ISSN 2832-8663

JOURNAL OF POSITIVE SEXUALITY

Published by The Center for Positive Sexuality

Volume 10, Number 2, November 2024

The journal of the Center for Positive Sexuality, a 501c3 non-profit organization.
Burbank, CA

THE JOURNAL OF POSITIVE SEXUALITY is a multidisciplinary journal focusing on all aspects of positive sexuality as described in the Center for Positive Sexuality's purpose statement. It is designed to be accessible and beneficial to a large and diverse readership, including academics, policymakers, clinicians, educators, and students.

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Word Play: A Top-Down Approach to Text Analysis of BDSM Practitioners' Written Language

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Abstract

Power play, or consensual power changing between "Dominant" and "submissive" role partners, is common practice within BDSM culture. In fact, to many BDSM practitioners, their D/s role is an integral part of their sexual identity and behavior, which informs not only their sexual scripts, but also their non-sexual social interactions. This two-part research study used computerized text analysis to determine whether BDSM practitioners relative to non-practitioners, and among D/s role identities, differed in their language use. Study 1 utilized a sample of 13,374 web-scraped comments from BDSM- and non-BDSM-related subreddits. Study 2 used a recruited sample of 285 self-identified Dominants, submissives, switches, and non-BDSM practitioners. Results suggest that BDSM practitioners consistently use role-specific language outside of scenes and sexual contexts. Findings from this top-down approach, coupled with a bottom-up approach published previously (Crane & Ireland, 2022), intend to facilitate a comprehensive analysis to inform future research of marginalized persons with diverse sexualities.

Keywords: BDSM, language analysis, LIWC, power, identity, individual differences

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a boom in using computerized text-analysis to probe connections between language and identity. Advances in technology have allowed researchers to explore differences in language use across various cultures, periods, people, and contexts. This type of research may be particularly useful to distinguish individual differences of stigmatized communities from the general population in an effort to refine resources. People who engage in BDSM, for example, may experience identity-based prejudice and discrimination that goes unnoticed and unvalidated. That is, if their involvement becomes known, BDSM practitioners may face discrimination at work, experience backlash or ostracization from family, friends, or partners, be targets of online harassment or cyberbullying, encounter bias in healthcare settings, or even be subject to legal scrutiny (Parchev et al., 2018; Reynish et al., 2022; Roush et al., 2016; Weiss, 2008; Wright, 2006). Thus, the present work sought to extend understandings of language to the unique context of BDSM and BDSM practitioners, to legitimize their status as a minoritized sexual identity. This, in turn, may encourage protections against such discrimination.

BDSM is a form of consensual sex play that involves, but is not limited to, bondage and restraint (B), discipline in the form of rewards and punishment (D), domination and submission-based power play (DS), and the application of intense or painful sensations through sadism and masochism (SM). Given the variation in sexual identities, behaviors, fantasies, and motivations, the term "BDSM" represents an encompassing umbrella term for these various kinks (Faccio et

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al., 2020). BDSM play does not necessitate enactment of one kink over the other, but some appear more frequently than others in relationships and during scenes. Power play[2], or the eroticization and/or implementation of power differences between partners, is a common kink employed by BDSM practitioners. In power play, one or more partners typically assume a controlling role while other partner(s) adopt an obedient role. Partners might also "switch" between roles depending on the scene, who they are playing with, and other situational factors.

In effect, Dominants[3] exert consensual control over submissive partner(s) by directing the scene, choosing the tools and activities, giving orders, and sometimes inflicting pain and/or discipline. Submissives, in turn, relinquish control and trust the Dominant(s) to precipitate pleasure. Because partners negotiate their desires, goals, and limitations before play begins, Dominants and submissives employ consensual, temporary, and illusory power dynamics to achieve scene objectives. However, many BDSM practitioners prefer to maintain one type of role regardless of variable situations and partners (Alison et al., 2001; Martinez, 2018). To these individuals, "Dominant," "submissive," and "switch" are self-defining labels pertinent to behavior broadly, and in some instances, one's identity.

Many BDSM practitioners have asserted that their power play role is a core component of their identity beyond a mere performance of sexual behaviors (Sprott & Williams, 2019; Williams et al., 2016), and instead reveals a facet of their sexual orientation (Bezreh et al., 2012; Carlström, 2019; Gemberling et al., 2015) or erotic orientation (Ortmann & Sprott, 2012). That is, erotic and sexual experiences are not mutually exclusive and an individual might adapt BDSM as a sexual behavior (e.g., during sex or intercourse), a nonsexual behavior (e.g., shibari, fireplay), a lifestyle (e.g., 24/7 power play), and/or as an aspect of one's identity (e.g., labeling oneself as a Leatherwoman). BDSM, and likewise power play roles, seems to emulate identity attributes that support these conceptualizations. Personality research reveals that BDSM practitioners exhibit higher levels of subjective well-being, less neuroticism, less agreeableness, more extraversion, more openness, and more conscientiousness relative to "vanilla"[4] or non-BDSM practitioners (Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013). The researchers also found that Dominants reported being less neurotic, more extraverted, more open to new experiences, more conscientious, and less rejection-sensitive compared to switches and submissives. A separate study found similar results such that Dominants expressed greater desire for control, extraversion, self-esteem, and life satisfaction relative to submissives (Hébert & Weaver, 2014). Moreover, Hébert and Weaver (2014) found that submissives demonstrated higher emotionality compared to Dominants. Damon (2003) also found that Dominant men exhibited higher levels of self-esteem than submissive men, corroborating results from Luo and Zhang (2018) in which Dominants reported higher trait self-esteem and romantic relationships satisfaction than submissives. Additionally, Luo and Zhang (2018) found that switches expressed more trait empathy than submissives and Dominants, especially among female participants. These findings suggest characteristics unique to BDSM practitioners generally, and trait-based differences

[2]I use the terms "power play" and "power dynamic" intentionally. Phrases such as "power exchange" reinforce hegemonic gender and sexual norms of power by suggesting that certain roles are "normal," (i.e., dominant men and submissive women) and any variation in these roles are "abnormal" (Pitagora, 2019).

[3] Throughout this document, I use the traditional difference in capitalization between power play roles to symbolically refer to their innate power differences.

[4] Vanilla is a community-based term that is widely used by BDSMers and academics.

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between specific D/s role identities. Evidently, power play role appears to be an integral element of BDSM practitioners' sexual identity, which informs not only their sexual behavior but also their behavior outside of BDSM playtime.

In fact, power play role identity may influence non-sexual social interactions outside of BDSM relationship dynamics. BDSM is not inherently a sexual activity, although it can be sexual. BDSM actively de-centers sexual intercourse and phallocentrism (Faccio et al., 2020; Pitagora, 2019), which makes it appealing and accessible for asexual individuals too (Sloan, 2015). Therefore, typical BDSM practices are unrelated to erogenous zones, genital areas, intercourse, and orgasm and instead focus on emotional intimacy, vulnerability and trust, close relationships, self-discovery and enhancement, psychological stimulation, and spiritual transcendence (Carlström, 2019; Faccio et al., 2020; Sloan, 2015). BDSM practitioners can also extend power play to other aspects of their relationships in the form of 24/7 lifestyle play. In these contexts, division of household labor, daily activities such as dressing, eating, and sleeping, and sexual interactions are executed with respect to predetermined power play roles (Dancer et al., 2006) yet remain separate from intercourse and BDSM scenes. In other words, non-sexual aspects of daily life are structured within the power dynamic but are not overtly sexual or confined to a specific time. Instead, 24/7 power dynamics guide, maintain, and strengthen the interpersonal relationship between practitioners entirely. Consequently, one's role as Dominant or submissive may shape day-to-day behaviors, thoughts, feelings, motivations, and interactions outside the confines of BDSM-specific contexts.

Language

Patterns in one's language use, particularly their use of function words (e.g., pronouns, prepositions, articles) can reveal how a person thinks, feels, and behaves. Several studies have found connections between use of function words to social and psychological processes (Pennebaker, 2011; Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010), personality traits (Cohen et al., 2008; Groom & Pennebaker, 2002; Hirsh & Peterson, 2009; Park et al., 2014; Yarkoni, 2010), and behavior (Niederhoffer & Pennebaker, 2002; Pennebaker & Lay, 2002; Simmons et al., 2005).

Language reflects and predicts individual differences, which differ according to personality and mental health. Linguistic style has been shown to be consistent with big-five personality traits. People who scored high on extraversion used more verbs (Lee et al., 2007), social words, more positive emotion, less complex language (Pennebaker & King, 1999), and fewer negative emotion words (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). Additionally, Mehl et al. (2006) found that higher word count and fewer large words predicted high extraversion scores. Conversely, people who scored high on neuroticism used frequent negative emotional words and first-person singular pronouns (Pennebaker & King, 1999). Relatedly, depressed and suicidal individuals are more self-focused (i.e., use first-person singular pronouns), express more negative emotion, and often use more death-related words (see Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010 for a review). Words therefore provide clues to people's character and wellbeing.

Research has also found that linguistic style can be used to infer social hierarchy. Fragale (2006) demonstrated that speech styles influence others' trait inferences about the speaker. Participants conferred high status, respect, and agency to an actor who used confident statements

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and commands in their speech, but conferred low status, negative attributions, and communality to an actor whose speech included hesitations, qualifiers, and disclaimers (Fragale, 2006). Similarly, Carney et al. (2005) reported that participants believed that high-powered individuals used more smooth and confident speech and were more successful at interrupting. These studies indicate that nonverbal cues and linguistic styles affect whether someone is deemed powerful, confident, respectable, successful, or not.

In a study of leadership rank and pronoun use, Kacewicz et al. (2013) found that higher rank was linked with other-focus, marked by second-person pronouns (e.g., you, your) and first-person plural pronouns (e.g., we, us), whereas lower rank was linked with self-focus, marked by use of first-person singular pronouns (e.g., I, me). Moreover, the use of these pronouns was a good predictor of high or low status. Evidently, people in differing hierarchical positions of power focus their attention differently depending on what role they are in. Language thus shapes interpersonal relationships and how various components of hierarchy are communicated.

Overview of the Present Research

The present research had two aims. First, I sought to determine whether BDSM practitioners differed regarding their linguistic style relative to non-practitioners. Second, the present research aimed to uncover content and language style differences between Dominant and submissive role identities[5]. Because power play is a common practice and self-defining element among BDSM practitioners, I hypothesized that BDSM practitioners would use more power-based content words relative to non-practitioners. Moreover, I anticipated that BDSM practitioners would use more reward-based content words than non-practitioners given that allocation of rewards and punishments is associated with upholding power differences between partners. Additionally, past research evinces that BDSM practitioners exhibit higher levels of well-being (Connolly, 2006) and lower levels of neuroticism (Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013) compared to non-BDSM controls. I thus predicted that greater use of positive affect words and fewer use of negative affect words among BDSM practitioners would be associated with a healthy psychological state relative to non-practitioners. Given that BDSM practitioners have been shown to score higher than non-BDSM practitioners on self-reported personality factors, such as extraversion and openness (Hébert & Weaver, 2014; Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013), which may be associated with risk-taking (Cross & Matheson, 2006) and sensation-seeking (Dawson et al., 2016; De Neef et al., 2019), I hypothesized that BDSM users would use more risk-based content words than their counterparts. Also, because consent, often expressed through verbal negotiations, is essential to BDSM, I predicted that BDSM practitioners would use more assent-based words than non-practitioners. Finally, because BDSM practices are described using jargon distinct from non-kinky, vanilla sexual practices, I created a BDSM dictionary to capture the distinct vocabulary utilized by BDSM users. In turn, I hypothesized that BDSM practitioners would use more BDSM dictionary words than non-practitioners. Thus, the hypotheses for language differences between BDSM practitioners and non-practitioners were as follows:

[5]I did not make any predictions among switches given that they adopt both Dominant and submissive roles, thereby eliciting a conflated language style. However, exploratory comparisons were informally conducted for each outcome in Study 2.

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1a) BDSM users use significantly more power words than non-BDSM users;

1b) BDSM users use significantly more reward words than non-BDSM users;

1c) BDSM users use more positive emotion words and fewer negative emotion words relative to non-BDSM users;

1d) BDSM users use more words associated with risk than non-BDSM users;

1e) BDSM users use more assent language than non-BDSM users;

1f) BDSM users use more BDSM dictionary words than non-BDSM users.

In line with my second aim, I anticipated that differences in content and style would appear when comparing Dominant and submissive language samples. Given previous findings that people in powerful or high-status status positions focus on others, rather than the self, in written and spoken language (Kacewicz et al., 2013; Sexton & Helmreich, 2000), I hypothesized similar results: Dominants would use more first-person plural pronouns, second-person pronouns, and third-person plural pronouns. I anticipated the opposite for submissives such that they would use more first-person singular pronouns. I also hypothesized that Dominants would use more verbs based on research suggesting increased power leads to action (Galinsky et al., 2003). Furthermore, due to their increased power, I predicted that Dominants would use more power-driven words than submissives. Additionally, I hypothesized that because submissives are often the continuously consenting and subservient party, they would use more assent-based words than Dominants. That is, one who "accepts" things is likely a passive decision-maker or of lower agency (Sap et al., 2017). Because submissives might be highly motivated to obtain pleasure as a reward, I likewise hypothesized that submissives would use more reward-based words. Finally, I hypothesized that submissives would express greater emotionality through affective language, along with more negative affect words given higher rates of neuroticism relative to Dominants (Hébert & Weaver, 2014; Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013). Thus, the hypotheses for language differences between Dominants and submissives were as follows:

2a) Dominants use more first-person plural pronouns, second-person pronouns, and third-person plural pronouns than submissives;

2b) submissives use more first-person singular pronouns than Dominants;

2c) Dominants use more verbs than submissives;

2d) Dominants use more power-driven words than submissives;

2e) submissives use more assent words than Dominants;

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2f) submissives use more reward words than Dominants;

2g) submissives use more negative emotion words relative to Dominants.

