview process. However, the expansion on the community’s response and the validation that has resulted in that witnessing was independently offered from both participants. It is apparent that this shared sense of understanding and recognition was an important element in helping participants’ acceptance of their own lived experiences.

Table 6

Validation and Authentic Self

Validation and Authentic Self
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “I don’t think it’s necessarily inherent in my attraction. I think it’s just, erm, something that’s is almost more personality based” (Strava). - “Gosh, I was just having this discussion with one of my partners, in it’s a natural predisposition for me to differ to them” (Bebe). - “I don’t know, I had one boyfriend who was like, ‘I’m not into kinky stuff. I’m only into really normal stuff,’ and I was like, “That’s really boring and not what I’m into.” And it sort of felt like I was screwed up because I was interested in kinky stuff and then getting to play with and know actually there are people who think this is awesome and revel in it” (Iskra). - “I guess there are women who are happy in situations that I wouldn’t be happy in, of all different kinds, but if I chose what I want and they chose what they want, that’s what really matters” (Iskra). - “Part of it is feeling accepted, and part of it is a sort of like, I can do these things that other people might not be able to do, and I’m sort of proud of myself for it” (Iskra).

Choice

Choice was a theme that was communicated consistently and independently throughout interviews with participants. It became apparent in the interview process that this element of participants’ interactions was an important aspect that they wanted to communicate and be heard in their story. Often, this was highlighted in relation to the importance of communication that is

inherent in BDSM/kink dynamics, where submission, just like other activities, is negotiated and thought through, with the ability to be reclaimed if so desired. As stated by Strava, ““In the kink communities, submission is a choice, it’s well communicated.” Bebe expanded on her role of submission and the choices she makes, as they are integral to her role as a submissive. It is evident that her decision process comes from a sense of pride and autonomy in performing her role to the best of her abilities in a way that maintains her identity. She stated:

I don’t reside with any of my partners, erm, but when they are here, I want to make sure that part of my actions are that they want for nothing when they’re with me. I know their favorite drink, I know their favorite foods, I know what they’re allergic to, I know what their favorite past times are, I know what they like in sex. I make it a point to know all this.

Daja similarly echoed this sentiment, stating, “Choosing to do it for someone who has earned that trust versus being expected to do it all the time.” Again, the element of choice is apparent here in that participants are deciding to engage in this action, subsequently entering into that role. Whether the submission state is something that relates to a long-term relational dynamic, or a more time-limited play scene, the power remains with the submissive to continue these actions.

Table 7

Choice

Choice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “I’m choosing to do this” (Sadia). - “I’m doing it on purpose” (Iskra). - “As a submissive, I enter into power exchange relationships with my partner and I, erm, I tend to ... I differ pretty much to their decisions, erm, for my well-being and what they want from me, because I chose to do that” (Bebe). - “But it is a choice on my part, to hand over that power to someone else” (Bebe)

Trust

Trust was an element that was spoken about regarding engagement with others in the community and the partners that participants chose. Bebe stated, “I am very careful about always picking partners who always have my own best interests at heart.” It was noted that trust was an element that was given great magnitude in terms of personal and emotional safety with partners. Trust was highlighted to not only be about an issue of safety, but also a part of the emotionally rewarding experience that can transpire between partners. Daja said, “Emotional vulnerability is frowned on, and being able to explore that emotional vulnerability and not have that backfire in ways that hurt, matters to me.” The importance of trust in this dynamic allowed participants to feel a level of comfort and security in exploring aspects of themselves in a way that allowed them to feel secure and protected.

Table 8

Trust

Trust
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “To be a slave, though, is to be in service, and so in my experience with the Master that I have, he has the final say in everything. You know, him and I have built a level of trust where it’s not an issue; I don’t worry about my own safety” (Sadia). - “I can trust them to make an objective decision” (Bebe). - “Level of rewarding” (Daja).

Understanding Others’ Perspectives

A theme that was noted throughout the interviews was one of understanding and respecting the perspective of others, specifically those who differed in circumstances from the other participants. Iskra stated, “I guess there are women who are happy in situations that I wouldn’t be happy in, of all different kinds, but if I chose what I want and they chose what they want, that’s what really matters.” Iskra’s identification and recognition that there may be elements or dynamics within the community that she does not ascribe to, or perhaps even understand, such as understanding that other women may make choices that do not align with her decisions, exemplify the level of respect for autonomy and choice that was salient throughout the interviews. The pervasive understanding seemed to be rooted in the concept of autonomy and choice for the individuals involved. This acceptance allowed for flexibility in participants’ view of others and fostered a sense of communal respect and acceptance throughout. Furthermore, there seemed to be a level of empathy that was fostered from this understanding. As stated by Iskra, “I’ve heard it’s really hard to be submissive and a dude, because it’s really hard to find

images that you can see yourself in.” Contrasting with the theme of anger towards misogyny that was outlined earlier, Iskra’s account highlights that the underlying response to males in the community is not completely negative. This account highlights a genuine compassion and understanding of an experience that is outside of the experience of any of the participants: being a male submissive; this suggests that the overall sense of community allows for an element of support and compassion for all members, especially those who may continue to be marginalized.

Table 9

Understanding Other’s Perspectives

Understanding Other’s Perspectives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “Supporting your sisters” (Strava). - “You know, one person can handle getting swatted with the paddle 50 times, and another person will freak out with one hit, because you also have to look for triggers. Is that a term you’ve come across? Trigger equals bad” (Sadia). - “There was one guy I followed for a while, who was saying how his old fashioned family couldn’t tell that there was anything kinky about his relationship because his wife just acts as they expect a wife to act. And part of me is kind of grossed out by that, but then part of me is like, well she’s doing it on purpose so, if that’s how that works, cool” (Iskra).

Satisfaction

Satisfaction was an element that was specifically asked about during the interview questions; however, it was formulated in participants’ responses in three distinct ways. First it was noted that participants felt sexual pleasure from such actions. Iskra stated, “In some ways, it’s the real like satisfaction, if you know what I mean. Like I have actually orgasmed just from

being beaten, so there's the sexual satisfaction." Secondly, it was found that participants described satisfaction as either feeling cathartic or a sense of pride. Sadia said, "When Sir and I have a scene, depending on what's going on determines what it's like. So there are times when it is very cathartic, because I have to be so strong every single day for everybody around me." As evidenced in these accounts, participants described feeling a sense of relief within their role as submissives. While participants were cognizant of their sense of autonomy and independent decision to engage in these activities, there was an ability to let go of the essence of power during this time and become vulnerable with their partners; this was outlined in both the physical and emotional element of submission, within which participants described both the physical release through body as well as the emotional release while in their head space.

Pride was also expressed by participants in relation to the activities in which they engaged. Participants expressed a sense of accomplishment in being able to withstand activities, noting a sense of satisfaction in their body's strength. Participants also highlighted a sense of accomplishment in terms of accomplishing a role and maintaining certain standards. As Strava said, "Look at what I can withstand and look at not only what I can withstand, but I can enjoy it." Similarly, Sadia offered the following: ""It's one of those things where you can hold your head up high knowing that you did a good job and not only that, but they don't mind saying, 'You did a good job.'"

Table 10

Satisfaction

Satisfaction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “But it’s not like I’m completely selfless. Like, I’m going to get what I want too, whether that’s like spanking or biting or whatever. But I’m very cognizant of myself in the room getting what I want” (Strava). - “I can largely turn off my brain and just do what I’m told, and that’s lovely. And then you mix it with all kinds of like fun activities and then you get all these lovely brain chemicals and you get floaty, lovely altered states of consciousness that even help facilitate decompressing even more” (Lamia). - “You know, something else that I like about our community is that they’re not short on gratitude” (Sadia) - “My kinks are, erm, a lot of times a relief, erm, especially when deriving pleasure through pain. It has a very calming and centering effect upon my persona” (Bebe). - “I do derive pleasure from pain” (Bebe). - “A level of emotional vulnerability that leads to a more emotionally satisfying connection with my partner” (Daja). - “I can do these things that other people might not be able to do, and I’m sort of proud of myself for it. Like taking a really hard beating, or let someone stick needles in me and make a corset down my back of them. I’ve done some things that are maybe even more exciting for people to see than for me to experience, and that’s sort of like a feather in my cap. Like I’ve done fire play, which almost just feels like a warm massage, but the looks on people’s faces when they see you get set on fire are amazing” (Iskra).

Sexual Assault

Three of the six participants independently disclosed that they had experienced sexual assault. In speaking of these experiences, it was noted that such incidences have occurred both in and out of the BDSM/kink community, highlighting that while there is a culture of consent, sexual assault continues to be a pervasive problem. However, all participants spoke openly about how they have been able to utilize the BDSM/kink community as a tool for healing; this was noted in either the element of accountability from other members taking action, a sense of being validated in their experiences, or even using play scenes as a way of reclaiming a sense of power and ownership over their experiences.

