

The Structure of Kink Identity: Four Key Themes Within a World of Complexity

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Abstract:

What is the structure of kink identity? Using a thematic analysis design, our study explored this question through 70 in-person interviews with adults 18 years and older living in Northern California who identified as kinky. Four key themes of kink identity emerged from our analysis: sex, power, headspace, and community. Although there were great variety and diversity in how these four themes were characterized -- both as separate and overlapping themes, we were able to conceptually group these themes into seven discrete subthemes based on how our 70 participants narrativized their kink experiences during interviews: (1) intertwining of kink and sex; (2) intense physical sensations (SM); (3) sensual experiences (fetish); (4) eroticizing power differentials; (5) fluidity vs stability of power role in kink activities and relationships; (6) community connections; and (7) headspace or altered states of consciousness. That our thematic analysis developed into these seven subthemes suggests that kink identity is a multidimensional structure of complex and diverse aspects.

Introduction

“Kink”¹ is used as an umbrella term to address a wide range of atypical erotic interests, identities, behaviors, practices, and relationships. Aspects of kink include eroticizing intense sensations, including but not limited to “pain,” eroticizing power dynamics, enduring fascination and erotic arousal with sensorial stimuli like specific body parts or inanimate objects, e.g. “fetishes,” role playing or dramatizing erotic scenarios, and other activities that induce heightened states of consciousness, i.e. “headspaces,” which is how positive, altered states of consciousness are referred to in kink subcultures. Approximately 45-60% of people in the general population of some Western nations report having fantasies that involve dominance and submission in some fashion (Joyal et al., 2014; Jozifkova, 2018), and in terms of behavior, approximately 10% of the general population of some Western nations have engaged in kink

¹ The compound acronym “BDSM” is also often used in the literature, denoting bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, and sadism and masochism. However, “kink” is a term that comes from the community and has been used for over 90 years (Bienvenu, 1998), whereas BDSM is a more recent term created by scholars and researchers that was adopted by kink communities in the early 1990s. This paper uses “kink” to respect the community’s culture.

behaviors at some point in their life (Joyal & Carpentier, 2016; Janus & Janus, 1993; Masters et al., 1995).

A recent study examining the Belgian population found that 46.8% of the representative sample engaged in kink-related activities at least once in their lifetime, with 12.5% engaged in at least one ‘BDSM-related activity’ on a regular basis (Holvoet et al., 2017, p. 1155). This study of the Belgian population also found that while nearly half of the study’s participants reportedly engaged in kink-related activities, just 7.6% self-identified as “BDSM practitioners,” with the data in this specific quantitative study coded into four categories: dominance, submission, visual play, and attributes (Holvoet et al., 2017, p. 1154). Qualitative research on kink has also addressed a range of kink activities and roles that people adopt, indicating a notable complexity in kink identity (Newmahr, 2011; Weiss, 2011).

While it seems as though kink occurs at an appreciable rate in the population, we know very little about what it actually means to have a kink identity. When one considers the number of people who are members of kink-related clubs and advocacy organizations, the number of attendees at kink community events, and the number of people active on kink-focused social media platforms, it may be that 1-2% of the general population have a kink-centered identity (Sprott & Berkey, 2015). Our purpose in conducting this study is to locate the key dimensions of kink identity to better understand these complexities and the sex-positive discourse they provide.

Methods

The design of our qualitative, cross-sectional study used a thematic analysis approach to interview data. The study protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the California State University, East Bay.

We first gathered our qualitative data through 70 in-person interviews, using open coding to identify themes that were relevant to how people discussed their kink identities, and then through comparative methods that refined the themes into seven subthemes.

Participants

The selection criteria for the initial round of interviews consisted of adults 18 years and older who self-identified as kinky with primary residence in Northern California. The sampling method involved snowball sampling, as well as community outreach requests posted on the social media platforms of Facebook and Fetlife. The outreach and recruitment of participants had several distinct rounds to recruit as diverse a sample as possible in terms of race, gender identity, sexual orientations, ethnicity, experience in kink, and levels of community involvement. Interviews were gathered from July 2014 through November 2015. A total of 111 volunteers contacted the research team, and out of that, 71 of these participants completed interviews. Because one of the audio recordings failed, the final sample was 70. The 40 people who did not complete an interview after expressing initial interest did not respond to follow-up contacts to schedule an interview time. Three follow-up contacts were attempted by the research team before marking the volunteer as unavailable.