I tested my predictions in two studies using computerized text analysis. In Study 1, I used web-scraped comments from relevant subreddits to test my hypotheses using organic language samples outside BDSM scene-specific contexts. Due to concerns with lack of control over the subject matter discussed in subreddit samples and inability to directly assess users' power play role identification, I conducted a second study addressing these limitations. Study 2 tested my predictions using focused writing prompts solicited from a sample of recruited participants. The hypotheses remained the same between the two studies, but samples differed such that Study 2 utilized focused writing prompts from recruited participants rather than scrapings from Reddit community pages.

The present studies use a theoretically informed, exploratory approach to examine differences in linguistic style between self-identified BDSM practitioners and non-practitioners as well as between Dominants, submissives, and switches. This top-down approach coupled with a bottom-up approach published previously (Crane & Ireland, 2022) is meant to facilitate a thorough analysis and a comprehensive interpretation of these data.

Study 1

Study 1 examined differences between BDSM practitioners' and non-practitioners' use of linguistic content words and style words in written language. The primary categories of interest were: power, reward, positive emotion, negative emotion, risk, assent, BDSM dictionary, first-person singular pronouns, first-person plural pronouns, second-person pronouns, third-person plural pronouns, and verbs. Although not hypothesized, I also included personal pronouns, third-person singular pronouns, affective processes, anxiety, anger, and sadness categories out of interest.

Method

Text Samples

I identified several subreddit communities that would diversely represent and be comprised of BDSM practitioners (i.e., 'r/BDSMcommunity', 'r/BDSMAdvice', 'r/BDSMfaq', 'r/BDSM'), Dominants (i.e., 'r/GentleDomination', 'r/Domspace', 'r/FemDomCommunity'), submissives (i.e., 'r/SubSanctuary', 'r/DDLG', 'r/Petplay', 'r/DDLGconfess'), and non-BDSM practitioners (i.e., 'r/DeadBedrooms', 'r/Marriage', 'r/Dating'). I used the reddit function in R to scrape and download 200 posts with linked titles and comments from each of the subreddits. The total sample included 13,374 web-scraped comments (3,309 BDSM; 1,464 Dominant; 2,397 submissive; 6,204 non-BDSM).

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Data Analysis

Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC; Pennebaker et al., 2015) was used to process responses in addition to a sex dictionary and a BDSM dictionary that I created (see Crane & Ireland, 2022 for a detailed description of these dictionaries and development process). The software compares texts against internal dictionaries (lexicons or word lists) and outputs the percentage of total words in the text that matched each word list. LIWC's standard categories include linguistic (e.g., conjunctions, personal pronouns), psychological (e.g., anxiety, affiliation motives), and content (e.g., work, leisure) categories.

Before running analyses, I manually cleaned the text samples for spelling errors, abbreviations, contractions (e.g., verb contractions, possessive vs. is apostrophe+s, it's, apostrophe +d), and shorthand using the Reformatting Transcripts for LIWC 2015 guide and the Find and Replace function in Microsoft Excel. I then ran the text samples through LIWC to calculate the percentage of words that fell into the word categories of interest. In addition to the self-created BDSM dictionary, the internal LIWC dictionaries used in analyses were first-person singular pronouns, first person plural pronouns, third-person pronouns, verbs, assent words, positive emotion words, negative emotion words, power words, reward words, and risk words.

Using Microsoft Excel and SPSS Statistics, I tested for differences in positive emotion, negative emotion, power, reward, risk, assent, and BDSM dictionary usage (hypotheses 1a-f) between BDSM subreddit text samples and non-BDSM subreddit text samples. I also tested for differences in first-person singular pronoun, first person plural pronoun, third-person pronoun, verb, positive emotion, negative emotion, power, reward, and assent word usage (hypotheses 2a-h) between Dominant subreddit and submissive subreddit text samples. I calculated frequency means for each LIWC category of interest and conducted independent sample t-tests to compare BDSM and non-BDSM text samples, as well as Dominant and submissive text samples.

Results

Independent sample t-tests revealed that there were significant mean differences between BDSM text samples and non-BDSM text samples for four LIWC categories: positive emotion, negative emotion, assent, and BDSM dictionary words. BDSM subreddit text samples contained more overall affective processes, $t(5536)= 5.43$, $p <.001$, $d= 0.12$ including significantly more positive emotion words compared to non-BDSM text samples, $t(5321)= 7.13$, $p <.001$, $d= 0.16$.

Non-BDSM text samples however, used significantly more negative emotion words, $t(6899)= 3.37$, $p <.001$, $d= 0.07$, more anxiety words, $t(8048)= 2.58$, $p <.01$, $d= 0.05$, and more sadness words, $t(7571)= 5.92$, $p <.001$, $d= 0.12$, relative to BDSM text samples. BDSM text samples also contained significantly more assent words, $t(4859)= 3.37$, $p <.001$, $d= 0.08$, and BDSM vocabulary, $t(3987)= 27.91$, $p <.001$, $d= 0.66$, compared to non-BDSM text samples. There were no significant mean differences between BDSM and non-BDSM text samples for power, $t(5729)= 1.71$, $p =.09$, $d= 0.04$, risk, $t(6634)= 1.64$, $p = .10$, $d= 0.04$, or reward categories, $t(5476)= 0.88$, $p = .38$, $d= 0.02$. It might be worth noting that although not significant, BDSM text samples were comprised of more power words than non-BDSM text samples. Table 1 lists

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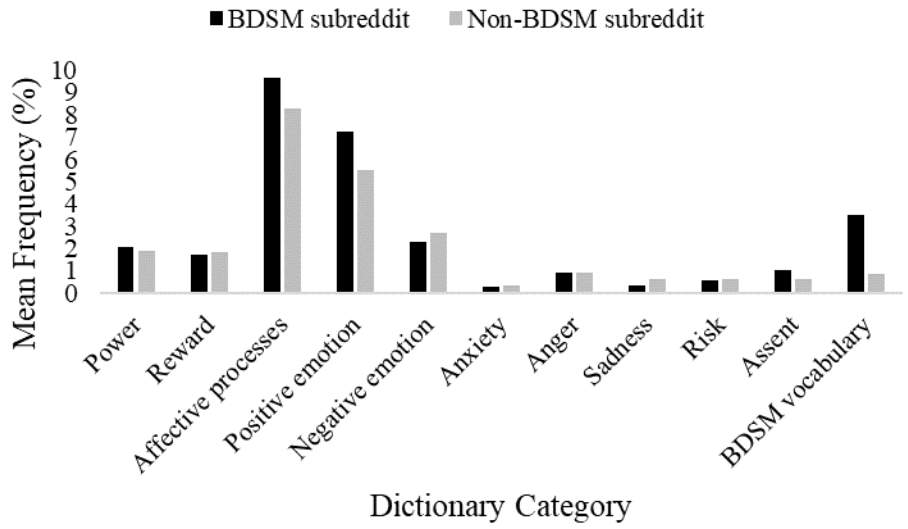
the means and standard deviations for the LIWC categories. Figure 1 displays mean differences for each LIWC category.

Table 1.
Means and standard deviations for LIWC categories as a function of BDSM or Non-BDSM subreddit text samples

		BDSM		Non-BDSM	
LIWC Category	Examples	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Power	superior, bully	2.05	4.47	1.89	3.68
Reward	take, prize, benefit	1.74	4.71	1.82	3.66
Affective processes	happy, cried	9.68	12.79	8.28	10.07
Positive emotion	love, nice, sweet	7.27	12.39	5.52	9.26
Negative emotion	hurt, ugly, nasty	2.32	4.82	2.67	4.95
Anxiety	worried, fearful	0.29	1.08	0.35	1.33
Anger	hate, kill, annoyed	0.92	3.21	0.92	3.34
Sadness	crying, grief, sad	0.36	1.91	0.62	2.19
Risk	danger, doubt	0.54	1.79	0.61	1.75
Assent	agree, OK, yes	1.05	6.29	0.65	4.12
BDSM vocabulary	kink, choke, masochism	3.52	5.19	0.88	2.26

Figure 1.
Mean frequencies for LIWC categories as a function of BDSM or non-BDSM subreddit text samples



There were significant mean differences between Dominant and submissive text samples for eight LIWC categories: first-person singular pronouns, first-person plural pronouns, third-person pronouns, positive emotion, negative emotion, power, assent, and BDSM dictionary words. Submissive subreddit text samples contained significantly more first-person singular pronouns, $t(3701)= 4.44$, $p <.001$, $d= 0.14$, and second-person pronouns, $t(3819)= 5.35$, $p <.001$,

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d= 0.17, compared to Dominant text samples. Conversely, Dominant subreddit text samples utilized significantly more first-person plural pronouns, *t*(3048)= 3.36, *p* <.001, *d*= 0.11, third-person singular pronouns, *t*(2917)= 7.244, *p* <.001, *d*= 0.24, and third-person plural pronouns, *t*(3241)= 2.24, *p* <.05, *d*= 0.07, relative to submissive text samples. Dominant text samples also used significantly more power-based words relative to submissive text samples, *t*(3133)= 6.82, *p* <.001, *d*= 0.23. Additionally, submissive text samples displayed higher rates of assent words than Dominant samples, *t*(3859)= 2.33, *p* <.05, *d*= 0.07. Submissive text samples contained a high degree of overall affective processes, *t*(3857)= 9.35, *p* <.001, *d*= 0.29, including a high percentage of positive emotion words, *t*(3858)= 10.86, *p* <.001, *d*= 0.34. Dominant sample texts contained more negative emotion words, *t*(3422)= 3.32, *p* <.001, *d*= 0.11, anger words, *t*(3105)= 3.57, *p* <.001, *d*= 0.12, and marginally more anxiety words, *t*(3469)= 1.89, *p* = .06, *d*= 0.06, than submissive sample texts. There were no significant mean differences for verbs, *t*(3762)= 0.30, *p* = .77, *d*= 0.01, reward words, *t*(3833)= 1.63, *p* = .10, *d*= 0.05, and sadness words, *t*(3695)= 0.31, *p* = .75, *d*= 0.01. Table 2 and Figure 2 display the means and standard deviations for each LIWC category.

Table 2.
Means and standard deviations for LIWC categories as a function of Dominant or submissive subreddit text samples

		Dominant		submissive	
LIWC Category	Examples	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Personal pronouns	I, them, her	11.31	7.70	12.30	10.62
First-person singular	I, me, mine	4.93	5.39	5.84	7.18
First-person plural	we, us, our	0.53	1.73	0.34	1.70
Second-person	you, your, thou	3.29	5.71	4.51	8.44
Third-person singular	she, her, him	1.94	3.40	1.14	3.16
Third-person plural	they, their	0.62	1.91	0.47	2.04
Verb	eat, come, carry	18.35	10.93	18.48	15.23
Power	superior, bully	2.21	3.32	1.45	3.37
Assent	agree, OK, yes	0.67	4.20	1.08	6.91
Reward	take, prize, benefit	1.70	3.04	1.92	5.42
Affective processes	happy, cried	9.03	10.61	13.18	16.98
Positive emotion	love, nice, sweet	9.03	10.11	13.18	16.78
Negative emotion	hurt, ugly, nasty	2.01	4.34	1.50	5.00
Anxiety	worried, fearful	0.29	1.29	0.20	1.52
Anger	hate, kill, annoyed	0.83	2.71	0.51	2.72
Sadness	crying, grief, sad	0.33	1.88	0.31	2.50

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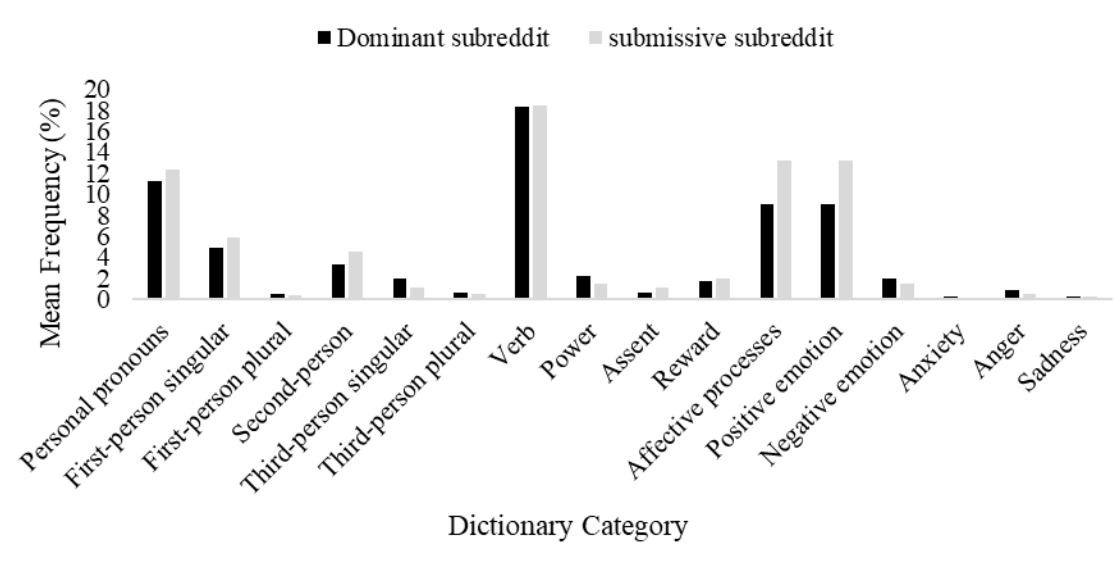
Figure 2.
Mean frequencies for LIWC categories as a function of Dominant or submissive subreddit text samples



Discussion

These data lend support to hypotheses 1c, 1e, and 1f. Study 1 provided an initial demonstration that language use indeed differs between BDSM-affiliated texts and non-BDSM texts. Moreover, within the BDSM community, language use differences seem to imitate the power play differences fundamental to Dominant and submissive roles. Although not statistically significant, BDSM subreddit texts included slightly more power words than non-BDSM sample texts, which may tentatively support hypothesis 1a. Additionally, BDSM sample texts demonstrated greater positive affect and psychological well-being than non-BDSM sample texts, thus supporting hypothesis 1c. BDSM sample texts also used more assent words, supporting hypothesis 1e, which is indicative of the consent and negotiation conversations foundational to BDSM. Finally, hypothesis 1f was supported through substantially greater use of BDSM-specific vocabulary in BDSM subreddit texts. Because no differences were found in use of reward and risk categories between BDSM and non-BDSM sample texts, neither hypothesis 1b nor 1d were supported. Perhaps because users were often asking questions or for advice on the 'r/BDSMAdvice', 'r/BDSMfaq', and 'r/DeadBedrooms' subreddits, the selected text samples may have reflected high levels of uncertainty (which is related to risk) and dissatisfaction (which is related to reward).