Table 11

Sexual Assault

Sexual Assault
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “As someone who did survive sexual assault, from someone I should have been able to trust, the kink community has been very important for me in being able to cope with that” (Daja). - “To have someone see you in that way and still respect you and deeply care for you, is amazing. Like, it’s something that I don’t think you get in other kinds of relationships and don’t get in the ability to be like, ‘Hey, so I’ve been raped before and I’m a fairly sex-repulsed A-Sexual, so I want you to hold me down and force yourself on me.’ And to be able to have a frank, adult conversation of where that’s coming from, what it means and have to make sure everyone’s okay in the aftermath, like, there is definitive power in that” (Lamia). - “So, I’ve had some not great consent experiences with cisgender men. And I feel like people who are not cisgender men have a better grasp on what it’s like to have that violated. So, I have been sort of steering clear, like I still get attracted to men, cismen, but usually I avoid them in actual practice” (Iskra).

Chapter Summary

Eleven main themes were pulled from the data: Communication, Consent, Safety, Defying Social Expectations and Norms, Validation and the Authentic Self, Choice, Trust, Understanding Other's Perspectives, Acknowledgement of Misogyny, Satisfaction and Sexual Assault. Themes. Reoccurring messages were noted to be significant if they were consistently found across three of the six participants' narratives; this ensured the most consistent translation across all the participants' experiences, summarizing into a collective narrative. The results of this study will inform recommendations for clinicians working with this population, implications for the psychological understanding of power and control, and broaden understanding of empowerment and female sexuality as a whole.

Chapter 5: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The following chapter reviews the qualitative results of this study with regard to the implications for findings. Furthermore, an exploration and discussion of recommendations based on the results of this study and implications moving forward is provided.

Interpretation of Findings

Participants were asked to speak of their experiences as a woman both within and outside of the kink world and to give a narrative of their experience in these domains. The data clustered around 11 themes: communication, consent, safety, defying social expectations and norms, validation and the authentic self, choice, trust, understanding other's perspectives, the fight against misogyny, satisfaction, and sexual assault.

All of the participants spoke of the importance of communication as a significant element in their interactions within the BDSM/kink community. Participants indicated that communication was a key element that allowed them to express their desires and understand the boundaries of their partners, as well as aid in finding someone who was willing to engage in these acts. Iskra's account highlighted how specifics of a play scenario can not only be negotiated, but also sought out in a way that allows for security and acceptance of desires:

Well, one of my friends calls it as being a sex nerd, which I really like. Because there's so much involved that you have to really think about and you really have to use your words about, and that really appeals to me, because you can't just like assume that someone wants you to dress up like a stegosaurus and pee on them. You have to specifically ask for that. And that, no matter what weird thing I'm into, there's someone else who's into it too.

Iskra's inflection during this portion of the interview was jovial in tone, which could be interpreted as a level of discomfort in talking to a stranger about sexual acts and desires. However, there is a playfulness in her account that indicates a level of ease and comfort in expressing what would typically be perceived by greater society as a taboo subject. Iskra's example of a stegosaurus urinating on someone, while whimsical in its nature, communicates a level of trust that she will not be rejected for her fantasy. Therefore, the opportunity to share, be accepted, and understood is in itself a form of communication that is valued.

This emphasis on communication is echoed in the literature, specifically by Newmahr (2011), who highlighted how the dynamics of a play scene are co-constructed through the negotiations of the players. Newmahr argued that these boundaries cannot exist without the collaborative efforts of players, which also speaks to the nature of consent and safety that is evident throughout participants' responses. This explicit need for communication also highlights how such scenes can unfold into something that is unique and intricate to the players involved. The co-construction of these interactions takes into account each individual's desires and needs from the scene, creating a more unified and intimate experience.

The value that is placed on authenticity within a communicative dialogue was something that seemed to occur across all participants. Often it was highlighted as a means of ensuring that individual needs were met; however, the discussion of specifics did not occur as a one-sided conversation. It was evident that part of the communication, which inevitably did involve negotiations for the self, also placed a heavy importance of communication for one's partner.

According to Sadia:

A lot of us who are involved in BDSM, we're not perfect people. We all have baggage. You know, there's always going to be something that doesn't sit right, and that's why

negotiations are so huge, and communication is so important, because that's how you understand personal boundaries.

There is an explicit understanding and respect for not only other people's boundaries, but the desire to communicate how to navigate those potential perimeters in a way that is safe and acceptable for all players.

The acceptance and integration of another person's life experience as part of the relational dynamic amongst players is unique in that it suggests the ultimate goal for an engagement is the mutual pleasure and enjoyment of players. While there remains the suggestion that one can ultimately find a partner or partners that will fulfill the requirements of a fantasy, Sadia's account indicates that there is a need for flexibility in expectations of others, which incorporates and respects their boundaries or limits as well. Essentially, the consensual engagement with another who is willing to explore a certain activity is the ultimate goal. Furthermore, this is in line with choice feminist theory, as the focus is on the importance for all players to communicate their desires. The collaborative and communicative efforts from all parties renegotiate the concept of power between players, as it is not the result of systemic oppression or gendered stereotypes. Hence, even when power dynamics play out in scenes, which may have a gendered form to their roles, the element of communication enables all players to feel equal in the enactment of these dynamics.

Consent was another theme that was prevalent throughout participants' experiences and was noted to be highly important when participants spoke of their engagement in scenes or activities. Lamia highlighted the differentiation of fear when she was able to give consent, and how this impacted her reconciliation with play scenes that replicate sexual assault:

Like, the expectation of having, of like, being a woman and, like, well, if I scare you enough, you'll just do the thing, versus like, hey like, I like being scared, this is fun. We should utilize those feelings to, you know, whatever and have fun and enjoy each other and get to know each other better. Like, that's the big difference I think is, it's much more controlled. I can play with sexual studs in kink and still have, still I'm the one doing the planning. That's not how sexual assault works.

The ability to give consent in this situation highlights that even when an emotional response is replicated, the overarching ability to engage consensually transforms the experience into one of enjoyment and intimacy.

Pleasure was not the only concept that was noted to be a byproduct of consent. A sense of reclaiming and taking ownership of experiences was also found. Lamia stated:

I've been raped before and I'm a fairly sex-repulsed A-Sexual, so I want you to hold me down and force yourself on me. And to be able to have a frank, adult conversation of where that's coming from, what it means and have to make sure everyone's okay in the aftermath, like there is definitive power in that.

Lamia's account displays how the element of consent opened up an opportunity to re-experience a previously traumatic event in a way that felt powerful. There is an element of reclaiming her experience, allowing Lamia to be able to take back part of the power dynamic that was once taken and simultaneously have others share in the emotional process and meaning making of this journey. This process not only took an occurrence that was disempowering and turned it into one of power, but it also transformed the experience into one that was safe. This phenomenon is similar to Bennet's (2015) understanding of the role of consent within BDSM/kink interactions, which argues that the presence of consent removes the power of cultural and systemic oppression

from a scene. Similar to the concept of communication, it is the ability to advocate and agree that distinguishes these actions from structural oppression. Choice feminist theory also indicates that it is the ability to examine and explore the meaning behind these notions that discerns acts from subjugation. Lamia's account speaks to her desire to engage in consensual rape scenes, which give her an ability to reclaim a sense of power of her experience as well as have an ability to understand and explore the motivations of her desires to engage in these scenes. Lamia's ability to make a decision about her actions and to experience those elements in a way that is thought out and deliberate not only removes the power from her oppressors, but empowers her in the same movement.

Consequently, safety was another element that was noted to be important in the accounts of participants. Sadie stated, "The ability to let my walls down safely, that's really what first drew me. The fun, kinky sex was the second part." Sadia's classification of important elements in her interactions highlights the significance of safety in creating a space for intimacy, autonomy, and authenticity. In offering this explanation of sexual gratification as a byproduct of this safe space, Sadia's tone was almost flippant; however, it is important when considering the connection to her initial classification of safety as a primary necessity. Essentially, she was advocating that without the ability to feel such security, she would not feel as able to engage in "fun, kinky sex."

The essence of safety was also noted in other participants' language; however, others appeared to speak of it as a pleasant surprise that emerged as they explored their BDSM/kink identity. Iskra stated, "Wow, that was a sexual experience that we shared, and it didn't hurt, and I wasn't scared, and everybody's happy." Similarly, Strava said, "It took me some exploring to realize that it's possible to find people that you trust and that won't take advantage of you."

These accounts from Iskra and Strava indicate that, while safety is an important and welcome experience that they have found, their previous encounters may not have facilitated such a feeling. Strava also spoke about her conscious efforts to carve out a space that allowed her to engage in a way that was safe and approachable as a queer woman, noting that society has not provided this. These narratives speak to safety in two ways. Firstly, it indicates that as women, they have had previous experiences that have proven unsafe or threatening; furthermore, it emphasizes that these women are aware of the continuing threats to their safety as women. Secondly, these accounts give some hope that it is possible to find a place that accommodates safety in a conscious manner. The very fact that Iskra and Strava were able to incorporate a positive encounter as part of their narrative speaks to the ability to foster the need for safety and advocacy.