Procedures

The study involved semi-structured interviews, which were conducted in a private, quiet space that was convenient for the participant, e.g. coffee shop or participant's home. Participants first filled out an informed consent form. Interviews were audiotaped and interviewers took notes during the interview. Interviews lasted from roughly 40 minutes to 120 minutes, with the average length of interviews being 70 minutes. Participants were asked to fill out a brief demographic questionnaire at the end of the interview. Interviewers were members of the community-based research team, which included graduate students in counseling psychology or sociology programs and kink-identified community members.

The planned interview questions covered areas such as descriptions of the person's "kink identity," coming out issues, their personal journey in terms of kink-related turning points, peak experiences and low points, and whether their kink sexuality was experienced in a manner similar to their sexual orientation. Questions were also asked about community involvement and one's understanding of several community-related values often discussed in kink forums, community events, and literature.

Analysis began with an open coding phase. The research team examined several interviews together, coding aspects of kink identity to locate different meaningful dimensions across interviews. Several rounds of analysis followed, with individual team members coding an interview on their own and then discussing modifications to the codes at team meetings for the next round of analysis. When coding saturation was reached, theoretical coding between the identified core themes was conducted by a subgroup of the research team.

Results

The 70 participants interviewed had an average age of 44.76 years, the youngest age 21 years and the oldest age 83 years. In terms of "years in kink," the average number of years actively engaged in kink behaviors was 18.8 years, with a range from 1.5 years of experience to 65 years of experience. There was a significant difference in years in kink between different racial/ethnic identity groups, with People of Color participants having fewer years of kink experience than White participants. See Table 1 for numerical and percentage breakdown of gender, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

What emerged from our analysis of interviews were four core themes of kink identity: sex, power, community and headspace, which were further categorized into seven subthemes: (1) intertwining of kink and sex; (2) intense physical sensations (SM); (3) sensual experiences (fetish); (4) eroticizing power differentials; (5) fluidity vs stability of power role in kink activities and relationships; (6) community connections; and (7) headspace or altered states of consciousness. Below is a description of each core theme and its respective subtheme as it relates to our participants' experiences. The direct quotes from participants are representative of our themes and are a cross section of how these themes differed within our sample.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Sample

Characteristic	N	%
Gender		
Cisgender women	28	39
Cisgender men	32	45
Gender diverse group (transgender men and women; genderfluid, ambigender, and genderqueer people)	11	15.5
Race/Ethnicity		
White, non-Hispanic	53	75
Black, non-Hispanic	6	8.5
Hispanic/Latinx	3	4
Asian American	2	2.8
Sexual Orientation		
Heterosexual	20	28
Pansexual, Queer	19	26.8
Gay	18	25
Lesbian	8	11
Bisexual	6	8.5

Dimension: Sex

Categories: (1) *Intertwining of kink and sex*, (2) *intense physical sensations (SM)*, and (3) *sensual experiences (fetish)*.

64% of our participants discussed a strong *intertwining of kink and sex* when discussing their kink identities. Some mentioned the interaction of kink and sex having started from the very beginning of their sexual history, while others discovered kink far after early sexual experiences. For many participants, the type of kink practice that was coupled with a sexual activity involved some element of power: “[Kink and sex] are part of the same for me. There is usually some part of the power exchange that happens with sex” – 41-year-old Latina lesbian cisgender female. “The very first time I ever masturbated I realized I was thinking about being dominated and abused by another kid in my class. And that developed into a very elaborate fantasy that included raunch, at 11 years old” – 48-year-old White gay cisgender male. Many of our participants were unable to consider kink and sex as separate since they were “part of the same,” as this participant mentioned, whereas for others, as seen with the second participant's statement, their earliest sexual experience was embedded in a kink fantasy centered on *intense physical sensations (SM)*. That the merging of kink and sex also involved power in these narratives suggests the complexity of how the themes of sex, power, and headspace overlapped for many participants.

Other participants specifically mentioned *intense physical sensations (SM)* and *sensual experiences (fetish)* to underscore their kink practice and identity. As one participant mentioned, “. . . the painful things . . . sometimes I would start doing them to turn myself on or start getting wet. So, it just progressed. I would do things like take straight pins and put them in my boob or my butt. Spank myself, just crazy shit” – 47-year-old White bisexual cisgender female. This participant discussed how self-directed pain was sexually activating. In hurting herself, whether through the means of self-spanking or pricking herself with a pin, she was able to use the kink practice of *physical sensations (SM)* to turn herself on.