Results also supported differences in pronoun usage between Dominant and submissive subreddit users. As predicted by hypothesis 2a, Dominant text samples were more focused on others, relative to the self, as indicated by greater use of first-person plural pronouns and third-person plural pronouns. However, submissive text samples used more second-person pronouns than Dominant text samples. This finding was not anticipated, therefore hypothesis 2a is only partially supported. Submissive sample texts contained significantly more first-person singular

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pronouns compared to Dominant texts, which supports hypothesis 2b. Hypothesis 2d was also supported such that Dominant subreddit sample texts contained a higher percentage of power words than submissive sample texts. Moreover, submissive sample texts used more assent words than Dominant sample texts, thereby supporting hypothesis 2e. Interestingly, submissive sample texts had more affective process words than Dominant sample texts. Yet, contrary to hypothesis 2g, Dominant texts rather than submissive texts exhibited more negative affect words. Finally, because no significant differences in verb or reward categories were found between Dominant and submissive samples, hypotheses 2c and 2f were not supported.

Study 1 replicated the findings from Kacewicz et al. (2013) such that writing samples extracted from lower status (e.g., submissive) subreddits used overwhelmingly more first-person singular pronouns, and that writing samples extracted from higher status (e.g., Dominant) subreddits used more first-person plural pronouns and third-person plural pronouns. The underlying power play structure and system of rewards in BDSM is reinforced by my finding that Dominant text scrapings contained more power words, whereas submissive scrapings contained more assent words. Although no significant differences in reward words were found, means indicate that submissive texts used slightly more reward words, which may reflect the system of rewards and punishment in BDSM relationships. Text samples from Dominant subreddits also used significantly more verbs, which demonstrates that power is associated with efficacious action even in settings where power differences are not directly experienced (Galinsky et al., 2003). Despite research showing that Dominants display somewhat better subjective wellbeing compared to submissives (Hébert & Weaver, 2014; Wismeijer & Van Assen, 2013), these data unexpectedly indicate the opposite. Although submissive text samples contained more emotional words, Dominant samples used significantly more negative emotion words and submissive text samples contained more positive emotion words. This difference seems to be driven by Dominant samples containing significantly more anger words compared to submissive samples.

Although Study 1 was not limited regarding sample size, the text samples that were scraped from subreddits were based on popularity and recency. The algorithm employed by Reddit may inherently exhibit bias in determining which posts to prioritize and promote over others. Furthermore, I had no control regarding the subject matter of posts and comments, and I could not determine users' BDSM affiliation or role identification. Instead, I had to assume that users posting in the selected subreddits were members of, or related to the theme of, a particular subreddit. I sought to resolve these limitations in a second study that tested the same hypotheses and LIWC categories using a collected sample of participants.

Study 2

Study 2 expanded on the first study in several ways. First, language data were collected directly from study participants instead of being scraped. This allowed me to collect information about participants' role as a Dominant, submissive, or switch in addition to other demographic variables absent from Study 1. Secondly, because Study 2 was conducted using a survey containing predetermined writing prompts, I was able to better control for what participants were saying. That is, data were gathered from participants discussing the same topic via common

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writing prompts, as opposed to being compiled from disjointed conversations in group forums. The same hypotheses and LIWC categories tested in Study 1 were also tested in Study 2.

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of 285 self-identified BDSM and non-BDSM practitioners recruited from online communities (of the original 1,659 cases, 1,372 were removed from the data set for no response to either writing prompts). Most participants self-identified as BDSM practitioners (53.7%), cisgender women (46%), and heterosexual/straight (27.4%). Participants also varied in level of activity in BDSM. See Table 3 for a full list of participant demographics.

Table 3.
Demographic Characteristics of Participant Sample (N = 285)

	n	%
Self-identified BDSM practitioner		
Yes	153	53.7
No/I am vanilla	79	27.7
Not sure	53	18.6
Self- Identified power play role		
Dominant	23	15
submissive	84	54.9
Switch	46	30.1
BDSM activity level		
Not at all/I am vanilla	44	15.4
Just curious right now	31	10.9
Curious and want to try	53	18.6
Once in a while to spice it up	61	21.4
I live the lifestyle when I can	77	27
24/7	19	6.7
Gender		
Cisgender Women	131	46
Cisgender Men	86	30.2
Transgender Women	25	8.8
Transgender Men	13	4.6
Non-binary	24	8.4
Questioning	6	2.1

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Sexual Orientation		
Asexual	13	4.6
Bisexual	71	24.9
Heterosexual/Straight	78	27.4
Mostly Heterosexual	46	16.1
Homosexual/Gay	17	6
Homosexual/Lesbian	14	4.9
Pansexual	37	13
Demisexual	6	2.1
Another Orientation (e.g., sexual, androsexual)	3	1.1
Education		
Less than high school	6	2.1
High school	42	14.7
Some college	91	31.9
Associate's degree	20	7
Bachelor's degree	79	27.7
Master's degree	35	12.3
Professional degree	6	2.1
Doctoral degree	6	2.1

Procedure

An online study to assess how BDSM practitioners' language use and personality differed relative to that of non-practitioners was conducted between July and September 2019. This study was approved by the Texas Tech University Institutional Review Board and all participants consented to their participation before the start of the survey. The full survey consisted of four different measures and was posted as a link in forums on several social networking sites, including FetLife, Reddit, 3DXChat, Twitter, Facebook, and in a university listserv. Explicit permission was acquired from moderators to post a link to the study in Reddit subcommunities (e.g., r/BDSMAdvice) and Fetlife groups (e.g., Daddy Doms and babygirls). Recruitment posts for non-practitioners were published in Reddit subcommunities not directly affiliated with BDSM (e.g., r/love, r/asktransgender). Everyone over the age of 18 was invited to participate and participation was not limited by gender, sexuality, or behavior. As compensation, participants were entered in a raffle to win one of eight $30 Amazon eGift cards. Given my explicit interest in outcomes related to language use, only data from participants who completed at least one writing prompt were included in the following analyses.

Measures

Demographics. Participants were asked to provide basic demographic information, including BDSM practitioner identity, power-exchange role identity, gender, sexual orientation, romantic relationship status, sexual relationship status, and highest level of education completed.

Writing Prompts. Participants were asked to complete two writing prompts, writing at least 200 words each before moving to the next section. One writing prompt asked participants to

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write about a current/most recent romantic or sexual relationship; the second writing prompt asked participants to write a short romantic or erotic story. This writing prompt noted that the "story could be sexually explicit, but the 'rating' of the story (e.g., PG or NC-17) was entirely up to the participant." The instructions in both writing prompts clarified that the story should have at least two characters but may have more; individuals' internal dialogue, spoken dialogue, or descriptions of actions could be written entirely from a first-person/inside or third-person/outside perspective; and the story could be completely fictitious or be based on personal experiences. The writing prompts also asked participants to consider addressing some suggested questions in their narratives, including "What is the relationship between the characters?" and "What are the characters' motives?" among others (see Supplementary File for the full list of questions).

Data Analysis

The same procedure for cleaning language transcripts in Study 1 was used in Study 2 before running them through LIWC. Of the original 1,659 cases, 1,372 were removed from the data set for no response to either writing prompts. Two additional cases were flagged for having inappropriate responses in the word prompts and hence removed, leaving 285 cases in the sample.

LIWC was used to process responses in addition to a sex dictionary and a BDSM dictionary created by the primary researcher. Participants' responses from both writing prompts, if applicable, were included in data analysis. Mean scores were calculated for each dictionary category and used for analyses. Once again, I used independent sample t-tests to compare self-identified BDSM and non-BDSM practitioners' written responses, as well as self-identified Dominants' and submissives' written responses. Although not hypothesized, several analyses of variance (ANOVA) were run to compare Dominants', submissives', and switches' use of pronouns, verbs, power, assent, reward, and affective processes.

Results

There were significant mean differences between self-identified BDSM practitioners' written responses and non-BDSM practitioners' written responses for two LIWC categories: power and BDSM vocabulary. Self-identified BDSM practitioners used significantly more power words, $t(230)= 4.49$, $p < .001$, $d= 0.67$, and BDSM dictionary words, $t(227.92)= 8.72$, $p < .001$, $d= 1.06$, compared to non-BDSM practitioners. However, there were no significant differences in use of reward, $t(230)= 0.12$, $p = .91$, $d= 0.07$, positive emotion, $t(230)= 1.04$, $p = .30$, $d= 0.23$, negative emotion, $t(230)= -0.52$, $p = .60$, $d= 0.03$, risk, $t(230)= -1.637$, $p = .10$, $d= 0.23$, or assent words, $t(230)= -1.43$, $p = .15$, $d= 0.06$ between BDSM practitioners and non-practitioners.

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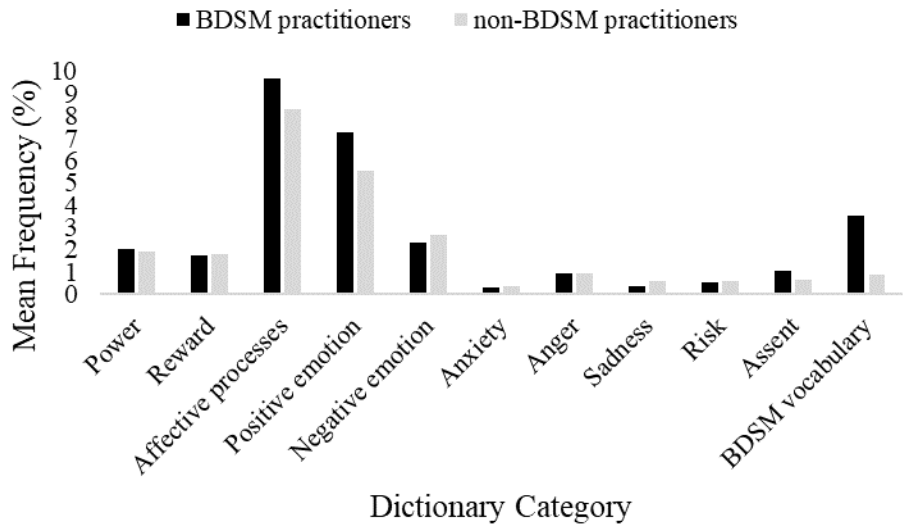
Table 4.
Means and standard deviations for LIWC categories as a function of BDSM or Non-BDSM practitioner self-identification (N=232)

		BDSM practitioners		Non-BDSM practitioners	
LIWC Category	Examples	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Power	superior, bully	2.47	1.18	1.79	.89
Reward	take, prize, benefit	1.32	.72	1.31	.69
Affective processes	happy, cried	5.80	1.67	5.67	1.47
Positive emotion	love, nice, sweet	4.03	1.50	3.82	1.28
Negative emotion	hurt, ugly, nasty	1.71	.90	1.78	.93
Anxiety	worried, fearful	.35	.35	.39	.41
Anger	hate, kill, annoyed	.66	.60	.55	.46
Sadness	crying, grief, sad	.28	.28	.35	.43
Risk	danger, doubt	.36	.34	.45	.46
Assent	agree, OK, yes	.15	.22	.21	.40
BDSM vocabulary	kink, choke, masochism	2.75	1.85	1.20	.86

Figure 3.
Mean frequencies for LIWC categories as a function of BDSM or non-BDSM practitioner self-identification



There were significant mean differences between Dominants' and submissives' written responses for only one LIWC category: first-person singular pronouns. Self-identified submissives used overwhelmingly more first-person singular pronouns (M =7.10, SD = 4.30) compared to Dominants (M = 4.90, SD = 3.43). Although not significant, $t(105)$= 1.90, p = .06, d= 0.39, Dominants trended toward using more second-person pronouns (M = 1.37, SD = 1.90) compared to submissives (M = .74, SD = 1.25). No significant differences were found for first-person plural pronouns, $t(105)$= 0.09, p = .93, d= 0.004, third-person plural pronouns, $t(105)$= 1.09, p = .28, d= 0.39, verbs, $t(105)$= -1.33, p = .19, d= 0.24, power, $t(105)$= -0.28, p = .78, d=

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0.09, assent, $t(105)= -0.37$, $p = .71$, $d= 0.09$, reward, $t(105)= -0.57$, $p = .57$, $d= 0.06$, or negative emotion words $t(105)= -1.80$, $p = .08$, $d= 0.37$.