This refuge and place of haven that provides an element of safety for women is reminiscent of the second-wave feminist movement, which called for a safe place for women created by women. However, as previously noted, the evolution of third-wave feminist theory welcomes male identified allies to these spaces also. As Strava and Iskra have highlighted, they are able to find a sense of safety and acceptance in the presence of male counterparts within these communities, speaking to the need to view safety as not only a women's concern, but as a wider societal concern.

While the overarching themes of safety, consent and communication were evident as separate entities, there were also overlapping elements that pooled them into a cohesive narrative. Collectively, these distinct themes form together to speak to the power and magnitude of the experience of the participants. The following quote from Lamia exemplifies how these separate themes form together to speak to the overall experience:

To safe word and have that respected and heard when that hasn't been the experience in "real life," like, that is powerful. It's not in the same way that we tend to conceptualize power in our culture, like as a whole Western society, but it's a power of its own. And it's just a powerful experience. And it's just like healing experience when you've had really bad experiences in the past, and really bad experiences before you've even had relationships.

Essentially, Lamia advocates that society's understanding of power needs to be reconceptualized, encompassing a more meaning-making process into the narrative of empowerment. Power for these women has come from finding safety, not from simply avoiding danger. Safety in turn has come from communication, which has been fostered by consent and their own sense of autonomy and voice. These women have been able to determine their level of involvement, communicated their willingness to engage, and explore the depth and meaning behind the activities in which they participate. It is evident that being acutely aware of not only their past experiences, but how they wish to process those events, has influenced the meaning-making process and given these women the ability to reclaim or rewrite a narrative that was previously forced upon them; this is in line with third-wave feminist theory, which advocates that a woman's ability to choose is an empowered position. They are able to determine their role, their position and their engagement within these scenes in a way that makes sense for them and not just for others.

Three of the participants disclosed a history of sexual assault as part of their narrative, and spoke about how the BDSM/kink community has facilitated a space to overcome or work through some of this trauma. For Lamia, it was her ability to re-experience her trauma in a way that empowered her in that scene. Daja spoke of the ability to regain a sense of trust from others

after having that trust violated by her perpetrator. Iskra spoke of the ability to choose partners based on her level of comfort. She noted how avoiding cisgender men allowed her to feel safe and have her experiences understood. All these enactments highlight how participants have made conscientious decisions, based on their experiences, of how to process their narratives in a way that feels safe, comfortable and meaningful to themselves. Essentially, it is their ability to choose the path that works for them that has facilitated a place of healing and meaning in their experience.

It is important to note that the topic of sexual assault was not anticipated as part of this study; however, three of the six participants independently spoke of this experience as part of their narrative. Mackay (2015) explained that many self-identified feminists claim similar experiences of sexual violence as their motivations for seeking out the feminist movement. While the scope of this study is limited and the sample size is small, it is important to recognize that half of the participants made note to include this element of their narrative. This fact not only speaks to the continuation of a pervasive societal problem, but also the need to provide a space for those who are impacted by such violence to be able to have a voice and to speak openly about how they can reclaim a sense of ownership and power.

Expanding on the concepts of choice, participants continued to describe their experiences in a way that echoed third-wave feminist philosophy. Daja described how she was “choosing to do it for someone who has earned that trust versus being expected to do it all the time.” Daja’s conceptualization of how she engages in power exchange is not one wherein she feels expected to conform to certain standards or norms. In fact, the ability to choose appears to dismantle the concept of hierarchical structure and power, creating an even platform where power is exchanged freely for an agreed-upon period of time. Participants are not engaging in submissive actions or

giving away power for the purposes of the submissive role simply because they feel that is their only option as a woman. It is clear that participants are engaging in these actions because they have made a conscious decision to enter upon a mutually respected and intentional dynamic with a trusted partner.

Critiques of female submissives within the BDSM world claim that women who enter into a state of submission are reenacting a sense of internalized patriarchy. However, results from this study indicate that the Dominant/submissive dynamic was not reliant on a male-female interaction. It should also be noted that three of the six participants identified their sexual orientation as bisexual, in addition to one who identified as demi-sexual and one as a-sexual. In speaking about their choice of partners, specifically in terms of how or who they choose as their Dominant, these participants claimed that gender was not significant. Furthermore, gender was noted to not be significant not because of sexual attraction, but because their desire for someone who could engage with them as a good Top or Dominant was more important than gender identity. This tendency towards a more gender-blind orientation forces individuals to reorientate their understanding of how players choose partners within a scene and challenges notions of what is important in terms of understanding attraction. Similar to how someone may have a preference for brunettes over blondes, these participants have indicated that their preference lie with a partner who can perform as a Dominant in a way that will satisfy their needs.

Trust in this dynamic was also noted to be an essential element in order for participants to fully embrace these roles and allow participants to fully exchange in power differentials. As Bebe stated, "I am very careful about always picking partners who always have my own best interests at heart." Trust is viewed here as a vessel that enables participants to engage in their submissive actions in a way that ensures their safety and security within the power exchange. As

Bebe indicated, there needs to be not only an element of trust between partners, but also an understanding of respect between players. Daja expanded on how this level of trust has enabled for a level of emotional gratification that can contribute to the dynamic. She said, “Emotional vulnerability is frowned on, and being able to explore that emotional vulnerability and not have that back fire in ways that hurt matters to me.” This is similar to Newmahr’s (2011) work on edge play and reminiscent of how “a feminist model can recognize a wide range of skills, including social-psychological and interpersonal skills sets, such as trust, expressiveness, emotion management, perceptiveness, self-awareness, introspection, and self-restraint” (p. 691). Here participants are expanding notions of what is risk and consequently reward. By understanding the significant emotional risk of handing over power to a partner, one can understand the significance of the reward.

Participants again spoke about this dynamic as a conscientious part of the relationship that takes time to build and strengthen, implying that thought and dedication to these roles has been considered. Submission in this way can be conceptualized as a state that is entered into after careful consideration, after a level of trust is gained and rightfully earned. Bebe also highlighted the complexity of this charge, openly speaking about how a natural attraction can still inhibit reasoning skills:

New people who are just starting about, especially in submission, they get caught up in what, a term we all tend to use as frenzy. They want to be involved and they want to do what they see on TV or in the movies or whatever or read about online. And because it can be overwhelmingly intoxicating to get into one of these relationships, I’m dealing with that right now, with a newer partner. His natural dominance is very intoxicating, and I have to be very, as much as I trust him, I still have to guard myself from it mentally

sometimes. But people who are new starting out in this world get caught up in that intoxication of that power or turning over that power.

Bebe's ability to critically examine her own motivations and assess her desires with her partners highlights how much the trust process is not just an external experience directed towards her partner, but also an internal assessment of the self. This self-reflective process demands a level of insight that challenges her natural disposition and attraction, calling for a level of examination of what is best for her in these scenarios. It illuminates the fact that even in a position of submission, submissives remain in charge of themselves; this again challenges the predominant understanding of power dynamics wherein those who are indicated to be on Top or in a Dominant position maintain authority. In fact, this exchange of power dynamics suggests that those who are in position of submission are in fact the ones who are in charge, with the power to give or take back their submission at their own free will.

The relationship between power and submission also speaks to the rejection of social expectations and norms that was evident throughout participant's dialogues. Sadia stated, "It's different whenever you choose to do it, as opposed to whenever someone tries to say you're not as worthy because you're female." Sadia's narrative speaks once again to the importance of choice in this process; however, it also indicates an innate understanding of the social expectations and norms that have been established by greater society. Here she was able to acknowledge the historical implications of submission as a devalued status of women in society, rejecting those concepts and empowering herself in the element of choice. It is also interesting to note the use of the word "worthy" in this statement, as it again challenges the normative concept of structural power. Sadia recognized her own worth as a woman, and as a person, within this role of submission and did not deem it a devalued role based on traditional stereotypes. Similar

to third-wave feminist theories that attribute their growth to the origins of the second-wave feminist movement, Sadia exemplified how she was intrinsically aware of the historical context that could be attributed to her position. However, as feminist theory has evolved, so has the participants' ability to expand and embrace their ability to choose based on their own desires and not the prescribed notions of femininity and the idea of submission.

Gender as a concept was also noted to not maintain the same traditional concept of societal power. According to Lamia, "Yeah it's not necessarily gendered. Like, I very much believe that a King does not have to be a dude, like a King does not have to be male identified." Similarly, Daja stated, "Somebody's gender doesn't matter to me as much as if I'm going to be attracted to them, as if I think they could dominate me." Here one can see that gender does not maintain the same level of power and privilege that it typically does in society, but it also does not play into the roles and dynamics of the players. While gender is not obsolete in the discussion entirely, as noted earlier, the importance that participants placed on it did not impact their choice of partners, their own identity as a submissive, or their embodiment of certain roles. Gender did continue to be a salient element of the conversation, however, with regard to the fight to dismantle social inequality based on gender norms, specifically misogyny. Iskra said:

I've run into a lot of especially cisgender men who are like, "Well, of course you're submissive because you're a woman and that is woman's natural state, to be submissive to a man," and I'm like, "Yeah, nope. That's not where I want to go with this at all."