Another participant commented on the power of leather: “Fetish wear of the kinky style always caught my eye. Leather. Smells -- I like the smell of leather” – 59-year-old White heterosexual cisgender male. In contrast, the kink practice of this participant was centered on the *sensual experience*, or fetish, of leather. The sensory experience of leather -- seeing it, wearing it, and smelling it, was an important dimension of this participant’s kink identity.

When I was a teenager, tight pants, tight belts, boots of any sort. Leather, clearly leather was the attraction. I had found some leather gloves and I kept those hidden. We had a barn that I could go out to. And so, I would, with leather gloves on, bind my hands with rope and suspend myself by wrists quite often to masturbate. Never touching myself – just from the tightness of the rope and the leather gloves. I would hold myself up off the floor so I could smell the leather on my hands and then I would cum. So, I did that as often as I could get away as a teenager. – 50-year-old White bisexual cisgender male

Here, the sensual experience of leather was spoken of as being connected to sexual activities. Several of our participants not only found the *sensual experience (fetish)* of leather to be central to their kink identity and experience, but they also considered it intertwined with their sexual practices. As this participant mentioned, they reached a sexual climax from the smell of leather because there was something unique in the qualities and associations of leather that activated this participant in a sexual way. The *intertwining of kink and sex* for those participants whom leather is a meaningful signifier suggest fetishes as a powerful conduit for connecting kink and sex.

Although many of our participants found kink and sex strongly overlapping, others discussed kink as distinctly separate from sex, with these participants describing themselves as having very little interest in sex. Instead, the kink identity and experiences of these people had more to do with *intense physical sensations (SM)* or power exchange. “Kink is more important than sex to me — kink is more erotic to me than anything else” – 32-year-old White pansexual transgender female. In this case, this participant prioritized kink over sex and considered kink to be more erotic than anything else, including sex. This suggests that it is not that this participant finds no interest in sex, but if one were to classify the degree of significance kink and sex hold for them, kink would be higher in erotic importance.

“I am not one of the folks for whom kink itself is sex,” said a 29-year-old White queer cisgender female participant. This participant’s statement reflects that they need not equate kink with sex as others did, and that physical sex or sexual practices were not necessary for this participant to still fully participate in kink activities and experiences of headspace, community, and/or power.

Another participant mentioned how “the whole kink play doesn’t necessarily have to include sexual activity, although it normally does,” said a 55-year-old White bi-curious transgender female participant. While this participant’s kink play could do without a sexual dimension, it often still included some type of sexual activity because of the more fluid approach this participant had with kink and sex. There was no categorical boundary with kink play for many of our participants; they reported feeling free to mix in sex with kink as they like. This aptly captures the fluid and complex nature of what our sample demonstrated about kink and the

structure of kink identity -- sometimes kink will mesh with sexual activity, and sometimes it won't.

Dimension: Power

Categories: (4) *Eroticizing power differentials*; (5) *fluidity vs stability of power role in kink activities and relationships*.

Eroticizing power differentials was a common theme of our participants' kink experiences, with 66% discussing power while describing their kink identities. Some participants' interests in eroticized power exchange developed in childhood.

A specific episode of Star Trek – the women were all in charge and the men were all slaves. I thought that was really hot and I jerked off thinking about how I could be a slave to these women, being kept naked and made to do stuff. I love that. I was more turned on by the subservience of it. Same with Westerns or Pirate movies. As far back as I can remember – maybe 10. – 46-year-old White gay cisgender male

A 48-year-old Black queer transgender male participant also mentioned loving Westerns “. . . which is great for people to get tied up. Then I remember I was inappropriately watching some documentary and there was a rape scene; I was about 12. And I was horny about that.” These participants recalled early experiences of being turned on sexually by the power differences seen in film and television. *Eroticizing power differentials*, specifically through the context of subservience and submission, e.g. being “made to do stuff,” as the first participant mentioned, or being turned on by having someone dominate you against your will, as the second participant stated, were how many participants discussed the ways power dynamics show up in their kink practices.

While eroticizing power was a common element of many of our participants' narratives, the theme of power itself varied across each person's story depending on the *fluidity vs stability of power role in kink activities and relationships*. “Leather definitely, daddy and also boy and Sir at times . . . Because I am polyamorous, it kind of depends on the person I am reacting with in the various relationships,” said a 39-year-old White queer genderfluid participant. For many of our participants, shifting power dynamics was an important theme, with several participants switching between dominant and submissive roles depending on who one's partner was. “Switch would probably be what most people would call me, but even that is so dependent on who my partner is. . . . I will switch between partners” – 32-year-old White heterosexual cisgender male. Another participant, a 54-year-old White lesbian cisgender female, mentioned how they also would call themselves a switch, “. . . but, out of that, 80% bottom, 20% top . . . inclined to being very submissive or mildly dominant -- completely depending on who I am with . . . completely depends on the relationship.”