Table 5.
Means and standard deviations for LIWC categories as a function of Dominant or submissive self-identification (N=107)

		Dominants		submissives	
LIWC Category	Examples	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Personal pronouns	I, them, her	14.77	4.07	16.25	4.54
First-person singular	I, me, mine	4.90	3.43	7.10	4.30
First-person plural	we, us, our	1.53	1.41	1.50	1.71
Second-person	you, your, thou	1.37	1.90	.74	1.25
Third-person singular	she, her, him	6.06	3.65	6.29	3.74
Third-person plural	they, their	.91	1.20	.62	1.11
Verb	eat, come, carry	15.74	2.57	16.64	2.94
Power	superior, bully	2.51	.86	2.59	1.32
Assent	agree, OK, yes	.14	.25	.16	.23
Reward	take, prize, benefit	1.29	.64	1.40	.80
Affective processes	happy, cried	5.82	2.03	5.87	1.55
Positive emotion	love, nice, sweet	4.33	2.13	3.94	1.30
Negative emotion	hurt, ugly, nasty	1.46	.80	1.86	.98
Anxiety	worried, fearful	.31	.28	.33	.39
Anger	hate, kill, annoyed	.56	.49	.74	.68
Sadness	crying, grief, sad	.23	.32	.32	.28

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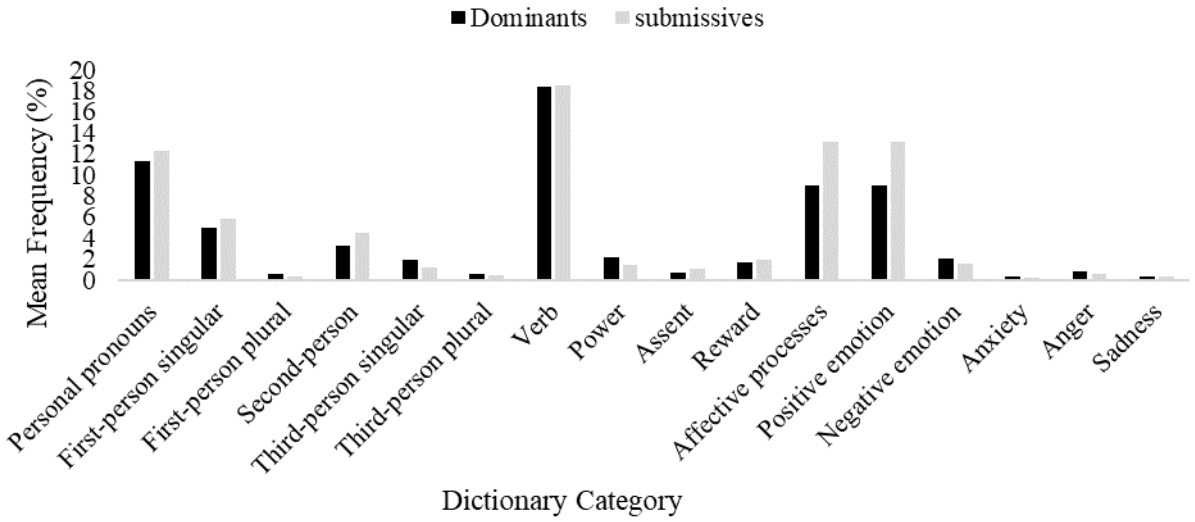
Figure 4.
Mean frequencies for LIWC categories as a function of Dominant or submissive self-identification



Analyses of variance revealed that significant mean differences were apparent between Dominants, submissives, and switches use of first-person singular pronouns $F(2, 152)= 6.24$, $p <.05$, $\eta^2= 0.08$. Submissives used significantly more first-person pronouns in their written responses ($M = 7.10$, $SD = 4.30$) compared to switches ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 3.77$) and Dominants ($M =4.90$, $SD = 3.43$). No other significant differences were found.

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Table 6.
Means and standard deviations for LIWC categories as a function of Dominant, submissive, or switch self-identification (N=153)

		Dominants		submissives		switches	
LIWC Category	Examples	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Personal pronouns	I, them, her	14.77	4.07	16.25	4.54	15.55	3.83
First-person singular	I, me, mine	4.90	3.43	7.10	4.30	4.73	3.77
First-person plural	we, us, our	1.53	1.41	1.50	1.71	1.24	1.36
Second-person	you, your, thou	1.37	1.90	.74	1.25	1.21	1.85
Third-person singular	she, her, him	6.06	3.65	6.29	3.74	7.36	4.47
Third-person plural	they, their	.91	1.20	.62	1.11	1.01	1.29
Verb	eat, come, carry	15.74	2.57	16.64	2.94	15.92	2.63
Power	superior, bully	2.51	.86	2.59	1.32	2.23	1.05
Assent	agree, OK, yes	.14	.25	.16	.23	.15	.22
Reward	take, prize, benefit	1.29	.64	1.40	.80	1.19	.59
Affective processes	happy, cried	5.82	2.03	5.87	1.55	5.68	1.73
Positive emotion	love, nice, sweet	4.33	2.13	3.94	1.30	4.04	1.48
Negative emotion	hurt, ugly, nasty	1.46	.80	1.86	.98	1.71	.90
Anxiety	worried, fearful	.31	.28	.33	.39	.39	.30
Anger	hate, kill, annoyed	.56	.49	.74	.68	.56	.46
Sadness	crying, grief, sad	.23	.32	.32	.28	.22	.23

Discussion

Data from Study 2 provided support to hypotheses 1a and 1f. BDSM practitioners' written responses incorporated significantly more power words than non-BDSM practitioners' responses. Additionally, language containing BDSM-specific terms was more frequent within BDSM practitioners' narratives despite not being instructed to write BDSM-explicit stories. These findings show that language use differs between BDSM practitioners and non-BDSM practitioners regarding power and use of BDSM vocabulary. However, because no significant differences were found regarding reward, positive emotion, negative emotion, risk, and assent LIWC dictionary categories, neither hypothesis 1b, 1c, 1d, nor 1e were supported.

Extending my finding from Study 1, self-identified submissives in Study 2 used more first-person singular pronouns in their written responses compared to self-identified Dominants, thus supporting hypothesis 2b. Like Study 1, Study 2 echoed results from Kacewicz et al. (2013) such that submissives (having low power and thus status) used more first-person singular pronouns compared to Dominants (who have high power and status). No significant differences between Dominants and submissives were found for use of first-person plural pronouns, second-person pronouns, third-person plural pronouns, verbs, power, assent, reward, or negative emotion words. Thus, hypotheses 2a, 2c, 2d, 2e, 2f, and 2g were not supported.

Because switches express both characteristics of Dominants and submissives depending on context, I was not sure if any differences would emerge regarding language use. Submissives

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used significantly more first-person pronouns compared to switches and Dominants, imitating the fact that switches fall somewhere in the middle of the Dominant-submissive spectrum. Switches neither have low or high status, nor are they entirely self or other focused, so this finding seems to mirror power play roles' function and attention. No other significant differences were found.

General Discussion

The present work sought to determine if one's identification as a BDSM practitioner also manifests in their language use, thus distinguishing the BDSM community from the general population. Multiple findings were consistent across both studies which supports the validity of significant differences existing between BDSM practitioners and non-practitioners, as well as between power play roles. Although a few hypotheses were supported by both studies, several others were not. In the next section, I discuss each outcome in turn, as well as the broader implications of these individual differences.

Power and Discipline

BDSM practitioners utilized more power words and BDSM vocabulary than non-practitioners in online forums and creative writings, indicating distinct language differences between people who practice BDSM and those who do not. An important distinction to note is that the writing samples collected in both studies appeared outside of BDSM play scenes and the question prompts did not specify or encourage stories about BDSM. Moreover, no participants communicated with each other. That is, participants were not primed to be in the mindset of their D/s role, whether via a scene or a play partner, yet still used language reflecting those roles. Thus, BDSM and power play-specific language seemingly influences other forms of social communication irrespective of the setting and target of the conversation. BDSM practitioners, unlike non-practitioners, consistently use community-specific language across non-sexual contexts and without performing their Dominant or submissive role identity.

The underlying power play structure and system of rewards in BDSM is reinforced by my finding that Dominant text scrapings contained more power words, whereas submissive scrapings contained more assent words. Dominance and status are features of power. Because Dominant play partners are responsible for establishing control, facilitating physical and psychological sensations, and responding to the wellbeing of their partners, Dominants have more power and hence have increased influence over submissives. Dominants not only have power in sexual settings, but also may take more responsibility for family finances, childcare, housework, or producing income in a 24/7 lifestyle relationship, which may explain their power-based language within social contexts. Assent words signal level of agreement, or consent, between speakers. Submissive partners recurrently agree to activities set forth by Dominants during a scene, whereas Dominants must be alert to and fully responsive to submissives' signals and communication (Dunkley & Brotto, 2018). Because consent is a core tenant to BDSM and submissive roles, it may be habitual for individuals to use similar language in contexts outside of a scene. However, this significant difference was not replicated in Study 2. In fact, self-identified submissives used only slightly more power words and assent words than Dominants, whereas in Study 1, this difference was greater. Although submissives may be more aware of their

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subservient state from acquiescing to Dominant partners' commands, all parties are constantly negotiating power play boundaries. Relatedly, although no significant differences in reward words were found in either study, means indicate that submissive texts used slightly more reward words. These nonsignificant findings might be attributed to insufficiently powered independent t-test due to small sample sizes, or possibly because power-based status was not strongly primed or manipulated. Perhaps if power role was made more salient in future studies, as opposed to passively collecting participants' demographic data, significant differences in LIWC power, assent, and reward categories may appear between Dominants and submissives.

In both Study 1 and 2, verbs were no differently used by Dominants compared to submissives. Based on findings from Galinsky and colleagues (2003), I hypothesized that holding power increases an action orientation among Dominants, even in contexts where power is not directly experienced or salient. Verbs, by definition, are words that convey an action. Therefore, I expected that frequency of verb usage would convey greater efficacious action in participants' writings. However, power status and role identity were not primed in the present study, which may explain my nonsignificant findings. Furthermore, verbs may be too passive of an implicit measure to detect group differences, especially given that verbs are necessary elements of communication. Although power and action may indeed be positively related (Galinsky et al., 2003) and even hegemonically gendered (Sap et al., 2017), no differences in verb usage can be attributed to BDSM power play roles.

Pronouns

Self-orientation of low-status individuals was subliminally reflected in language use of submissive individuals. In both studies, submissive texts used more first-person singular pronouns than their Dominant counterparts. Hierarchical status is associated with attentional biases, such that lower rank is linked with self-focus first-person singular pronouns (Kacewicz et al., 2013). Submissive BDSM practitioners are often the recipients rather than administrators of pain and pleasure and hence pay more attention to their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in scenes. Moreover, submissives are concerned with what the Dominant thinks of them and are more focused on what they can do to impress and please the Dominant. Some researchers argue that self-focus may also be a function of involuntary defeat strategy (Sloman et al., 2003), such that submissive play partners self-handicap to avoid hierarchical competition with Dominants. However, my results do not indicate significantly greater depression scores among submissive texts compared to Dominant texts, so future research with BDSM practitioners might examine how language reflects corresponding psychological states associated with status. Like the findings reported in Kacewicz et al. (2013), results from Study 1 and Study 2 indicate a robust relationship between self-attention and lower status. Distinctive use of first-person pronouns may thus signify important individual differences between power play roles in BDSM.

Across both studies, Dominant texts used marginally more first-person plural and third-person plural pronouns compared to submissive texts. However, these differences in pronoun use were not significant. Kacewicz et al. (2013) found that high status individuals used first-person plural pronouns more frequently than low status individuals, with medium effect sizes across the five studies. On the contrary, Kacewicz and colleagues reported only marginally greater amounts of third-person plural pronouns in high status texts relative to those lower in status. Findings

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from the present study likewise mirror this pattern of first-person and third-person pronoun usage by Dominants, though not significantly. It may be the case that there are no substantial differences in language use between Dominant and submissive BDSM practitioners, thus hierarchical status has no effect on self- or other- focus. Or perhaps my non-significant findings could be attributed to insufficient sample sizes. Study 2 especially suffered from disproportionate power play role sample sizes which may have driven negligible group differences. Future studies should recruit more Dominant-identified practitioners, a population typically underrepresented in most BDSM research (Hébert & Weaver, 2014), to achieve comparable samples of power play roles.

Contrary to Kacewicz et al. (2013)'s findings, second-person pronouns were more common in submissive text samples relative to Dominant text samples in Study 1. This finding may indicate frequent conversations and social connection between the commenters and original poster (OP) in submissive subreddit forums. Submissive subreddit users commonly implicate the OP when giving advice or expressing appreciation (e.g., "thank you"), thus directing attention inward toward the person reading the message (Pennebaker, 2011). Responses in Dominant subreddits, though, seem to use "you" and "your" abstractly (e.g., "Sure you learn, but you cannot always control yourself."; "having an upright posture and open body language helps you to feel more confident") when giving advice. However, the relationship found in Study 1 was reversed in Study 2 in such a way that self-identified Dominants used marginally more second-person pronouns than submissives. Although Kacewicz and colleagues explain that high-status individuals use more collectively oriented language such as "we" and "you," their results demonstrated less robust use of second-person pronouns and yielded small effect sizes across their five studies (Kacewicz et al., 2013). Finally, given that the English language does not distinguish between singular and plural forms of the second-person, differences among hierarchies are difficult to interpret. More testing is needed to determine if use of second-person pronouns indeed reflects status hierarchies among BDSM practitioner's power play roles.

Affective Processes

Study 1 revealed significant differences in positive and negative affect processes between BDSM practitioners and non-practitioners as well as between power play roles. Although Study 2 did not replicate these significant differences between BDSM practitioners and non-practitioners, group means echoed the hypothesized difference such that BDSM practitioners used more positive emotion words and less negative emotion words in their stories compared to non- practitioners. These results tentatively support existing literature that BDSM is associated with comparable psychological wellbeing and sexual functioning among practitioners in relation to the general population (Ambler et al., 2017; Brown et al., 2020; Connolly, 2006; Cross & Matheson, 2006; Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013; Richters et al., 2008). Furthermore, this finding suggests that BDSM is not rooted in psychopathy or illness, despite historical prescriptions, but rather in healthy psychological functioning and sexual expression.

Despite the finding that submissive text samples contained slightly more emotional words, Dominant samples in Study 2 used slightly more positive emotion words whereas submissive text samples contained significantly more negative emotion words. At first glance, results from the second study strengthen the extant literature, demonstrating that submissives

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express greater levels of emotionality, neuroticism, and stress compared to Dominants (Gemberling et al., 2015; Hébert & Weaver, 2014; Hébert & Weaver, 2015; Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013). However, this finding is contrary to results from Study 1, which indicated that Dominant subreddits, not submissive, used significantly more negative emotion and less positive emotion words in their language samples. Perhaps these inverse results in Study 1 are best explained by theories of emotional workload. Dominants, especially pro-dommes, take on more responsibility (mental, physical, and emotional labor) from degrading, punishing, and caring for submissive clients, which may lead to more negative affect associated with stress (Guy & Newman, 2004, from Pinsky & Levey 2015). Unlike submissives, Dominants may not be able to release negative emotions inconsequentially without first dealing with their role responsibilities. However, low sample sizes in Study 2, especially among Dominant BDSM practitioners, may be directly responsible for nonsignificant differences and high mean scores. More research is needed to determine if Dominants and submissives differ on implicit measures of neuroticism relative to explicit personality measures.