Iskra was not alone in her recollection of examples wherein she has faced experiences of marginalization and discrimination within the community, and specifically identified cisgender, White males as the perpetrators of continued stereotypes. Strava stated: "A lot of gross Dommes who are, I would definitely use the word misogynistic, will use kind of this community and

people's interests, erm, in a very selfish and unhealthy way." Daja offered the following viewpoint:

With the exception of a few older White guys, erm, that's just how it was. Some of the ... almost exclusively old White guys had this assumption, at least in my experience that, erm, all young women are subs, period. End of discussion. All women are subs, and if they say otherwise, they just need the right top to show them that they are wrong.

Similar to third-wave feminist theory, the roots of participants' narratives are grounded in second-wave philosophy: dismantling the patriarchy. Unfortunately, the accounts of Daja and Strava speak to the reality that misogyny is still apparent even in spaces which are built on the concepts of trust, respect and consent. However, their ability to identify and continue to work to dismantle these oppressive views speaks to a level of power and strength to rise above these standards and remove themselves from these ideologies. Subsequently, participants were acutely aware of the perpetuating stereotypes that are connected with not only their gender, but also their identities as submissives. However, the rationale behind participants' engagements does not align with these traditional norms. The intention behind these actions, it would seem, is not to engage in subservience as a natural state prescribed by gender. In fact, the submissive element of their engagements speaks more so to an authentic and personal piece of their identity, grounded in a sense of self-validation and empowerment.

The authentic self and validation of this individuality was a common theme that was present in participant's responses. Daja's statement, "You're more you now," highlights the sense that this identity is a natural and important part of the self that completes her sense of individuality. Due to the often controversial and pathologizing view that is placed upon

involvement in BDSM/kink identities, disclosure is often withheld, even from the self, as Iskra's account highlights:

I had one boyfriend who was like, "I'm not into kinky stuff. I'm only into really normal stuff," and I was like, "That's really boring and not what I'm into." And it sort of felt like I was screwed up because I was interested in kinky stuff.

Here we can see how the pressures of normality are grounded in heteronormative expectations of what sex and relationships should entail, with BDSM/kink being labeled as deviant or other. The concept that normality is a constant with any identity falling outside of those realms led Iskra to believe that her inherent interests were the result of a pathological trait, ultimately forcing her to question her own identity. This was also echoed in the experience of Bebe:

I didn't know it was out there, but it's been out there for decades and decades, you know centuries. But I didn't know that it really existed. I had read some fiction, but to know there were people who lived these lives and that I wasn't, you know, those things that roll around in your head, "I'm sick, I'm perverted, I'm whatever." 'Til you realize that it is a thing, that there's a reason and that there's a driving force behind them, so, it was very self-validating.

Again, the presumption that any interests that fall outside of the realm of normative expectations translates to a fear of pathology, labeling the individual as "sick or perverted." The narrative from participants speaks to a sense of community that has provided a space that is not only accepting and validating of their desires, but also allows them to connect with a part of the self that was otherwise unavailable. This need for community is apparent in how the BDSM/kink culture is portrayed within media outlets. As discussed previously, the book and film series *Fifty Shades of Gray* (De Luca et al., 2015; James, 2011) as well as the film *Secretary* (Fierberg et al.,

2002) brought BDSM into the public eye. While the content of the stories was titillating and engaging for viewers, the conclusion of these tales end in a heteronormative, monogamous dynamic. This message continues to perpetuate the concept that such relationships are not acceptable or normative in societal standards, and furthermore, does not provide examples of healthy and functional BDSM/kink interactions. In this way, one can understand how important the larger sense of community can be for those who identify as part of the BDSM/kink scene if not only to find a sense of acceptance and validation for this part of their identity.

Daja specifically highlighted how the integration of parts of the self was facilitated through this communal sense of acceptance and understanding:

General society does not like people who don't pick one side or another. And I have more flexibility to do that in the kink world. And that's really nice, and it lets me embrace all the parts of who I am, rather than just the parts that I feel passionate enough about standing up for, or that society deems are acceptable.

For the majority of the participants, submission was not an all-encompassing element of who they are; it was a part of them, an important part of themselves. Daja's description speaks specifically to the juxtaposition that submission can be a state of value or power within a relational dynamic. Essentially, it is not only the mutually respected exchange of power that produces and enables individuals to feel control within the scene; it is also the ability to embody and connect with a real part of themselves.

This sense of validation and connection to an authentic self extended to an appreciation and acceptance of others as well. Iskra said:

There was one guy I followed for a while, who was saying how his old-fashioned family couldn't tell that there was anything kinky about his relationship, because his wife just

acts as they expect a wife to act. And part of me is kind of grossed out by that, but then part of me is like, well she's doing it on purpose so, if that's how that works, cool.

Initially there was a rejection and element of disgust at the concept of traditional norms that dictate a power differential between men and women, but as Iskra's explanation continued, she highlighted that the normative values are not dictating the relational dynamic. Again, it is this element of personal choice and autonomy within the relationship that creates the boundaries and dynamics. The support Iskra offers for this engagement is not based on replication of expectations and gendered values, but instead a validation of consenting adults participating in a dynamic that works for their relationship. This support was noted to cover other engagements within the community and was not just restricted to the roles and power exchanges that others participated in. Daja offered the following:

Like vivisection is a thing that a couple of people in the community do. There's no way to safely do that, but it's something that they want to play with. Hypno-play lets them do that ... erm, I don't understand that part of it, but hey, they're doing it from as safely as they can. Go for it, guys.

Daja highlighted the variety of play that can be engaged in within the BDSM/kink community, which often does not pertain to relational dynamics or perhaps even power exchanges. While the scope of this study does not cover all those areas of BDSM/kink, the theme of support and validation for others' experience remains clear.

As seen in earlier themes, a need for safety and consent continues to be significant in the validation of actions performed. As both Daja and Iskra portrayed, it is the element of providing a space that allows individuals to explore their desires in a way that is safe and consensual for all individuals. This sense of acceptance and understanding of others' desires was noted to be

fundamental in not only creating a safe space for those around them, but also provided a way of finding safety and acceptance in themselves. According to Ferguson (2010), “Encountering and learning about others, trying to see the world from their perspective, is not only threatening insofar as it challenges my positions, but it can also be erotic, different and new” (p. 252). It is possible that in pushing their own understanding and acceptance of what is desired, participants too are engaging in a mental stimulation that can be erotic.

Participants spoke of satisfaction in several ways, one of which was the element of sexual satisfaction. Iskra said, “In some ways, it’s the real, like, satisfaction, if you know what I mean. Like, I have actually orgasmed just from being beaten, so there’s the sexual satisfaction.” While narratives thus far have typically spoken about the mutuality of the relationship, evident in the importance of consent and need for trust, there was an element of this sexuality that was more individualistic than other realms. Strava stated, “But it’s not like I’m completely selfless. Like, I’m going to get what I want too, whether that’s like spanking or biting or whatever. But I’m very cognizant of myself in the room getting what I want.” Strava’s narrative of her desire to seek out experiences that are beneficial for her own sense of sexual gratification illuminates how the role of submission does not entirely equate to providing a sense of satisfaction for others. In this way, the biological response of pleasure derived from pain represents the concept that these women are seeking out engagements that fulfil their sexual desires and provide them with a source of individual satisfaction. Participants also spoke of a level of catharsis or release that can be obtained from this physical experience. In this way, the experience of submission can be understood as one that does not always center around the exchange of power and dominance, but can in fact be a way to gain a level of sexual gratification from the Dominant.

Satisfaction was also noted to be a level of personal triumph, feeling a sense of pride and accomplishment in performing certain actions. This notion is reminiscent of Synder-Hall's (2010) concept regarding the origins of feminist theory, which attribute a level of self-determination to the foundation and strength of the movement as a whole. Iskra stated:

I can do these things that other people might not be able to do, and I'm sort of proud of myself for it. Like taking a really hard beating, or let someone stick needles in me and make a corset down my back of them. I've done some things that are maybe even more exciting for people to see than for me to experience, and that's sort of like a feather in my cap. Like, I've done fire play, which almost just feels like a warm massage, but the looks on people's faces when they see you get set on fire are amazing.

Iskra's references to activities that provide more aesthetic pleasure for viewers, or perhaps require more physical withstanding, mirror the accomplishment of engaging in an extreme leisure or performing a dangerous stunt. In providing these examples, Iskra noted that those who witnessed the event provided a validation and recognition of her ability to withstand such acts. The external acknowledgment reinforces a sense of strength in the participant and creates a shared experience in this moment. This, again, is in line with the concept of edge play outlined by Newmahr (2011), which focuses on how pushing the physical boundaries of one's body can be in itself a powerful and exciting practice. As Newmahr (2011) noted, the literature thus far has mainly reflected a male perspective on this type of work, suggesting that research has seen extreme physical limit pushing as a typically male exercise, even suggesting that females expand this concept with emotional edge work. However, as these results highlight, women also are engaging in physical edge play.