Some participants considered themselves a “switch” to signify that they were fluid in their D/S role, while others preferred to keep their nominal power identities and fluidity without employing the “switch” title. One further reflection of fluidity with power was described by a participant who considered power shifts as “roisserie sex,” adding how they have never been

good with power being equal – 63-year-old White gay cisgender male, demonstrating how some kink-identified people prefer the rotating capacity of power differentials.

While some participants preferred fluidity with power play, others considered a specific power role as a stable part of their identity. As one participant mentioned, being dominant is “how I live and breathe in the world” – 52-year-old White lesbian cisgender female. Another participant reported, “I’m a dominant. I’ve always been and it’s just who I am” – 44-year-old White queer cisgender female

Dimension: Community

Category: (6) *Community connections.*

Involvement with community was important to 43% of the participants when discussing their kink sexuality, whereas others did not mention community involvement or membership in organized groups. Some participants discussed how community became important over time, usually in the context of finding sex-positive acceptance and support for their alternative interests and desires. When the dimension of *community connections* was discussed in a positive way, it was often spoken of as “extended family” or “chosen family.” As one participant mentioned, “The idea that you are in it beyond just play is truly valuable. That I called my mentor when my dad died -- that is family” – 48-year-old Black queer transmale

To me our leather family has supported each other through something extremely vulnerable, shown each other our weak spots. They’re my support network, closer than my biological family. I’d feel comfortable showing up on their doorstep if everything fell apart. We have chosen to lean on and support each other. We’re all going through something together and we’re really good friends. It’s a unit. As far as the community goes, I feel a lot of people throw it up because it’s a popularity contest. Some throw it up because it actually really means something in their heart and soul. – 30-year-old White bisexual cisgender female

I think one of the pinnacles thus far . . . was volunteering as a domme at SOJ during the Folsom Street Fair . . . That filled me greatly, in many ways. Number one I was fully exposed to 400,000+ people as who I am, transsexual. Two, as a dominant, a top, within the BDSM community. And, three, as someone capable and experienced, and trusted by an organization to use whips on volunteers and public bystanders – it was an accolade of trust and acknowledgement by others around me of who I am and how they see me . . . I think that was one of the highest accolades I have received. Because it validated me on all those levels . . . And that to me was the highlight of, I’m finally here, I’m finally in a space in which, not only am I accepted, but encouraged, and actually asked to do this thing. – 52-year-old White bisexual transmale

Many of our participants reported positive experiences with the kink community, often feeling appreciation and trust from the community in a similar way as the participants above. In contrast, other participants said that they felt like an outsider and unable to forge many meaningful connections in community settings, with a small portion of our sample actively

shunning the organized kink community. In two separate parts of the interview, one participant discussed both feeling like an outsider and rejecting the community:

I kind of actually see myself as a bit of an outsider a lot of the time. I am of it, but I'm not in it, a lot of the time. Even though people see me as being... sometimes fairly prominent. I mean, if for no other reason than I am a presence, and I teach, and I... do stuff and what not, yet in a lot of ways I've always felt like a complete outsider to BDSM people. And I mean I'm absolutely not part of any of the in-groups. And I'm absolutely not part of any of the empowered groups... and that makes it difficult to really define thinking of myself as in it . . .

The single worst aspect of the community to me is it's very much like the junior high school from hell. You know, I've never willingly spent any time as an adult in a community that misbehaved this badly. It's so much like a bad junior high school movie, I can't believe it. – 58-year-old White heterosexual cisgender male

Another participant quoted the famous Groucho Marx quote, saying, “I wouldn't be a member of any club that would have me as a member” – 52-year-old White gay cisgender male. Just as with the previous themes of sex and power, the relationship between one's kink identity and the kink community is multidimensional.

Dimension: Headspace

Category: (7) Headspace or altered states of consciousness.

9% of the participants discussed their kink sexuality and identity in terms of experiential “highs” from kink activities, i.e. *headspaces or altered states of consciousness*. For example, a headspace is achieved when one plays a role like “pup” or “slave,” which involves fulfilling a particular mindset. Others discussed how mental stimulation was more important than physical stimulation in their kink practice, with some highlighting the spiritual aspect of their kink practice. “This is spiritual, this is physical. I can have physical sensation, and I can get into a very spiritual place with kink” – 50-year-old Black dyke genderqueer person.