Risk

Finally, risk words were not used significantly more by BDSM practitioners than non-practitioners in either study. Some researchers have historically declared BDSM a pathological, abusive, or deviant risky (multiple partners, unprotected sex with strangers, and prostitution) behavior (Crown, 1983; Dawson et al., 2016; Freud, 1953; Krafft-Ebing, 1965; Moskowitz et al., 2011; White, 2006). Several studies (Dawson et al., 2016; Martin et al., 2016; Schuerwegen et al., 2020) have similarly asserted that sensation-seeking behavior, which is related to engaging in novel and/or risky sexual behaviors (Gaither & Sellbom, 2003), is prevalent among BDSM samples. Others (Connelly, 2006; Cross & Matheson, 2006) have reported no evidence that confirms this value judgment that BDSM practitioners are more risk-prone than non-practitioners. The hypothesized risk-taking tendencies were not supported in the present study. Given mottos such as “Safe, Sane, and Consensual (SSC)” and “Risk-Aware Consensual Kink (RACK),” it is obvious that the BDSM community acknowledges the intense and sometimes dangerous activities enacted by practitioners yet places great emphasis on safety and communication. My nonsignificant results may thus be explained by the fact that BDSM practitioners are more prone to risk-taking than non-practitioners. Moreover, these ratings may be similar across groups because Reddit users come from a place of uncertainty when asking for advice, which is related to risk. Means indicate that non-practitioners in both Study 1 and Study 2 used slightly more risk words than BDSM users, which may be due to the nature of web scraping and recruiting from depressing help-seeking subreddits such as DeadBedrooms. Implications that BDSM is inherently risky are problematic and inaccurate, so more work is needed to challenge these trait-based associations.

Limitations

This research is not without limitations. First, this project did not directly address the question of causality. These findings are also non-directional and merely indicate that individuals who engage in BDSM differ from those who do not, whether due to the attraction of diverse personalities to BDSM or the transformative impact BDSM may have on them. Additionally, no manipulations were used to make either BDSM or power play status salient separate from the

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demographic questions. It is not clear if manipulations or priming can ultimately activate personality traits, influence changes in status, or signal role-specific behaviors. Perhaps by prompting BDSM practitioners to respond with their identity in mind, distinctive language styles may appear more clearly and causally. Additionally, statistical analyses in Study 2 may have been affected by small sample sizes, which could have impacted both significant and nonsignificant results. Another drawback of these findings is that some non-practitioner text samples and participants were drawn from the DeadBedrooms subreddit, a help-seeking forum for long-term sexless relationships. Users belonging to this community may have more adverse sexual experiences than more truly neutral subreddits and thus may not be representative of the general population of non-practitioners. Future researchers should diversify their search and inclusion procedures when seeking to recruit more neutral "vanilla" comparison or control groups to counteract these potential biases.

I also acknowledge that I did not collect demographic information relevant to race, ethnicity, nationality, or socioeconomic status, country of origin, or whether English was participants' first language or not. Consequently, I was not able to control for confounds related to these demographics or explore their intersection with language use. There is little literature on how race, class, and culture intersect with alternative sexual identities and behaviors, unfortunately (Sheff & Hammers, 2011). To achieve greater representation and understanding of these complex intersecting identities, future research on these communities should account for race, ethnicity, ability, and class, among other defining identities.

Further, my positionality as a cisgender, heterosexual, White woman and as a researcher with professional expertise in diverse sexualities guided the present analyses and interpretation of results. I have worked as an instructor for 7 years and taught undergraduate courses on the psychology of human sexuality and gender. Also, I have facilitated various workshops and programs that educate about and destigmatize BDSM and plurisexuality. I am aware that my privilege in terms of gender, sexuality, race, and class may produce significant blind spots in my ability to explain participants' language use. Future research may benefit from exploring language use from other fields of study and diversifying the research team.

Future Directions

Future studies examining language use of BDSM practitioners might consider other methods for gathering text samples. One option is to non-invasively record the audio of a BDSM scene to determine how practitioners speak to one another naturally in realistic settings. However, several precautions would need to be set in place to avoid issues with confidentiality, safety, and discomfort for participants and the research team. Another method of data collection could be to conduct interviews and focus groups. In this manner, participants could speak freely and naturally in conversations with other BDSM practitioners as opposed to submitting edited, written responses.

Future researchers might also be interested in examining BDSM practitioners' experiences of code switching. Code switching, or the impression management strategy of adjusting one's style of speech, behavior, appearance, or expression to receive a desirable outcome in specific social contexts (McCluney et al., 2021), has often been studied with regard

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to race. For example, prior studies indicate that Black people might reduce their use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or Black English (BE) to promote perceptions of competence and professionalism and minimize discrimination in White-dominated spaces (Boulton, 2016; McCluney et al., 2021; Myers, 2020; Wood, 2019; Thomas, 2018). Researchers might explore language-based code switching for Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) BDSM practitioners, given that BDSM spaces are often predominately White. Some BDSM practitioners might also code switch when engaging in power play, which may signify noticeable differences in natural language use that are context dependent. Switches might be at the nexus of such code switching since they have the unique experience of playing as both Dominant and submissive. Moreover, language use may differ between BDSM/kink subcommunities especially if practitioners embody and alternate between several roles and identities (e.g., Mommy, cuckqueen, and kitten).

Finally, researchers should consider asking BDSM practitioners their opinions regarding if and how practicing BDSM has shaped their own language use. Giving participants the freedom to self-reflect and respond to research questions would not only permit greater insight from community members, but also allow for collaboration. Many studies of BDSM practitioners have not involved members of the community in study design or data analysis, nor have participants directly benefited from studies. Consequently, BDSM practitioners have reported feeling objectified, exploited, and misrepresented by researchers. Keeping the BDSM community deeply involved in the process through community-based participatory research (CBPR), including cultural brokers during the planning, development, and implementation phases of the project (Gatlin & Johnson, 2017), and focusing on topics that benefit participants in a meaningful way (Owen-Smith, 2016) could alleviate feelings of frustration and mistrust among members. Moreover, community members' participation is one way to share information with the scientific community, which seems out of touch and unrepresentative of BDSM practitioners.

Conclusion

The present study was among the first to use computerized text analysis to examine language differences between BDSM practitioners and non-practitioners, and between power play roles. Findings from both studies suggest differential use of power words, BDSM vocabulary, and first-person pronouns and may point to true individual differences between BDSM practitioners and non-practitioners, as well as between Dominants and submissives. When we categorize the distinctive characteristics and life experiences of a particular community as a minority identity, we acknowledge and reduce the stigma linked to those identities. Research findings such as these could validate the BDSM community's classification as a sexual identity, potentially paving the way for protective measures against discrimination. This is achieved through the implementation of protections, anti-discrimination laws, and improvements in medical care. This study expands the scientific community's understanding of BDSM and informs future research of diverse sexualities. Due to this improved understanding, future studies may continue to authenticate BDSM as a protected minoritized group, thereby safeguarding practitioners from discrimination because of their sexual identities and practices.

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Acknowledgements
Thank you, to the Texas Tech University Graduate School for financially supporting, in part, this research via leftover monies from the Summer Thesis/Dissertation Research Award. I am grateful for the support of Jody Randall and the Texas Tech University Office of LGBTQIA Education and Engagement, who saw the value of this research and allowed me to present my work at the first and second annual Big XII LGBTQIA & Allies Summit. Thank you to Dr. Molly Ireland for her guidance, creativity, and collaboration on two language-based projects. I would also like to express my thanks to my undergraduate research assistant, Wilder Cosaboom-Son, who's forward-thinking helped finish the future directions section and spurred new project ideas. I also appreciate my other research assistants' help on revising the manuscript, especially after I accidentally deleted the entire thing. Thank you to Dr. Michael Serra for his instrumental suggestions in the final writing stages of this project. Finally, I would like to thank my participants, without whom this research would not have been possible.

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An Exploratory Comparison of Attachment Style, Emotion Regulation, and Relationship Equity in BDSM and Non-BDSM Relationships

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Abstract

This quantitative study examined attachment styles, emotion regulation, and relationship equity in an anonymous online sample of adult participants (n = 155) recruited via FetLife, Facebook, Tumblr, and MTurk, and separated into three groups by relationship type: 24/7 D/s (i.e., Dominant/submissive) relationships, BDSM relationships without D/s, and non-BDSM relationships. Although no significant results regarding attachment were found, participants in 24/7 D/s relationships reported lower relationship equity than those in non-BDSM relationships and participants in non-BDSM relationships were more likely to use emotional suppression than participants in BDSM relationships. Implications for research and practice are offered.

Keywords: Relationship Equity, Emotion Regulation, Attachment, BDSM, Couples, Kink

Introduction

Imagine a couple sitting next to each other on a park bench. One partner gazes adoringly at the other partner through lowered eyelashes, seeming to flirt but never quite making eye contact. At first, the partners appear to be having a serious conversation as they speak to each other in low conspiratorial tones. Then the taller partner bursts out laughing, their head thrown back. Then you notice the shorter partner wears a thin leather collar around their neck. This could be a typical moment for a couple with D/s (i.e., Dominant and submissive) power dynamics in their relationship.

Research regarding BDSM relationships with a 24/7 D/s dynamic has been primarily qualitative, based on interview data collected from small convenience samples of populations being studied (Cutler et al., 2020; Fennell, 2015). Results of these studies offer in-depth insight into specific individuals' perspectives, yet cannot be generalized. A large-scale quantitative study of BDSM relationships including couples with 24/7 D/s dynamics can build upon existing findings and offer results that could be generalized. Ten Brink et al. (2020) suggested that further study of attachment style among people who engage in BDSM would contribute to their findings that BDSM activities are not maladaptive coping strategies. Thus, the current exploratory study was conducted to compare the interpersonal constructs of emotion regulation, attachment style, and relational equity across BDSM, 24/7 D/s, and non-BDSM relationships. We begin with an overview of relevant literature about BDSM and related stigma, types of BDSM relationships, and research regarding the aforementioned constructs as they pertain to BDSM practitioners.

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BDSM: Definition, Prevalence, and Stigma

The acronym BDSM represents a combination of bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadism and masochism (Holvoet et al., 2017). In BDSM, experiences such as physical restraint, intense or limited sensory experiences, and fantasy or activities involving dominance and submission can play a key part in role-playing among consenting adults (Holvoet et al., 2017; Rehor, 2015). Well-defined BDSM subcultures exist around the world with distinct geographic and regional differences (Carlström, 2019; Zambelli, 2017), yet common values across BDSM communities underscore the importance of understanding the potential physical and psychological risks of BDSM activities and eliciting affirmative, informed consent from partners (Dunkley & Brotto, 2020). In the U.S., this concept was abbreviated as RACK, which stands for risk-aware consensual kink (Switch, n.d.). According to Jozifkova (2013), this means that BDSM involves voluntariness and consent, ensuring that clear communication of expectations, needs, and desires between partners is incorporated. Unless agreed upon by partners, the hierarchy of dominance and submission that exists in a BDSM "scene" is typically not carried over into everyday aspects of life. The tenets of any traditional, healthy, romantic, or sexual relationship can also be found in BDSM relationships. Sexuality scholars have proposed the "4 Cs" as a more accurate abbreviation to describe the values of BDSM relationships: "caring, communication, consent, and caution" (Williams et al., 2014, p. 2).

Individuals with a spectrum of identities, roles, and practices engage in BDSM activities (Ambler et al., 2017; Dunkley & Brotto, 2020; Holvoet et al., 2017; Jozifkova, 2013) that may be sexual or non-sexual (Newmahr, 2010; Fennell, 2021). Some BDSM practitioners feel connected to a subculture or community and claim a distinct kink identity (Hammack et al., 2019; Zambelli, 2017), while others describe BDSM as a therapeutic practice (Lindemann, 2011), leisure activity (Newmahr, 2010), embodied eroticism (Turley, 2016), or form of spirituality (Sprott & Williams, 2019). Just as the term BDSM represents a range of behaviors and activities in which people engage for a variety of reasons (Dunkley & Brotto, 2020), people who engage in BDSM have a range of personal qualities and do not constitute a homogenous group (Brown et al., 2020). There are many people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, gender expansive, and asexual within kink communities (and vice versa), yet the majority of research on BDSM subculture reflects heteronormativity (Carlström & Andersson, 2019; Zambelli, 2017), a fact that has been criticized by participants and researchers (e.g., Fennell, 2015). Many long-term BDSM relationships represented in the literature are between heterosexual, cisgender men and women, with men in Dominant roles and women in submissive roles (Botta et al., 2017; Cutler, et al., 2020; Fennell, 2015); traditional gender norms (Hammack et al., 2019) are reflected in D/s power dynamics (Agree, 2014). While these BDSM relationships may appear to reproduce hegemonic hierarchies of gender identity or role, BDSM roles and relationships can also challenge the assumptions of binary gender roles or patriarchy (Martinez, 2018; Zambelli, 2017).

Although BDSM is more frequently represented in the U.S. media in recent years, stigma still surrounds BDSM activities. Lack of accurate representation in the media contributes to racy stereotypes of BDSM practitioners as immoral or having non-traditional partnerships when in reality, some couples explore BDSM after years of marriage and raising children (Agree, 2014). According to Hansen-Brown and Jefferson (2023), BDSM practitioners are stigmatized in U.S.

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society[1]. Thus, practitioners may conceal their kink identities or activities from friends, family, and/or colleagues to protect themselves from discrimination or bias (Hammack et al., 2019; Holvoet et al., 2017).

Historically, psychiatry and related mental health fields have pathologized BDSM by describing sexual sadism and sexual masochism as mental disorders. A subtle but important change in the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic & Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM-5)* was that the terms "sexual sadism" and "sexual masochism" were changed to "sexual sadism disorder" and "sexual masochism disorder" to differentiate between disordered sexual behavior and normative sexual practices (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, pp. 694-95). According to *DSM-5* criteria, people either feel distress about BDSM interests not solely related to social stigma or feel consistent sexual desire to engage in non-consensual sexual or physically harmful acts for sadism or masochism to be considered pathological (Weierstall & Giebel, 2017).

Types of BDSM Relationships

Relationships that incorporate BDSM involve differing amounts of exclusivity, emotional connection, longevity, sexuality, and egalitarianism (Dancer et al., 2006). Polyamory is fairly common among BDSM practitioners (Pitagora, 2016), and partners may allow each other to engage in BDSM scenes with others (Fennell, 2015). Monogamous couples in BDSM relationships have reported the same degree of relational satisfaction as couples in non-BDSM relationships (Rogak & Connor, 2018).