While much of the discussion of this study's results focused on the emotional components of sub work in relation to their Dominant counterparts, these women independently brought forward their physical triumphs. Upon reflection of this finding, this author is left wondering if the initial focus of this study was impacted by the original literature, in a way that overlooked the physical strength of women. Future research could benefit from exploring the physical elements of submissive work from a female perspective and working towards dismantling the stereotypes that women are strong in an emotional capacity only.

Recommendations

The sense of safety and communal experiencing redefined how participants understood power and control in their experiences of trauma. Participants were able to redefine their own experiences of trauma, writing a script that allowed them to either map out new, safe encounters, or re-experience such traumas with their own narrative. As noted, three of the six participants of this study spoke openly about their experiences of sexual assault within their narrative. While it is not within the scope of this study to expand upon the dynamics of BDSM/kink as a recovery mechanism for survivors of sexual assault, it was noted to be an important element for participants. Past research has worked to understand the use of BDSM/kink as a healing mechanism for rape survivors (Hammers, 2014) or the emotional healing process for males (Lindemann, 2011); however, future research could benefit from expanding on such gendered views of trauma. For example, do males survivors of sexual assault utilize rape play in the same manner? The current study found that participants were able to engage and utilize this dynamic as a way of providing emotional release, often noted as a sense of catharsis. However, the limitations of this study did not allow for an in-depth understanding of what this experience means.

Future research would benefit from exploring what this cathartic experience means for the individual. Furthermore, in understanding this element of safety, it is important to remember that this interaction is a dual process between all the players involved. Lindemann (2011) highlighted how female Dommies often view their work with male clients as emotional labor, yet little is known regarding how this is viewed from the male perspective. For male Doms who engage in rape play scenes, what is the emotional labor that they provide and how do they engage in after-care to ensure that both their self and their sub are emotionally recovered? As the feminist movement is calling for male allies to be part of the progression, how can we understand and support the emotional work that our male counterparts play in these roles?

Submission for participants spoke more about a level of empowerment through the ability to trust, advocate and communicate their desires. Participants were able to engage in a level of vulnerability with partners through submission, connecting with an authentic part of the self and experiencing a sense of validation that was otherwise unavailable; this in turn incorporated an explicit conversation of safety, which again translated to the physical wellbeing of those who were involved, as well as the emotional wellbeing of players. The importance of attending to the emotional wellbeing of all players highlights the need to continually communicate and assess the motivations behind actions. As stated by Strava, it's about "supporting your sisters."

One of the limitations that was noted as part of this study was the potential availability of subjects to participate in this discussion due to the fear of pathologization. In speaking with the participants, this author was aware of the initial hesitance from subjects in their initial responses, suggesting an uncertainty and distrust for the researcher. However, as the interviews progressed, participants became noticeably more relaxed and their answers were given with more fluidity and less hesitation. This process was helped by the researcher having a basic understanding and

knowledge of BDSM/kink language and terminology, so that participants did not spend their time educating her on these elements. However, in maintaining the feminist theory of giving voice to the participants, this researcher asked all participants to clarify what these roles meant in their own understanding. Implications for future clinicians working with this population should note the significance of having a basic understanding of the unique language of this community, being able to speak to clients in a language that makes sense for them, and giving power to their voice. However, it is important to also note that while this language is specific to the community, the application is not always universal. Just like variation in linguistic dialects, some words or terms may have a different connotations or meanings depending on the individual. For this reason, inviting clients to engage in a discussion of what these terms mean to them and understanding how this dynamic works for their situation is important.

Another limitation was the fear from participants of being pathologized for their involvement in BDSM/kink activities; this was even evident in their own narratives of internalized heteronormativity. It is important for clinicians moving forward to help remove the stigma related to BDSM/kink identified individuals, debunking the concept that such involvement is the result of pathological traits. In working with participants, this author identified the stigma that is often assigned to the community prior to the interview, assuring participants that the purpose of this study was not to judge or condemn participants, but to learn from them. Being authentic in my intentions as a researcher and giving participants the respect of honesty from the beginning of the process mirrored the need for openness and communication that was noted to be an important part of many of their experiences. Future clinicians working with this population should be aware of their responses to certain topics that are brought forward with this community and be introspective of where these views may be coming from. As noted

from participants, the activities that individuals engage in can be graphic, and it is natural for clinicians to have responses to such information. Understanding where one's individual limitations are as a clinician and being authentic with clients regarding one's limitations is essential for creating a collaborative space.

Further limitations of this study involved the decision to interview individuals who identified as cisgender female, or who were perceived as cisgender females. However, participants' discussion of gender and the importance of their link to cis identification was mixed. While some participants were comfortable in their assigned gender, others were more flexible in their concept of gender identity. Furthermore, the element of gender blindness with regard to potential partners suggest that gender is not as rigid of a concept within this community. Future research could expand on the concept of gender and explore how this impacts the play dynamic within the kink community, if at all.

Implications

The findings of this study call for a restructuring of how researchers and clinicians can and perhaps should view the dynamics of submission, power and control. As the participants in this study have highlighted, it is the element of choice regarding their actions that allow them to retain their power, even in moments where they have given up power to another. The fluidity of gender norms and identity throughout these narratives also highlights the concept that such dynamics of power and dominance may not be as closely tied to societal structures of hierarchy and oppression as once observed. It is possible that through the use of choice, these women are able to dismantle and reframe the structures of patriarchal systems, claiming ownership and autonomy in their environment.

Implications for clinicians working with this community should focus on the importance of allowing individuals to express and determine their own experience within these actions. As

noted, the meaning-making process is an individualized journey that can take many different paths. However, there are safety elements that need to be discussed when engaging in this practice. The practical elements of not only edge play, but other work that may leave physical and emotional marks after a scene are a huge consideration. Consequently, special attention should be placed on safety planning, building trust with potential partners and engaging in a critical analysis of motivations behind engagement in scenes. Being comfortable in discussing details of how participants engage in after-care with a partner, how to dress wounds or even reconnect with their world after being in a sub space is essential. It would be beneficial for clinicians working with this population to engage in these discussions from a harm-reduction perspective, collaboratively exploring how to maintain safety during these actions.

Clinicians working with this population, just like with any other population, should continuously work to recognize their own limitations and reactions to the content that is brought forward in session. Consultation with fellow practitioners who are kink-aware is advised as a way of maintaining neutrality and subjectivity in their responses to material brought forward in session. Additionally, recognizing one's own limitations and abilities is essential in work with all clients; hence it is essential to understand that referring clients out is not a failure, but a necessary competency. Providing referrals for kink-identified or kink-aware psychologists is the first step in providing support that aligns with a client's identities and specific needs.

Conclusion

Throughout all participants' responses it was clear that the themes that arose were both individual and independent from one another, and that they all contributed, interacted and influenced each other. Communication is an essential element that allows individuals to express their desires, boundaries and willingness to engage in a scene, dynamic or role. The ability to self-determine one's level of involvement within a scene strips away traditional dynamics of

power and control, and transforms the relationship into an equal and consensual engagement. Unlike structural systems of hierarchical power, wherein position and authority are predetermined, the roles within a BDSM/kink scene are mutually agreed upon, with the ability to negotiate and adapt as necessary. Furthermore, this eliminates the traditional power differentials that have conventionally been enforced by gender norms. While it was noted that there are members of the community who do try to reinforce these standards, the meaning behind submission for these participants was not one that spoke about the reinforcement of such traditional values.

Participants also spoke of a sense of safety not only in terms of communal support that such standards would not be accepted, but also that they would be able to advocate for themselves when fighting misogynistic ideals. The essence of these narratives formulates to a deeper understanding of how someone can utilize existing structures of power, submission and dominance as performance pieces, restructuring the function of these roles into something devoid of the original meaning. It is in the understanding of mutual play, consent and ability to choose that these women have been able to reclaim their identity and power within seemingly traditional placements, in ways that are meaningful to them.

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Appendix A: Open-Ended Interview Questions

- 1) How do you identify within the BDSM/Kink community? Can you explain the nature of this role?
- 2) In your own words, can you tell me how you identify? Age, gender, sexual orientation, kink identity.
- 3) Can you describe what is kink to you? Sexual orientation, extreme leisure activity, healing mechanism?
- 4) Can you describe your experiences of marginalization as a woman in society? And how you have dealt with those experiences?
- 5) How would you differentiate submission within the play scene from submission in the general world?
- 6) What drew you to the engage in submissive actions in the kink world?
- 7) What satisfaction, if any, do you gain from your engagement in submissive actions?
- 8) Can you tell me about you experiences of being a woman and being a submissive? How, if at all, do these factors interact?
- 9) Do you feel empowered by your role as a submissive? Please explain your answer.