My back was being whipped by this bull whip but I was not there. I was in the forest as a wolf completely detached from my physical body. I had never experienced my wolf side before that. I was immersed into a forest where I was with another group of wolves and my spirit was protecting... it might have been protecting me, or protecting my physical body or... there was definitely a low-level growl, guttural, fierce, protective kind of thing going on. – 55-year-old White gay cisgender male

These participants' responses speak to the unique headspace kink provides for some participants. The kink practices of these participants involved a physical dimension that translates into a spiritual and otherworldly dimension.

One of the really good things about kink and sex is that kink occupies you with a lot of things . . . you get to travel to all kinds of different places, you get to go further, you get

to learn more about yourself and the other person or persons. – 71-year-old Caucasian queer cisgender female.

Several of our participants underscored headspace as a place that kink takes you. As one participant mentioned, “I would give up the church before I give up the kink” – 32-year-old White pansexual transgender female. In the words of these participants, kink “occupies” you and brings you into a special headspace that allows you to develop a special connection to yourself and others, sometimes to the point where the primacy of kink outweighs any religious commitments; in this respect, the headspace of kink becomes king.

Discussion

While conducting the thematic analysis of our interviews, we came to see these themes as actually demonstrating *dimensions* of kink involvement. It is possible that the four core themes we captured reflect aspects of kink identity that one can be “high” or “low” in, or another gradient of, much like the dimensional aspects of personality. We believe that a dimensional approach to studying kink identity can help us better understand the most significant aspects of kink practices. This dimensional, or structural, approach to kink identity contrasts with the narrative approach explored by others (Hughes & Hammack, 2019; Hammack & Toolis, 2016; Hammack et al., 2009), which emphasizes the way in which people use narratives about social categories to make sense of their sexual identities. In their analysis, Hughes & Hammack discuss three themes within a “liberatory narrative” of a kink identity that resists the pathologization of kink practices: the focus on consent and collaboration in scripts and scenes, the reimagining of power play as ‘serious leisure’ (see Newmahr, 2010; Sprott & Williams, 2019), and the emphasis on positive, self-affirming values of subculture and community (2019, p. 152). This narrative approach to identity highlights significant aspects that complement the structural, sex-positive approach taken in our study. In addition, our study aligns with Hammock et al.’s “queer paradigm of intimacy,” especially their axioms of desire, sexual identity, relationality, and consensual power exchange (Hammock et al., 2019, p. 559). On a more general note, we find that queer theory would be an appropriate theoretical framework for future scholarship that expands on this study, mainly because of its emphasis on resisting what is normative and dominant for more fluid behaviors, identities, and orientations that exist outside of established categories (Minton, 1997, p. 338).

A special note is also to be made about the intersection of gender diverse identities and kink identity, in particular. The genderqueer and transgender participants in this study noted that kink identity had important intersections with their gender identity: For some participants, the development of their kink identity facilitated the development of their gender identity, while others temporarily stepped away from the development of their kink identity to more fully explore their gender identity. The intersection of gender identity and kink sexuality has been noted by a number of studies (Sprott & Hadcock, 2017; Simula, 2012; Bauer, 2007, 2008), highlighting that kink interests, behaviors, and community spaces often facilitate the exploration of gender, or can subvert traditional gender roles and the importance of gender in sexuality. Simula, in her study of bisexuality and kink, noted that in the context of kink, there is a “strikingly complex relationship between BDSM bisexuality and patterns of doing, redoing, and

undoing gender” (Simula 2012, p. 501). We saw a similar complexity in our study’s diverse participants.

Since the limitations of our study include the sample selection criteria of adults who were kink-identified and living in Northern California, it is unclear as to how results would compare in other regions of the United States or in other nations. The snowball sampling method also introduces limitations in the generalization or applicability of the results. Future research should address these limitations by expanding kink identity research to broader regional areas and through more diverse sampling methodologies and procedures.

Conclusion

This thematic analysis study presents an initial exploration of the multidimensional structure of kink identity by locating what we found to be four critical themes of kink identity -- sex, power, community, and headspace, along with seven subthemes. Our sex-positive approach to the study of the structure of kink identity emphasizes sexual diversity, which has positive social implications for removing the stigma that is often attached to people who identify as kinky or are involved in kink practices. By helping to expand the general construct of sexual identity and thereby the specific needs of kink-identified people, this study brings sex-positive discourse to the public on the diversity and complexity of kink to improve the health and wellness of sexual minorities.

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