People in BDSM relationships also devote different amounts of time to BDSM-oriented interactions. For those who engage in time-limited "scenes," rules and roles established during the scene, including power dynamics, are abandoned when the scene ends (Dancer et al., 2006). In contrast, couples in 24/7 Dominant/submissive (D/s) relationships have rules, roles, and power differentials permanently in place. Submissives can safely obey their Dominants because they trust Dominants will respond to submissives' needs and desires (Fennell, 2015). Established protocols between partners provide consistency and security that strengthens relational bonds (Cutler et al., 2020).

Only a few studies have examined 24/7 D/s relationships. In a study of 17 heterosexual BDSM couples, over half of the participants reported being in 24/7 D/s relationships (Cutler et al., 2020). When asked by researchers what made their relationships work, a majority of participants reported "communication" and "mutual support" as being essential (Cutler et al., 2020, p. 99). Partners in 24/7 D/s relationships utilize rules and rituals to demonstrate their interdependence (Cascalheira et al., 2021, Cutler et al., 2020) and may choose to wear items symbolizing their D/s roles, e.g., jewelry, collar (Agree, 2014). In a qualitative study of 70 BDSM practitioners, partners in 24/7 relationships reported that their power dynamic reinforced their intimate bond (Fennell, 2015). Themes across 24/7 D/s relationships are that BDSM-oriented activities demonstrate love and commitment (Fennell, 2015) and that partners deepen protocol to resolve interpersonal issues rather than breaking roles (Cutler, et al., 2020).

[1] This paper adopts the capitalization convention of some BDSM communities in which the role of Dominant is capitalized and the role of submissive is lowercased.

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Submissives described the satisfaction of pleasing someone important to them and feeling a sense of purpose while Dominants described the pleasure of having needs met and rewarding someone for a job well done. Fennell (2015) found that 24/7 relationships met a variety of relational needs for the people in them, similar to the interdependence of non-D/s couples with secure adult attachments (Johnson, 2008).

Emotion Regulation, Attachment, and BDSM

Emotional regulation has been characterized by scholars as related to attachment style (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019), whereby people with insecure or anxious attachment styles repeatedly experience emotional activation and choose to suppress emotions they deem to be negative. For example, though physical signs of stress are still present in the body, people with avoidant attachment do not express felt stress to others (Eilert & Buccheim, 2023). In contrast, people with secure attachment styles engage in emotional suppression as a means of emotion regulation less frequently (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019) and tend to utilize more balanced emotion regulation strategies, such as cognitive reappraisal (Eilert & Buccheim, 2023).

Research findings on attachment style and BDSM role are mixed. Wismeijer et al. (2013) and Botta et al. (2017) found that submissive role identity was more related to anxious attachment style than other identities. Wismeijer et al. (2013) also found no significant differences in avoidant attachment style between Dominants, submissives, switches, and a non-BDSM group. Ten Brink et al. (2021) found that BDSM practitioners showed more secure attachment and more anxious-preoccupied attachment than non-practitioners, with secure attachment relating to dominance and anxious attachment relating to submissiveness. Exploratory studies show some evidence that secure attachment may be a goal of partners in 24/7 D/s relationships (Agree, 2014). These couples also engage in co-constructions of reality that reinforce power exchange dynamics (Cutler et al., 2020) in ways that people in casual or intermittent BDSM relationships do not.

The Present Study

The current exploratory study aimed to fill gaps in knowledge surrounding emotion regulation, attachment styles, gender role adherence, and perceptions of relationship equity in 24/7 D/s relationships, other BDSM relationships, and non-BDSM relationships. Data analyses included independent samples *t*-tests to detect differences in attachment and emotion regulation between groups of Dominants and submissives, and an independent-samples one-way ANOVA was run to understand the relationship between power differentials and type of relationship (i.e., BDSM, 24/7 D/s, or non-BDSM).

Method

Participants

Adult individuals in non-BDSM relationships, 24/7 D/s relationships, and other relationships that incorporate BDSM activities were included in this study. Given the difficulty of recruiting BDSM practitioners reported in past research, several recruiting methods were used

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to reach the goal of approximately 150 participants: 50 non-BDSM participants, 50 participants in 24/7 D/s relationships, and 50 participants in other BDSM relationships. There were no criteria regarding monogamy or exclusivity in these relationships, yet participants had to be in established relationships (i.e., lasting at least six months). The 6-month eligibility criterion was chosen based on Levesque et al.'s (2017) study of emotion regulation and attachment in couples.

Recent studies have used BDSM-oriented websites and social media to recruit participants involved in BDSM (Ambler et al., 2017; Zambelli, 2017). Similarly, to recruit BDSM practitioners for this study, a link to the questionnaire was posted on Facebook, Tumblr, and FetLife, a social media site "like Facebook, but run by kinksters like you and me" (BitLove, 2021). Although the identities of people who join FetLife are confidential, the majority of members likely reflect the demographics of social privilege found among BDSM practitioners in the U.S., i.e., White, heterosexual, and cisgender (Martinez, 2021). While people who identify as Black, Indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC) and practice BDSM are welcome on FetLife, it is not an affinity group like other sites (e.g., Dark Connections).

MTurk (i.e., Mechanical Turk) is an online crowdsourcing website hosted by Amazon that allows businesses and researchers to collect data through Human Intelligence Tasks that people complete for monetary compensation. MTurk was used to recruit participants who were and were not involved in BDSM relationships.

Measures

A battery of instruments known to measure attachment, emotion regulation, relationship equity, and gender role beliefs and expression was used to evaluate similarities and differences between people in 24/7 BDSM relationships, people in other BDSM relationships, and people in non-BDSM relationships.

Demographics

This study included several closed-ended demographic questions created by the first author, including a question regarding relationship status to verify eligibility, i.e., only participants who had been in romantic relationships for at least six months. Each participant was asked, "Are you in a relationship that incorporates BDSM (Bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and/or sadism and masochism?" then asked, "If yes, is your relationship identified as a 24/7 Dominant/submissive or Master/slave relationship?" and, regardless of response to the second question, asked, "If in a relationship that incorporates BDSM, in your current relationship(s), do you identify as predominantly dominant or submissive?". Questions regarding age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and level of education were included. See Table 1 for these comparisons.

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Table 1.
Gender, Sexual Orientation, Education, and Ethnicity Demographics

	24/7 BDSM	Other BDSM	Non-BDSM	Overall
Gender				
Male	63	40	46	48.7
Female	37	53	54	49.4
Other	0	6	0	1.9
Sexual Orientation				
Heterosexual	64	60	90	74.2
LGB+	35	39	10	25.7
Education				
Some high school	0	2	0	0.6
High school graduate	5	11	10	9
Some college	33	33	22	28.4
Bachelor's and above	62	53	68	62
Ethnicity				
White	86	91	65	78.1
Hispanic/Latino	2	0	6	3.2
African American	0	2	7	3.9
Other (Asian, etc.)	12	6	22	14.8

Note. All data are presented as percentages.

Adult Attachment Style

The Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised Questionnaire (ECR-R) is a 36-item self-report measure of adult attachment style (Fraley et al., 2000). The ECR-R measures individuals on two subscales of attachment that each contain 18 items: Avoidance (e.g., "I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down") and Anxiety (e.g., "My desire to be very close sometimes scares people away"). Participants rate how much each item has applied to their general experience of relationships on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha in Fraley et al.'s (2000) study indicated that internal consistency is very strong for both attachment avoidance (α = .91) and anxiety (α = .94). Two items are reverse scored, and higher scores in Avoidance items indicate avoidant romantic attachment while higher scores in Anxiety indicate anxious romantic attachment. In the current study, the ECR-R demonstrated strong internal consistency for both Avoidance (α = .96) and Anxiety (α = .96).

Emotion Regulation

The Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ) is a 10-item scale that measures respondents' tendency to regulate their emotions through Cognitive Reappraisal, e.g., "I control my emotions by changing the way I think about the situation I'm in," and Expressive Suppression, e.g., "I control my emotions by not expressing them" (Gross & John, 2003). Six items make up the Cognitive Reappraisal facet, and four items make up the Expressive

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Suppression facet. Respondents answer each item on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Cronbach's alphas in Gross and John's (2003) study indicated the Cognitive Reappraisal factor (α = .80) and the Expressive Suppression factor (α = .73) had moderately strong internal consistency. Higher scores on Cognitive Reappraisal items indicate functional emotion regulation, while higher scores on Expressive Suppression items indicate dysfunctional emotion regulation. In the current study, the ERQ demonstrated strong internal consistency for the subscale Expressive Suppression (α = .79)

Relationship Equity

In the Multi-Trait Measure of Equity (MTME), respondents are asked how fair and equitable their dating and marital relationships are on 25 different facets split into four categories: Personal Concerns (e.g., Social Grace, Intelligence), Emotional Concerns (e.g., Liking and Loving, Acceptance), Day-to-Day Concerns (e.g., Finances, Sociability), and Things One Gains or Loses Simply by Dating or Being Married (e.g., Opportunities Gained or Forgone) (Traupmann et al., 1981). Responses are made on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from +3 ("I am getting a much better deal than my partner") to -3 ("My partner is getting a much better deal than I am "). The number 0 represents complete equity ("My partner and I get an equally good deal"). For the current study, equity was measured by averaging participants' overall scores rather than considering scores in each separate category.

During the development of the MTME, Traupmann et al. (1981) demonstrated the larger scale's internal consistency for total inputs (α = .87) and total outputs scales (α = .90). Scoring involves the calculation of a *Total Index* by summing the respondents' estimates of how "good a deal" a respondent considers themselves to be getting on each of the 25 scales. More negative scores indicated that participants generally felt under-benefited, whereas more positive scores indicated that participants generally felt over-benefited and participants whose scores were close to 0 reported relatively equitable relationships. In the current study, the MTME demonstrated strong internal consistency (α = .91).

Procedure

Participants accessed the link to the survey through postings on MTurk, FetLife, Facebook, and Tumblr. The advertisements were consistently worded across social media platforms. FetLife, Facebook, and Tumblr were used to recruit participants involved in BDSM, while MTurk was used to recruit participants both involved and not involved in BDSM. The survey did not ask where the participant heard about the survey, so the percentage of respondents recruited from each source is unknown.

The survey included all measures and was administered in Qualtrics, a secure online environment. The first screen in the survey introduced participants to the types of questions they would be asked and the amount of time the study would take. Participants were understood to have given informed consent by clicking the arrow to move forward with the survey. There were no differences in the order of the survey questions and instructions for each measure were provided. No explicit instruction was given to complete the survey privately, as participants were

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anonymous, no protected health information (e.g., date of birth) was collected, and no information a participant shared could be linked back to their identity. The survey took approximately 30 minutes. Participants recruited through MTurk earned an incentive of $2 upon completion of the survey and participants recruited from other sites were not given incentives.

Results

Of 250 participants, data from 95 individuals were removed before data analysis due to reported relationship status (single or in a relationship lasting less than six months) or missing data. This resulted in 155 total participants: 42 participants in 24/7 relationships, 45 participants in other BDSM relationships, and 68 participants in non-BDSM relationships. A total of 49 dominants and 38 submissives were included in the study; 22 Dominants and 23 submissives in other BDSM relationships, and 27 Dominants and 15 submissives in 24/7 relationships. The demographics of the overall sample and each relationship group can be found in Table 1. Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 68 (M = 36.04, SD = 12.03); the majority of participants self-reported White racial identity and acquisition of at least a Bachelor's degree.

Chi-square tests were run to detect significant differences in gender, education, ethnicity, and sexual orientation between the three relationship groups (i.e., 24/7 D/s, other BDSM, non-BDSM), while a one-way ANOVA was conducted to detect significant differences in age between the three relationship groups. No significant differences in age, gender, education, and ethnicity were found. A Chi-square test revealed that the relationship between sexual orientation and type of relationship was significant, X^2 (14, N = 155) = 15.43, p < .001. Participants in BDSM relationships (24/7 or other) were significantly less likely to identify as heterosexual than participants in non-BDSM relationships, which is consistent with findings that characterize BDSM practitioners as having diverse sexual orientation identities and being predominantly White, younger, and well-educated (Williams et al., 2016). A Chi-square test was conducted to detect significant differences in gender between dominant and submissive participants in BDSM relationships. The relationship between gender and BDSM role was significant, X^2 (1, N = 83) = 42.01, p < .001. Participants who identified as Dominant were significantly more likely to identify as male, and participants who identified as submissive were significantly more likely to identify as female.

To investigate the relatedness of the questionnaires themselves, including the MTME, anxious attachment, avoidant attachment, expressive suppression, and cognitive reappraisal scales, Pearson's r correlations were calculated (see Table 2). Expressive suppression was positively correlated with both anxious (r = .33, p < .01) and avoidant (r = .44, p < .01) attachment. Cognitive reappraisal was negatively correlated with anxious (r = -.25, p < .01) and avoidant (r = -.20, p < .05) attachment. Anxious and avoidant attachment were positively related (r = .58, p < .01). These results indicate that maladaptive emotion regulation patterns are connected to maladaptive attachment patterns and adaptive emotion regulation patterns are not.

Results of the independent samples' one-way ANOVAs comparing means on all measures between the three relationship groups can be found in Table 3. There was a statistically significant relationship between expressive suppression and type of relationship, F (2, 152) = 3.43, p < .05. -The effect size was estimated to be small (η^2 = .04). Participants in non-BDSM

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relationships (*M* = 3.78, *SD* = 1.27) were most likely to use expressive suppression to regulate their emotions, followed by participants in 24/7 D/s relationships (*M* = 3.35, *SD* = 1.33). People in other BDSM relationships (*M* = 3.18, *SD* = 1.23) were found to be the least likely to utilize expressive suppression. Fisher's LSD was conducted to explore the differences between the conditions, with results supporting the conclusion that partners in non-BDSM relationships utilized expressive suppression more than partners in BDSM relationships, although not significantly more often than partners in 24/7 D/s relationships (see Table 3).