Appendix B: Terminology

Retrieved from <http://rekink.com/terminology/glossary-of-kink-terminology-a-to-i/>

24/7 – A Dominant/submissive relationship that is in effect at all times.

Aftercare – The time after a BDSM scene of play session in which the participants calm down, and slowly come back in touch with reality. Depending on the intensity of the scene and the nature of the participant, aftercare may be very important to one or both participants in order to prevent later emotional aftereffects. Aftercare may consist of some or all of the following components: Being away from noise, activity, bright light; physical closeness and touching with the partner; hydration with water or sport drink; keeping warm. Aside from its necessity, aftercare can be one of the most rewarding and loving experiences the participants can share.

Age play – Scene (or entire relationship) in which one person (usually the submissive) dresses and acts as if young in age, ranging from infant to adult child. May or may not include sexual relations. Does not usually include or imply aspects of incest or pedophilism, but rather the nurturing relationship of parent/child or teacher/student.

Animal play – The sub behaves and/or dresses like an animal. The principal theme of animal play is usually the voluntary or involuntary reduction (or transformation) of a human being to animal. Animal play may or may not involve sexual activity. Not to be mistaken with bestiality/zoophilia, which involves the actual animal.

Anti-humiliation (also reverse humiliation)– Saying and doing nice things in a way that opens up the subject emotionally, often causing tears and emotional breakdown. Similar to extended aftercare, but with the intent to build intensity.

Bad pain – Physical or psychological pain which is beyond what the recipient capable of accepting without potential long-term physical or emotional consequence. Frequently arises from exceeding the recipient's limits, or failing to recognize signs of distress. Can lead to drastic

consequences, including permanent physical damage, psychological side effects, ending of the relationship, even abandonment of the lifestyle.

Body worship – To show respect to every part of the Dominant’s body, often by kissing, licking, or sucking. May involve ritual components.

Bastinado (Impact play) – Involving the soles of feet.

Beating – The Top uses an implement to hit the sub.

Bisexual – A person open to sexual activity with both sexes. May still have a preference, or the attraction might depend more on the individual person than on their sex.

Bit; bit gag – A style of gag with a cylindrical mouthpiece, usually made of soft rubber or latex. Simulating the bridle of a horse, such bits are often used in pony play.

Blackbooting – Using a shoe heel as an anal dildo; some care required.

Bladder/bowel control - (1) Requiring the submissive to ask permission before toileting. (2)

Training the submissive to be able to eliminate in the Dominant’s presence, or even while being fondled. As an invasion of privacy, this can be a form of humiliation; it can also be used to foster the submissive’s trust and acceptance of the Dom into the most intimate aspect of the sub’s life.

Blood play – The drawing of blood during play.

Body modification – Various changes to the body, usually permanent. Including tattoos, piercings, scarification (scarring), branding, permanent hair removal, breast augmentation or reduction, etc. Microbranding or “cell popping” is considered temporary; subdermal implants can usually be removed.

Bondage – Acts involving the physical restraint of a partner, Bondage may refer to total body restraint, or restraint of a particular body part, such as breast bondage.

Bondage art – Binding the bottom in a way which is aesthetically pleasing. Often for photography.

Bondage & Discipline (BD or B&D) – A part of the multiple acronym BDSM. Refers to the primarily physical aspect of BDSM; that of restraint and of physical play.

Bondage belt – Usually made of leather, with metal rings for bondage attachment points.

Bondage suit – Used for mummification and occasionally suspension. Commonly made of leather with straps and made to fit snugly.

Boot worship – To show respect for the Dominant’s footwear, often by kissing, licking, or sucking, or by cleaning/polishing. May involve ritual components.

Bootblack – A person (male or female) who polishes and/or spit-shines a pair of boots, sometimes as a gesture of submission, sometimes as a part of military-style uniform play, sometimes as part of boot worship, and sometimes to mark the beginning of a scene.

Branding – Scarring of the skin by a heated object. Can be semi-permanent or permanent.

Brat – A “bratty” submissive has a reputation for talking back, being disrespectful or mildly disobedient. On the surface, this is a negative quality in a submissive; however, a certain amount of “brattiness” is enjoyed by some Dominants, and may in fact be a large component of a power exchange relationship.

Breast bondage – The act of restraining female breasts so that they are either flattened against the chest or so that they bulge.

Breath control breathe play – The act by which the Dominant controls the submissive’s breathing, often by choking, HOM (hand over mouth) or other forms of asphyxiation. *Important: Many consider any form or degree of breath control to be extremely dangerous.*

Breeding – Usually means to have unprotected sex to ejaculation (ejaculating inside the vagina or anus) and often performed by a D-type to an s-type. This can be done to males as well as females. It can also refer to a breeding fantasy, where females will role-play being impregnated and carrying the baby, even up to the ‘birth’. This cycle can happen several times in one session as it is fantasy.

Brown shower – Defecation on a person.

Bullwhip – A type of single tail consisting of a woven or braided leather whip, usually longer than 4’, with a short rigid handle.

Butt plug – Much like a dildo, only shaped slightly differently. Usually has a flared base to prevent it from entirely entering the rectum. They come in a variety of styles and sizes; some can vibrate.

Camming – Having ‘sex’ via the Internet, with webcams allowing viewing of the action, either one or both ways.

Cane – A thin rod used for striking. Commonly made of hardwood, bamboo, or acrylic.

Cat o’ nine tails – whip with nine tails or lashes.

Cell popping – A small metal poker is heated until glowing red and gently applied to the skin for one second. A design is formed by a series of dots made by the poker. This body mod is considered a temporary branding, lasting anywhere from 2 weeks to 6 months, depending on application and individual healing factors.

Chastity – A form of erotic sexual denial or orgasm denial whereby a person is prevented from access to, or stimulation of, their genitals, save at the choice of their partner; sometimes by means of a device called a chastity belt (or for men a cock cage) that prevents stimulation or makes it painful.

Checklist – A listing of BDSM and fetish activities used to determine the experience, willingness, and desire of participants for the various activities by both Tops/Dominants and bottoms/submissives. The activities are typically rated on a scale.

Chemical play – Using chemicals to produce sensations. Examples: wintergreen oil, Tabasco sauce, tiger balm, ginger, peppermint, rubbing alcohol, toothpaste, menthol.

Cisgender – The person identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth.

Clover clamp – A specific type of nipple clamp consisting of a clamp with a lever mechanism to which a chain or cord is affixed in such a way that pulling on the chain or cord increases pressure on the clamp.

Collar – Any symbol used to represent that a submissive or slave is Owned. Often an actual collar, but can also be anything from an anklet to a bracelet, etc.

Collared – The state of a submissive or slave who is the consensual partner of a Master or Owner, usually in a long-term relationship. Sometimes referred to as Owned.

Collaring – (1) The formal acceptance by a Dominant of a submissive's service (2) A ceremony celebrating such an event. May be a simple act of commitment between two people, or a formal ceremony similar to a wedding.

Consent – Mutual agreement to the terms of a scene or ongoing BDSM relationship.

Contract – A written agreement between the Dominant and submissive. Generally, it outlines the structure, guidelines, rules and boundaries of the relationship. It is not, nor is it intended to be, legally binding.

Corporal punishment – Punishment involving pain, often more specifically impact punishment. Any activity involving discipline through physical means.

Cracker – Attached to the end of a whip. Makes a loud cracking sounds as the whip is snapped.

Crop – A thin, flexible instrument used for striking, constricting of a rigid shaft wrapped with leather or a similar material, with a handle at one end and often with a small leather loop at the other.

Cupping – To use a suction device on body parts. Commonly glass cups which are done with suction or fire.

Cutting – The use of a sharp instrument with the intent of drawing blood.

D-type – A universal term including all forms of Doms, Dommes, Owners, Tops, etc.

Diaper lover (Adult baby) – (1) One who dresses and/or role plays the part of a baby or toddler.
(2) One who enjoys wearing and/or relieving themselves in diapers, without necessarily indulging in role play.

Discipline - Any activity in which one person trains another person to act or behave in a specified way, often by enforcing rigid codes of conduct or by inflicting punishment for failure to behave in the prescribed way.

Dominant – Person who exercises control in a Dominant/submissive relationship. Can be used for any gender.

Dom – Male (sometimes all gender) form for Dominant.

Domina/Domme – Female forms of Dominant.

Dominate – To have power and influence over another person. In Dominant/submissive, generally refers to having control in a power exchange relationship.

Dragon's tail – An unusual type of whip consisting of a handle, often made of wood and wrapped with leather, to which a wide triangular piece of thin leather or suede is attached. This leather or suede forms a lash which is a hollow tube tapering to a point at the striking end.

Dungeon – A room or area with BDSM equipment and play space.

Dungeon Master/Mistress (DM) – The owner or host of a dungeon facility, or host of a play party.

Dungeon monitor (DM)– A person appointed to supervise the interactions between participants at a play party to ensure their safety and adherence to the dungeon rules. The DM's direction must be accepted by all attending.