Table 2.
Correlations between Questionnaires

Measure	ECR-NX	ECR-AV	ERQ-ES	ERQ-CR
ECR-NX	1			
ECR-AV	0.58**	1		
ERQ-ES	0.33**	0.44**	1	
ERQ-CR	-0.25**	-.20*	-0.00	1
MTME	0.07	0.05	0.13	0.02

Note. ECR-NX = Experiences in Close Relationships-Anxiety; ECR-AV = Experiences in Close Relationships-Avoidance; ERQ-ES = Emotion Regulation Questionnaire-Expressive Suppression; ERQ-CR = Emotion Regulation Questionnaire-Cognitive Reappraisal; MTME = Multi-Trait Measure of Equity
*$p < .05$
**$p < .01$

Table 3.
Descriptive Statistics and One-Way ANOVA Results for Questionnaires

Measure	24/7 BDSM (*n* = 42)	Other BDSM (*n* = 45)	Non-BDSM (*n* = 68)		
	M(SD)	*M(SD)*	*M(SD)*	*F*	*p*
ECR-NX	2.79(1.29)	3.24(1.40)	2.82(1.15)	1.87	.16
ECR-AV	2.59(1.35)	2.72(1.30)	2.41(1.11)	0.89	.41
ERQ-ES	3.35(1.33)	3.18(1.23)[a]	3.78(1.27)[a]	3.43	.04
ERQ-CR	4.75(1.13)	4.43(1.16)[a]	5.04(1.12)[a]	3.96	.02
MTME	-0.19(0.67)	-0.13(0.58)	0.23(0.87)[b]	5.17	.007

Note. ECR-NX = Experiences in Close Relationships-Anxiety; ECR-AV = Experiences in Close Relationships-Avoidance; ERQ-ES = Emotion Regulation Questionnaire-Expressive Suppression; ERQ-CR = Emotion Regulation Questionnaire-Cognitive Reappraisal; MTME = Multi-Trait Measure of Equity

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[a] denotes means statistically significant from each other based on Fisher's LSD post-hoc test
[b] denotes means statistically significant from 0 based on independent samples *t*-test

There was also a statistically significant relationship between cognitive reappraisal and type of relationship, $F(2, 152) = 3.96$, $p < .05$. The effect size was estimated to be small ($\eta^2 = .05$). Participants in non-BDSM relationships ($M = 5.04$, $SD = 1.12$) were most likely to use cognitive reappraisal to regulate their emotions, followed by participants in 24/7 D/s relationships ($M = 4.75$, $SD = 1.13$). People in other BDSM relationships ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 1.16$) were found to be least likely to utilize cognitive reappraisal. Fisher's LSD was conducted to explore differences between the conditions, with results indicating that partners in non-BDSM relationships utilize cognitive reappraisal more than partners in any type of BDSM relationship, although not significantly more often than partners in 24/7 D/s relationships.

There was also a statistically significant relationship between levels of equity and type of relationship, $F (2, 152) = 5.17$, $p < .01$. The effect size was estimated to be medium ($\eta^2 = .06$). Participants in 24/7 D/s relationships ($M = -0.19$, $SD = 0.67$) were found to be the most likely to report feeling that their partner gets a better deal than them, followed by participants in other BDSM relationships ($M = -0.13$, $SD = 0.58$). People in non-BDSM relationships ($M = 0.23$, $SD = 0.87$) were found to be most likely to report feeling that they are getting a better deal than their partner. Fisher's LSD tests were also conducted to explore the differences in perceptions of relationship equity between the three levels of BDSM involvement (see Table 3), with results indicating that participants in BDSM relationships were more likely to report that their partner was getting a better deal compared to participants in non-BDSM relationships, and that participants in 24/7 D/s relationships were no more likely to feel this way than participants in other BDSM relationships. A subsequent analysis of these data revealed that both women and ($p = .02$) in 24/7 D/s relationships ($p = .01$) felt their partner was getting a better deal regarding day-to-day concerns (Ryan & Ro, 2019).

Due to the nature of the MTME scale, specifically that the value zero indicates complete equity, one sample *t*-tests were conducted running MTME scores for each group against a mean of 0 to determine whether any group felt they were significantly under- or over-benefited (see Table 3),with results indicating that earlier differences in the one-way ANOVA may stem more from non-BDSM practitioners viewing themselves as over-benefited rather than BDSM practitioners viewing themselves as under-benefited.

In addition to one-way ANOVAs comparing the means of all three relationship categories on each measure, two-way ANOVAs were conducted focusing solely on participants that were involved in BDSM in some way ($n = 86$; see Table 4). Two levels of BDSM involvement (i.e., 24/7 D/s relationships, other BDSM relationships) and two levels of BDSM role (i.e., Dominant, submissive) were included. No significant interaction effects were found. The main effect of BDSM role on expressive suppression scores yielded an *F* ratio of $F(3, 86) = 5.87$, $p < .05$, indicating that expressive suppression scores were significantly higher for Dominants ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 0.18$) than for submissives ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 0.21$).

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Table 4.
Two-Way ANOVA Results for Questionnaires by Type of BDSM Relationship and Role

	Type of BDSM	Role	Type x Role
Measure	*F*	*F*	*F*
ECR-NX	1.79	0.31	0.38
ECR-AV	0.14	0.21	1.20
ERQ-ES	0.02	5.87*	0.59
ERQ-CR	0.98	3.03	0.06
MTME	0.02	3.74	2.86

Note. ECR-NX = Experiences in Close Relationships-Anxiety; ECR-AV = Experiences in Close Relationships-Avoidance; ERQ-ES = Emotion Regulation Questionnaire-Expressive Suppression; ERQ-CR = Emotion Regulation Questionnaire-Cognitive Reappraisal; MTME = Multi-Trait Measure of Equity
*$p < .05$

Discussion

The results of these exploratory analyses revealed both similarities and differences between people in BDSM and non-BDSM relationships in the areas of attachment, emotion regulation, and relationship equity. No significant differences in attachment styles were found between any of the relationship subgroups, which is consistent with studies that have found no significant differences in attachment between participants in different BDSM roles and a group comprised of participants uninvolved in BDSM (Wismeijer et al., 2013). In terms of emotion regulation, participants in non-BDSM relationships utilized expressive suppression and cognitive reappraisal significantly more frequently than those in BDSM relationships.

When comparing emotion regulation among Dominants and submissives in BDSM relationships, Dominants reported using expressive suppression more frequently than submissives. These results are surprising given that a prior study found that participants with Dominant fantasies were more likely to use cognitive reappraisal than those with other BDSM -related interests (Dahl et al., 2024). However, this study did not compare those interested in BDSM to those who were not, which may help explain the discrepancy in results.

Results from the one-way ANOVA comparing scores on the MTME, which measured equity between 24/7, other, and non-BDSM groups showed that differences in relationship equity were more pronounced in 24/7 D/s relationships than in other types of relationships. Specifically, participants in 24/7 D/s relationships were significantly more likely to believe that their partners were getting a better deal than them compared to participants in non-BDSM relationships, regardless of role. As Fennell (2015) described, people in 24/7 relationships consistently perform duties aligned with their respective roles. Role exhaustion may explain why Dominants and

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submissives believed their partners were "getting a better deal." Another possible explanation is that one's partner getting a better deal may be viewed positively by people in 24/7 D/s relationships; in other words, self-sacrifice may be valued by partners in these relationships (Stiles & Clark, 2011) as an aspect of interdependence.

People in other BDSM relationships were also significantly more likely to say that their partners were getting a better deal than them as compared to non-practitioners, which likely reflects underlying social norms of equity in non-BDSM relationships (Hammack et al., 2019). Making sure a partner is getting the better deal might be a goal in BDSM relationships that involve caretaking and service (Cascalheira et al., 2021; Cutler et al., 2020). Using an assessment that was normed with heterosexual, cisgender people in non-BDSM relationships and has not been previously normed with people in BDSM relationships (i.e., MTME) could explain the valence and strength of these findings.

This study is one of few quantitative analyses of different types of BDSM relationships and the attachment styles and emotional regulation practices utilized by partners in these relationships. As people from across the United States and potentially around the world, with many different ages and ethnic, gender, and sexual identities were able to participate in this study due to the use of MTurk and FetLife, the results are somewhat generalizable to the larger population of BDSM practitioners.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are several limitations to this study. One design limitation is that using cross-sectional data precluded us from making inferences about causality. We cannot infer any directional relationships between attachment, emotion regulation, and relational equity from correlational results. Since all recruiting was done online through only a handful of websites, people in BDSM communities who were not active online were not eligible to participate. FetLife, which may be the only outlet for BDSM practitioners living in smaller, more politically conservative, or rural communities, has been criticized for not being inclusive of BIPOC people (Feast, 2020). Despite their terms of service prohibiting users from "mak[ing] or promot[ing] any type of racism or hate…unless in the context of role-playing between consenting parties," members who identify as BIPOC reported increases in racial slurs in recent years and feeling unwelcome or unsafe on the site as a result (Erickson et al., 2021). This may explain why the majority of BDSM participants in the current study were White and heterosexual. Another limitation involving recruitment is that we did not verify that MTurk workers completing the study were human and did not include attention checks in the survey. Research conducted before this study suggested that MTurk workers generally provided valid, reliable data (Chandler & Shapiro, 2016), and the presence of bots on MTurk was not reported as a challenge to data collection until after the study was concluded (Chmielewski & Kucker, 2020; Webb & Tangney, 2022). Without safeguards against bots, data integrity could be limited if these issues were present.

The measures used in this study have a few limitations. Only one maladaptive emotion regulation technique, i.e., expressive suppression, could be analyzed with the ERQ. Research has shown that many emotion regulation techniques can be used by one person (Pascuzzo et al., 2013). While this study found that people in 24/7 D/s relationships are no more likely to use

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expressive suppression than non-BDSM practitioners, more research is needed to provide sufficient evidence that BDSM practitioners in relationships are not more likely than non-practitioners to use maladaptive emotion regulation techniques. The MTME was normed with cisgender people in dyadic relationships who endorsed binary gender identities; the tool may not be culturally appropriate for this sample, given the prevalence of gender-expansive and consensually non-monogamous identities reported. Unfortunately, instruments normed to measure these constructs within these populations do not exist.

A final limitation that could be addressed by future studies is the lack of inclusivity of BDSM practitioners in polyamorous or aromantic relationships. A space was left in the survey for participants to "add any comments about this survey or any other information you feel would be relevant to this research." Several participants commented that since the study specified that only romantic relationships qualified for this study, their aromantic relationship would be excluded. A few participants commented that while they were in a BDSM relationship, they answered survey questions thinking about a non-BDSM relationship. As this study asked participants to base responses on their relationship with one partner, the generalizability of the results is limited to monogamous relationships. To be more generalizable, future research could explore the BDSM dynamics in polyamorous and aromantic relationships (see Bauer, 2010).

The findings of this study can provide direction for future researchers about attachment and emotion regulation among people who practice BDSM. The contribution of research evidence that people who practice BDSM report secure attachment as often as people who do not practice BDSM may help to reduce stigma toward people in BDSM relationships. An exploration of a broader array of emotion regulation techniques used by BDSM practitioners could enhance our understanding of how emotional expression and BDSM activities relate. Assessing attachment, emotion regulation, and relational equity in a longitudinal study of people who practice BDSM would allow for quantitative investigation of patterns of relating to see if they remain stable or change over time.

It may also be interesting to explore differences in beliefs about relationship equity and relationship satisfaction among people who practice BDSM in the U.S. Investigating the intersections of D/s roles and relational expectations among BDSM practitioners can illuminate how BDSM relationships challenge social and sexual norms (Hammack et al., 2019; Hébert & Weaver, 2015). The creation and validation of assessments of relationship equity that better reflect the values and norms of BDSM practitioners could extend this line of quantitative inquiry.

This study, like many about BDSM practitioners, enrolled primarily White, heterosexual, cisgender participants. Researchers noted the "overwhelming whiteness of writing on S/M" throughout the early 2000s, which continues to be troubling (Langdridge & Barker, 2007, p. 6). Even a study exploring intersecting identities enrolled participants who identified as "white, North American, heterosexually identified and college educated (sic)" (Damm et al., 2018, p. 21). Recent articles have described racism within BDSM spaces (Erickson et al., 2021) and called for greater inclusion and representation of BDSM practitioners who identify as BIPOC (Martinez, 2021; Newmahr, 2008). To increase inclusion and better represent the diversity of identities among BDSM practitioners, future studies on this topic can incorporate intentional

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sampling, or recruit participants from online forums or community events specifically for BDSM practitioners who identify as BIPOC or as queer and trans people of color (QTPOC).

Conclusion

Overall, this study has paved the way for future quantitative analysis of attachment styles, emotion regulation, and relationship equity among BDSM practitioners. By including different types of BDSM relationships (e.g., 24/7 D/s and other relationships) in an exploratory study of attachment, this research contributed to de-pathologizing BDSM relationships by illuminating similarities with non-BDSM relationships and highlighting ways in which couples in BDSM relationships express themselves emotionally. Further examination of what contributes to relationship satisfaction reported by couples in 24/7 D/s relationships may be particularly important for mental health providers working with people in these relationships.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank Master Bert Cutler, Ph.D., for connecting us and for his attentive review and thoughtful feedback on an earlier draft of this article.

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Pups at Pride: A Reflection on Negotiating Consent, Power, and Agency with Subversive Subcultures

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Abstract

Gaining consent from individuals who give control over aspects of their agency, autonomy, and ability to consent to another person by subverting normative power dynamics - such as those who belonging to kink communities - has seen little ethical discussion. This reflection provides a critical commentary on a specific scenario that occurred while conducting an LGBT hate crime project at a local Pride event in the North-East of England. While conducting a survey on anti-LGBT+ hate crime, a self-identified 'pup' approached the researcher to express interest in participation. The pup was unable to physically sign a consent form or fill out the survey themselves as their hands were covered and restricted by paw gloves. Further, they had indicated that they were under the control and supervision of their 'handler' who was observing the interaction from a distance. The pup was an unexpected respondent in the research as the survey was not kink-orientated. The ethical guidance underpinning the research was, therefore, not prepared for engaging with members of the kink community. Due to the subverted power dynamics over 'who' should give consent in this scenario, the author uses this as a case study to pose a series of questions on best ethical practice ‘in action’ when conducting research with individuals who challenge normative power relations.