Dungeon rules – A set of rules established by the host of an event or play party, by the host of an event or play party, by the Dungeon Master/Mistress, or a group or club. All attendees must agree as a condition of attending. These rules usually address such issues as safety, hygiene, consent, and good behavior.

Edge play – Play which pushes the limits of the persons involves. Also used for potentially dangerous activities such as fire, electricity, cutting, or breathe play, which require careful study and practice before attempting.

Edging – A sub being brought to the edge of orgasm, then denying them release, often done over and over again.

Electric Play – Any of a variety of different practices involving the use of electrical current or electricity to stimulate a person.

Embarrassment – Considered the emotional equivalent of bad pain. Humiliation beyond the recipient's limits; may cause long-term negative aftereffects.

Emotional play – Play making use of heavy emotional content; often humiliation, sometimes fear or shame.

Evil stick – An implement consisting of a thin rod, often carbon fiber, typically about the diameter of a mechanical pencil lead, attached to a small, rigid handle. The rod is flexible and

very strong; when laid against the skin and then flicked with a strong upward motion at its tip, it causes a sharp pain and typically leaves a thin, well-defined welt that can persist for days.

Exhibitionism – Behaving extravagantly in order to attract attention. In BSM often takes the form of displaying ‘taboo’ actions or portions of the body to others. This may be for the gratification of the exhibitionist, or at the direction of a Top, to expose them to humiliation.

Exhibitionist – A person who delights in, or obtains some form of gratification from, behaving extravagantly in order to attract attention.

Failsafe – An arrangement which allows the bottom to escape from bondage in case of emergency. May be used when a Dominant has a medical condition which may incapacitate them, or the participants may agree to it as a general safety policy.

Fantasy rape – A consensual rape scene.

Feeder – A person who takes pleasure in feeding their bottom so they can put on weight.

FemDom – A relationship in which the Dominant is female. Typically referring to a relationship between a female Dominant and a male submissive.

Feminization - The act of being forced to dress in traditionally female attire, typically frilly or lacy clothing and exaggerated makeup.

Fetish – Sexual excitement aroused by a specific object, body part, or activity not typically associated with sexual arousal.

Fire play – Using flammable liquids to create quick, fleeting instances of flame on the skin of the bottom.

Floating – How subspace is often described by submissives.

Flogger - A tool of impact play, consisting of a handle with multiple lashes attached to it. The lashes are typically made of leather, but may also be made of materials such as rope, suede, horsehair, or even rubber.

Forentine - A flogging technique involving the use of a flogger in each hand. The floggers are swung in a figure-8 pattern.

Foot worship – To ritually respect the Dominant’s feet, commonly by sucking, kissing, and/or licking. May include washing, pedicures, etc.

Furry – One who assumes an animal’s character in play.

Gag – Any device or object designed to be placed in the mouth, most commonly to prevent a person from speaking or making loud sounds, sometimes to hold the mouth open.

Good pain - Generally defines a level of pain (physical or psychological) which the recipient can bear without causing long-term physical damage or emotional harm.

Gunplay – Using actual or simulated firearms in a scene.

Hair bondage – Bondage technique in which the hair is secured in such a way as to limit mobility of the bound person’s head, upper body, etc.

Hard limit – What someone absolutely will not do, usually non-negotiable.

Heteroflexible - A person who identifies as primarily heterosexual but can occasionally find the same sex appealing, or is willing, in some situations, to have contact with the same sex.

Hog tie – A bondage technique in which one or both ankles are bound to the wrists, usually behind the back.

Homoflexible – A person who identifies as primarily homosexual but an occasionally find the opposite sex appealing.

Horse – A piece of bondage furniture consisting of a plank supported by two legs on each end, similar to a sawhorse.

Humiliation – Considered to be “good pain” in BDSM circles, compared to embarrassment, which is understood as “bad pain.” Humiliation is often desired by submissives, and is understood as a pleasurable or entertaining to many Dominants. Humiliation can be psychologically very intense, and should be explored gradually.

Impact play – Striking with various objects.

Informed consent – The principle that in order for consent to be genuine, the consenter must know all significant information about the object of consent. The consenter is capable of consenting; not under the influence of alcohol, drugs, coercion, exhaustion, etc.

Interrogation play – Oral questioning taking the form of torture or cross examination.

Japanese bondage – Any number of styles of rope bondage in which the emphasis is on artistic display rather than simple utility.

Keenhole – The act or fetish of penetrating a person’s earlobe piercing hole with one’s penis.

Kidnapping play – Scenario in which the bottom is forcibly restrained and (usually) taken to another location for further play.

Kink – Unconventional sexual preferences or behavior.

Kink friendly – Usually used in reference to someone who provides a professional service, such as a doctor, counselor, leather worker, carpenter, etc.

Knife play – The use of knives in a scene, often for psychological effect.

Leather (culture) – A traditional style of BDSM, whose origins are post-World War II and arose out of the combination of some motorcycle ‘gangs’ with male homosexual BDSM.

Limits – What someone will not do (hard) or is hesitant to do (soft).

Little or little boy/girl – One who takes the role of a submissive child in age play. May or may not be sexual; does **not** imply actual incest or pedophilism.

Masochist – A person who enjoys receiving pain or humiliation.

Master/slave or M/s – A consensual relationship in which the Master has ownership of the slave. A relatively intense form of D/s relationship. The relationship is more likely to be 24/7.

Madame – A name for a female Dominant.

Mental bondage – Being forced to remain in a position by orders of the Dominant.

Metamour – The lover of your lover. In a V structure poly relationship, the metamours would be the two people at the top of the V.

Mindfuck – To toy with one's concept of reality; to cause a state of confusion and befuddlement.

Mummification – Immobilizing the body by wrapping it up, usually with multiple layers of shrink wrap or food film. Creates a feeling of total bodily helplessness.

Munch – A meeting of a group of kinksters at a “vanilla” place such as a club or restaurant, usually for discussion, not play.

Needle play – Temporary piercings done with sterile needles, usually only for the duration of a scene.

Negotiation – Communication before a scene, or during the formation of a relationship, in which the parties reach agreement about the goals, expectations, and limits of one another.

Newbie – Someone new to the BDSM scene.

Nipple clamps – Any clamp or clamp-like device designed to compress the subject's nipples. May include a mechanism for adjusting or limiting the amount of pressure applied to the nipple.

Nipple noose – Similar in function to the nipple clamp, but made from a looped cord, like a miniature lasso.

Nipple torture – Pain play.

Noose hook – Two-pronged hook inserted into the nostrils; used in bondage. Causes both discomfort and a degree of humiliation.

Objectification play – the subject is dehumanized; treated as an animal, slave, furniture, toy, etc.

Old school – An elitist belief in the existence of one true way of approaching BDSM, often claimed to be based upon early Leather traditions.

Omnisexual – Being strongly attracted to, or aroused by, both sexes.

Orgasm control or denial – The practice whereby the subject is not permitted to reach sexual orgasm without permission, or for a set period of time, or sometimes at all, even though that person may be permitted to engage in sexual activity.

Out – A safe word or safe signal.

Over-the-knee – Traditional, “informal” spanking method.

Owned – The state of submission or slave who is the consensual partner of a Master or Owner, usually in a long-term relationship.

Pansexual – Not limited or inhibited in sexual choice with regard to gender or activity.

Pegging – The practice of using a strap-on dildo for penetration.

Permission – Nearly all power exchange relationships require the submissive to ask permission for certain things.

Pet play – A submissive is treated as a loved and valued pet; as in puppy or pony.

Play – To engage in a BDSM scene or session.

Play Collar – A collar used only in play or at a BDSM events. A play collar does not signify that s/he is committed for the night or session.

Play party – A gathering for the purpose of enjoying BDSM play. May be held at someone’s home, or in a club-owned or commercial space (often referred to as a dungeon) specifically intended for the purpose.

Play punishment – Punishment which happens for fun/play, also can be known as “funishment.” The aim of this is not to correct the s-type behavior, but to experience the punishment itself.

Plushie – One who plays with stuffed/plush animals, may or may not be sexually.

Poly – Usually short for polyamory, sometimes polyfidelity.

Polyamory – Having multiple relationships with persons not in the same household; also called open marriage, open relationship.

Polyfidelity – Group of people committed to each other, not having sexual or romantic ties outside of the commitment group, sometimes also called a family, group marriage, multiple marriage, or polygamy.

Polysexual – Having sex with multiple partners without commitment.

Power exchange – Any situation where two or more people consensually and voluntarily agree to a relationship in which one (or more) people assume authority and one (or more) people yield authority, either for a predetermined time, or indefinitely.

Predicament bondage – A type of bondage in which the intent is to place the bound person in an awkward, difficult inconvenient, or uncomfortable situation, or to set out a challenge for the bound person to overcome.

Pro-Dom/Pro-Domme/Pro-sub – Professional who dominates or submits to paying customers. May or may not be an actual “kinkster;” may or may not include sex as part of the “service.”

Progasm – An orgasm from massage of the prostate only, without penile stimulation.

Protector – Someone who acts as a “screener” for a submissive, generally screening and evaluating prospective Dominants for suitability and recommending that safe practices are followed if they should come to the point of physically meeting.

Psycholagny – A sexual term that refers to the ability to reach or achieve orgasm without any physical stimulation or the genitalia, usually achieved through mental stimulation or fantasy alone.

Psychological bondage – Being forced to remain in a position by orders of the Dominant.

Punishment – A penalty inflicted for an offense, fault, etc.

Push a limit – To cautiously explore the nature of a submissive’s limit, either to challenge her or to encourage her to do something she is reluctant to do, but which her Dominant desires.

Queening – Practice in which one partner sits on or over the other’s face, typically to allow, or force, oral-genital or oral-anal contact.

Quirt – A type of whip with two or (occasionally) three short lashes affixed to a long, thin handle.

Rack – Furniture to which the victim is bound by wrists and ankles; the ropes are tightened, stretching the body painfully.

Rape play – Scenario in which the bottom is forced to have sex.

Red flags – Behaviors in a prospective BDSM partner that indicate the person may be prone to abusive or undesirable behavior.

Resistance Play – Any mutually consensual activity in which one person struggles against another and is subdued by “force.” May involve rape play; some forms of bondage include resistance as well.

Reverse humiliation – Saying and doing nice things in a way that opens up the subject emotionally, often causing tears and emotional breakdown.

Reward – Positive reinforcement for the purpose of modifying the subject’s behavior.

Rimming – Licking or inserting the tongue into another’s anus.

Ring gag – A type of gag consisting of a metal ring, often padded with leather, which is placed in the mouth in such a way as to hold the mouth open.

Risk-Aware Consensual Kink (RACK) – A standard of conduct for the healthy enjoyment of BDSM participants; similar to SSC, but acknowledges that there are always risks in any kind of activity which must be understood and accepted.

Role play – Scene in which one or more participants assumes the role of a character.

Roman showers – Vomiting on another person.

Rope bunny – Usually demo model for rope work.

Sadism – Taking pleasure in inflicting pain and/or humiliation upon others, or observing others being hurt.

Sadist – A person who enjoys inflicting pain and/or humiliation on another, or observing others being hurt or humiliated, either for power and control or for sexual arousal.

Sadomasochism – An activity or practice involving the inflicting or receiving of pain and/or humiliation.

Safe, Sane and Consensual – A standard of conduct for the healthy enjoyment of BDSM participants; similar to RACK, but with an emphasis on making any activity as “safe” and “sane” as possible.

Safe call – A prearranged call to advise a friend that you are okay; especially useful in “first meeting” situations.

Safe meeting practices – Common-sense precautions to be used when physically meeting someone for the first time.

Safe word – A predesignated word or nonverbal cue used to stop or slow down a BDSM scene.

Sapiosexuality – The attraction to or arousal by intelligence and its use.

Scat play – Play involving the handling of feces.

Scene – A period of time devoted to BDSM activity.

Scent play – Smelling the areas that emit scents, such as armpits, anus, vulva, and scrotum. This may be used for enjoyment/arousal or humiliation play.

Self bondage – The act or practice of tying one's self up or otherwise restraining oneself, sometimes as a part of masturbation, includes some mechanism by which the person may be freed, which may include a timer mechanism to release a key or otherwise release the person.

Sensation play – BDSM play where the intent is to push the subject's sensory limits, using light touch, hot/cold, objects of different textures, etc.

Sensory deprivation- Use of various objects such as blindfolds, ear plugs, etc. to deprive the subject of one or more sense. The intent may be to enhance other senses, such as touch, or to cause insecurity.

Service – Acts, chores, or labor, sexual or otherwise, performed by a sub for the benefit of a Dom.

Service-oriented – A person who enjoys performing a service, which may be sexual or nonsexual, BDSM related or not.

Service Top – A top whose focus is on giving a bottom what s/he desires.

Signal whip – A type of small single tail, usually three to four feet in length, lacking the rigid handle of a bull whip. Different from a snake whip in that the cracker (popper) is braided into the thong of the whip.

Single tail – Any of a class of whips having a single lash; most commonly applied to bullwhips and signal whips. Single tail whip requires skill and training to use properly, and are not easy to master.

Slapper – A paddle with two pieces of leather that make a loud “popping” sound when used.

Slave auction – An event in which submissives are “sold” to the highest bidder, usually for a limited time, and with prearranged conditions.

Sleepsack – Bondage device similar to a sleeping bag or body bag. Usually very confining; often has straps for added restriction.

Smart-ass masochist – Submissive who exhibits bad behaviors (such as sarcasm, talking back, or disobedience), either because his/her Dominant enjoys it or to get attention.

Soft limit – A limit which is not necessarily set in stone. It may be flexible, may be pushed or may change over time and/or with experience or knowledge of that type of play.

Sound – A smooth rod, usually metal, for insertion in the urinary passage; comes in a set of graduated sizes.

Spanko – Person who enjoys spanking others.

Sploshing – The use of copious amounts of food.

Spotter – A person who monitors the safety of a bottom/submissive during a scene, most commonly scenes that involve complex bondage, particularly suspension scenes.

Squick – An expression of discomfort or revulsion in response to something.

St. Andrew's Cross – A popular type of bondage furniture consisting of an X-shaped cross, equipped with restraint attachment points.

Stone – A woman or man who does not wish to be touched genitally.

Strap – A tool or impact play/punishment.

Sub drop – An emotional condition following intense BDSM play. May experience a wide range of emotions from weepy to clingy to angry to lost or more. *It can often be prevented by aftercare immediately after the session.*

Submissive – Person who desires to give up control of themselves, or of certain aspects of their lives, to a Dominant partner.

Subspace – A “natural high” that a bottom may experience during an intense physical or emotional play. The sub may feel disconnected from time, space, and/or their body, and may have limited ability to communicate.

Suspension – Bondage in which the submissive's weight is totally or partially suspended.

Suture play – The practice of temporary suturing or sewing parts of the body, particularly the genitals, for sexual gratification.

Swinger – Someone in a committed relationship who swaps partners for sex.

Takedown – Scenario in which the bottom is forcibly restrained. This is often the case in the initiation of forcible play such as rape play or abduction/kidnapping play.

Tease and denial – Keeping another person aroused while delaying or preventing resolution of the feelings, to keep them in a continual state of anticipatory tension and inner conflict and heightened sensitivity.

TENS unit – A device which applies electrical currents through pads affixed to skin.

Toilet play – Also known as toilet training or toileting. Play or discipline having to do with the submissive's elimination of bodily wastes.

Topping from the bottom – A submissive or bottom who attempts to manipulate the Top, in an attempt to gain attention or to have his/her own needs met; for example, intentionally misbehaving to draw punishment.

Torture play – Sadistic pain inducement on various areas of the body, often to the point of leaving temporary or permanent marks or scars.

Training - Instruction by a more experienced member of the community in various aspects of BDSM. Education and discipline of a submissive. May refer to the entire program a Dominant employs to condition his/her submissive; or to individual disciplines, such as pony training, toilet training, etc.

Transgender – A person who lives (full-time or only under certain circumstances) as the opposite gender from which they were born. May or may not have had chemical treatments or surgery.

Under consideration – Consideration is when the person receiving or having power is still considering or deciding whether to accept the lesser-power partner to a closer, more important, or more responsible position or relationship.

Uniform play – Role play in which the wearing of uniforms, such as military or medical uniforms, is a significant part of the role play.

Urethral play – Play involving the urinary passage.

Vacuum bed – A bondage device composed of a latex envelope spanned by a frame. A suction pump removes most of the air in the envelope. The person inside the envelope breathes through a tube.

Vampire gloves – Gloves used for sensation play which have a large number of short spikes or needles protruding from the palms and/or fingers.

Vanilla – A person who is not in the BDSM fetish lifestyle.

Voice play – Play in which the top uses tone and volume of the voice as well as specific words to induce specific feelings in the bottom.

Voyeurism – Witnessing others' sexual play, or innocent activity such as undressing.

Wartenberg pinwheel – A small implement consisting of a short handle to which is affixed a small wheel with a number of sharp needle-like projections around its outer edge.

Waterboarding – Is a form of torture that consists of immobilizing the victim on his or her back with the head inclined downwards, and the pouring water over the face. Through forced suffocation and inhalation of water, the subject experiences a sensation akin to drowning.

Psychological edge play.

Watersports – Any play that involves urination, usually involving one person urinating on another for sexual gratification.

Wax play – The top drips hot wax on the bottom.

Wooden horse – An implement consisting of a wooden plank supported edgewise between two upright fixed posts, or of two sheets of wood coming together at a sharp angle, to which a submissive is bound with her legs off the floor. The goal is to place pressure on the genitals, and/or to position her for activities such as impact play or penetration.