Keywords: kink community, pup play, puppy play, research ethics, power dynamics, consent

Introduction

This reflection critically outlines a specific scenario that emerged when conducting a paper survey at a regional Pride event in the North-East of England (generalized to uphold anonymity guidance from the author’s University Ethics Committee). The survey examined the perceptions and experiences of anti-lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT+) hate crime. LGBT+ people who attended Pride were approached by the researcher with information sheets detailing the nature of the project. Physical consent forms, which were printed on the back of the paper survey questions, required signatures from respondents before participation. One potential respondent, who was a self-identified ‘pup’, came to inquire about participating in the project. Pups are members of a kink and fetish-based subculture who engage in both sexual and non-sexual ‘pup-play’. The pup who approached the researcher was wearing paw gloves, restricting the ability to provide a signature. The aims and scope of the research did not seek to specifically sample members of the kink community. Therefore, the ethical guidance underpinning the research was not prepared for engaging with members of the kink community. Decisions over how to proceed and include the pup within the research project were therefore decided in action

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while in the field. I use this scenario as a case study to reflect on the choices made and pose questions over whether they contravened the subversive power dynamics the participant was engaged in as part of his pup play.

Pup individuals 'tend to adopt a submissive role, imitate the posture of a dog, and wear a collar and other "gear" associated with owning a dog' (Wignall & McCormack, 2017: 801). This gear can include dog leads, butt plugs that simulate tails, rubber suits, pup masks, and dog toys. Wearing this gear is a visible display of membership in the pup community and represents their role as a pup during roleplay. While this reflection focuses on research pertaining to pups and gaining ethical consent, the questions posed can be applied to research on other kink dynamics more generally. For example, interviewing or surveying people who are adopting a submissive role - such as a slave, servant, boi, or cuckold etc. - who willingly exchanges power with a dominant, who in turn gives permission on the submissive's behalf, raises questions over whether the submissive can ever truly provide solo consent to participate in a research context. The submissive's ability to consent has been agreeably transferred to their Dominant in an arrangement that does not involve the researcher. Researchers must consider how to navigate and respect this arrangement if involving submissives in research, especially if in the presence of their Dom, so as not to compromise or bypass this prearrangement.

Those who engage in kink subvert normative power dynamics in a variety of ways that may disrupt traditional research practices of gaining consent. Pup roleplay often, but not always, involves a 'pup' consensually giving control over aspects of their behavior to a 'handler'; a person who cares for and potentially 'owns' the pup. Pup culture has seen very little empirical study, thus there is a paucity of methodological and ethical guidance on how to conduct research with pup-identified individuals specifically, and those engaging in pup dynamics generally. As such, there is currently a lack of discussion on how one gains informed consent from participants who hand control of their autonomy to another individual, or how to negotiate such subverted power dynamics. This reflection, therefore, raises unique ethical quandaries. As the primary focus of the hate crime project did not aim to explore pup-play, the actions taken by the researcher to gain consent from the pup in question were therefore decided instinctively, 'in action', during the fieldwork of the project. Pups are in a unique (usually but not always, submissive) headspace that has been likened to "something akin to a physically active mindfulness" (Langdridge & Lawson, 2019: 2208), which makes them a good case study when scrutinizing how they can consent to participate in a research project, while in this headspace. The ability for the pup to express agency and consent to participate in research and remain in line with their handler's wishes will be the main focus of this reflection. I reflect on the ethical implications underpinning research with participants who subvert normative power dynamics. I present this reflective piece as a mechanism to pose ethically laden questions that one may consider when researching sexual subcultures or communities that disrupt normative ideas of power and consent. These questions can be posed to research students and scholars, for pedagogical purposes, in order to facilitate debate on research ethics with sexual subcultures and subversive communities.

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Kink: A Brief Background

Research on kink over the past two decades has proliferated from what was once a highly stigmatized area of sexualities research. Individuals who practice pup play belong to a specific subculture within the wider kink community.

> "Kink is a spectrum of sexual or erotic activities outside normative versions of sex, undertaken for sensory, emotional, or intellectual pleasure. It tends to include a combination of the exchange of power, or perception of this, the infliction/receiving of pain, the wearing of gear, or the fetishization of body parts or objects. Kink can be practiced individually or in groups and can be organized into communities and subcultures. It is *consensual*, with a shared understanding that the activities are kinky" (Wignall, 2020: 66 original emphasis).

Individuals who engage in pup play must therefore be understood as members of a kink subculture, who consensually exchange power while entering a state of 'play' and willingly adopt the performance of a pup as part of a leisure and pleasure-based kink dynamic. The terms BDSM and kink are often used interchangeably in popular culture references. However, Simula (2021) notes that kink is an umbrella term to encompass a wide range of non-normative sexual interests and practices. BDSM is a subset of these practices and cover a wide range of identity, relationships, practices, and communities. BDSM encompasses three broad subtypes of kink variation: B/D which stands for bondage and discipline, D/S which stands for dominance and submission, and S/M which stands for sadism and masochism.

According to Ortmann & Sprott (2013), terms such as sadism, masochism, and fetish were borrowed and reclaimed from the medical and psychiatric profession, whereas 'kink' was created by early communities and can be used to honor this history and to avoid language that previously pathologized practitioners. Individuals who practice kink or BDSM experiment, play, and/or live with subverting normative power dynamics. It is difficult to coherently articulate kinky individuals as belonging to a set community or social group, as many who practice kink belong to different groups across the social spectrum and "could be said to represent a 'community of practice': a community built through shared enterprise and resources (techniques, language, knowledge, use of objects)" (Fanghanel, 2020: 284). Thus, kink subcultures largely share a specific language to refer to certain sexual acts or roles (e.g. pup, boywife, slave etc.), common protocols, rituals, and rules (e.g. having a safeward when a participants wishes to end or pause kink play) to navigate consent (ibid.), and aesthetic or gear (e.g. gags, cuffs, uniforms, leather etc.). Kink communities can meet one another online (Colosi & Lister, 2019) or in person to learn from each other, engage in 'play', meet partners for short or long-term kink dynamics, and become integrated into wider kink scenes, such as attending BDSM parties. Digital media have helped the sociality of pup communities develop, specifically. Social media platforms such as X/formerly Twitter are used by pups to follow one another and expand their social networks. Further, there are now specific online networks where socials, events, and Pride spaces are organized, coordinated, and collated (e.g., https://puppypride.social/) (Wignall, 2022). Although predominantly thought of as a purely erotic practice, kink generally and pup play specifically may contain romantic and emotional dimensions that can shape how trust, respect, and love are

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built in a relationship. Indeed, there is evidence that some asexual people engage in kink play for sensual inhancement and increased intimacy with their partner (Winter-Gray & Hayfield, 2021).

While breaches of consent and patterns of coercion and abuse can occur in all sexual relationships and dynamics, kink – and BDSM in particular – is differentiated from sexual abuse and psychopathology by the practice of consent in shaping mutually defined and agreed behaviors, roles, and actions (Dunkley & Brotto, 2020). This practice can take several forms, but often involves each partner pre-negotiating their 'limits', agreeing to specific safe words, and deciding on non-verbal cues to indicate withdrawal of consent. For those who are more experienced with kink relationships and play, and who are willing to consent to the unknown, having a less scripted and more organic negoation of consent can be preferable (Weiss, 2011).

Consent and consensual practice in kink communities is prioritized. Those who break consent, such as ignoring safewords or bypassing someone's limits, can face being regarded as dangerous to play with, becoming pariahs in their community (Taylor & Ussher, 2001). The preservation of consent is important to a) protect those practicing kink play as individuals and b) protect the reputation of the kink and BDSM community more generally, especially as they play on the fringes of socially normative sexual behavior (ibid). However, consent is not always a strict binary of Yes/No that is made verbally, clearly, and instructively. Indeed, some kink actively involves enjoying the grey area of consent where consent violations are broken, such as in Fanghanel's research, who interviewed a participant that "'does not particularly care' about consent and finds it 'hot' to have her consent violated by the right person" (2020: 280). In some kink contexts, sex can be both consensual and non-consensual at the same time, and, according to Szpilka (2023) can be navigated carefully to lead towards a more fulfilling sexual experience for some BDSM practitioners.

> "Consent is a nuanced and complex topic. Even within the BDSM world where prior negotiation is key, consent is not clear-cut. Instead, we can begin to see that sexual consent consists of nuanced and implicit communication between partners, even when the sexual interaction has been explicitly negotiated…An ethical and nuanced understanding of consent means looking further into how people think about communicating consent while navigating power relations and acknowledging the limits of freedom" (Beres & MacDonald, 2015: 430).

As researchers, we therefore have a delicate yet important task in navigating, respecting, and adhering to these nuances of consent, based on the specific power dynamics played out in kink relationships. Bypassing the power dynamics that have been agreed and exchanged by participants who are involved in kink play risks undermining the consensual practices they are navigating, even if they run counter to established ethical procedures. Further, 'consent' is a culturally framed practice that takes on different meanings in different contexts, communities, and social groups across the globe. Halkoaho, Pietilä, Ebbesen, Karki, & Kangasniemi's (2016) systematic review on cultural aspects of informed consent highlighted that power dynamics – which ultimately shape the ability to give informed consent – are infuenced by cultural and relational ties. For instance, "in cultures where the opinions of family members influence the

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decision-making of participants, individual decision making is not possible or reasonable…The influence of gender on family relationships has been noted, when the husband makes decisions on behalf of his wife. In particular, women in rural communities have expressed their wish to seek permission from their husbands, uncles, or other male relatives before giving consent." (Halkoaho et al., 2016: 705). Thus, there are examples of non-kink power dynamics involving those beyond the primary participant, in which researchers must carefully navigate to avoid disrupting the assumed cultural scripts on obtaining informed consent from familial gatekeepers. This does not necessarily diminish the likelihood that informed consent can be given or that voluntary participation can occur. Rather, it is necessary for researchers to create the right conditions, taking into account our own cultural and community assumptions of power and consent. I continue by reflecting on how pup subculture subverts traditional assumptions of power and consent and explore how researchers may navigate this.

Pup subculture

Although there is dispute over its exact origins, it is largely agreed that pup roleplay emerged out of the broader BDSM scene. Understanding the broad context of kink is therefore important when discussing the power relations that exist in the pup community. Lawson & Langdridge (2019: 1-2) for instance, argue that "puppy play seemingly has its historical roots as a socio-sexual practice in the wider and older BDSM/leatherman scene but has only recently emerged in terms of its visibility to the wider public." Thus, there is little empirical detail as to the interactional and relational intricacies between individuals who belong to this community. Pup play, and the activities that underpin pup relationships, takes place within the broader Dominance/submission segment of BDSM dynamics between those who performatively take on the persona of a canine or dog and their handler, who remains in a human persona but adopts the role of a dog owner or dominant (St. Clair, 2015).

Historically, queer BDSM communities, according to Lawson and Langdridge (2019) adopted a strict leather aesthetic with structured protocols of behavior to underpin the kink activities they engage in. Such behavior traditionally involved submissive 'boys' who were subservient to 'Sirs' or 'Daddies'. In these original leather scenes, boys were entirely subservient to their Sirs, while Sirs were expected to train boys in the desired manner of behavior, speech, posture, and dress; effectively becoming their owners. In order to maintain such protocols, punishment was key to maintaining this structured power dynamic. One method of punishment that reinforced this power structure was to reduce boys to a 'dog slave' with the intention to humiliate the boy for sexual pleasure (see Lawson & Langdridge, 2019). This role has since evolved to be distinct yet connected to the historical role of the boy, as pup individuals are seemingly trained by their handlers or owners to move on all fours, eat from a bowl, and to sit, speak, or bark upon command.

Pups engage in their role-play by adopting the physical posture of a canine, such as panting, standing on all fours, sniffing, kneeling, crouching, as well as embodying the emotional and/or mental personifications of a young dog, such as obedience, loyalty, playfulness, curiosity, and unconditional love. Pup role play is symbolised through the 'gear' adopted by both handlers and pups. Pups often wear dog hoods, muzzles, collars, gloves and paw pads that restrict hand movement and resemble paws, and rubber toys that are anally inserted to resemble a tail

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(Wignall & McCormack, 2017). The restriction of hands through paw gloves is key to this case study, as the pup who approached the researcher could not sign a consent form or complete the survey independently due to his hands being restricted by paw gloves. Mimicking playful canine like behaviors such as barking, growling, whining is also a large part of pup roleplay. If provided by an owner or handler, pups can be fed treats, play with chew toys, sleep on dog beds or in a cage, and drink out of a dog bowl. A kink name is often adopted, which is different to their day-to-day name to differentiate between their pup persona and non-pup life. Pup play can also involve various aspects of discipline, bondage, and sadomasochism.

To the author's knowledge, the majority of empirical work on pups is androcentric and largely focuses on play between men, sitting within the broader queer kink community (e.g., Wignall, 2020; Wignall, 2017; Wignall & McCormack, 2017). Lawson & Langdridge (2019) observe, however, that women are joining the pup community in increasing numbers, but have historically found it difficult to access as, in practice, pup events are usually held in gay male spaces and are largely represented in the public domain by men. Further, Wignall, McCormack, Cook, & Jaspal's (2022) survey of 753 pup play participants found that the majority of responents (78.72%) were men, but 7.78% were women and 5.86% non-binary. In the Wignall et al. survey sample, it was also noted that only 3% of responents identified as straight. Pup culture therefore has its roots in queer kink culture and remains a largely queer-dominated community.

Existing outside of the realms of normative sexual practices (Rubin, 1984) pup play and other fetish activities are viewed as a socially deviant practice. Those interested in BDSM practices were historically pathologized by the psycho-medical sphere, which sought to treat and cure practitioners of their 'sickness'. However, there is now a large body of social scientific evidence that recognizes BDSM as a pleasure-based practice that actually has many psychological benefits and allows individuals to explore more about themselves and their sexuality (Easton, 2013; Fitzgerald & Grossman, 2018). Although there is an abundence of work examining the psychology of BDSM more generally, there is a lack of work exploring the psychological appeal of pup-play specifically. To bridge this gap, Langdridge & Lawson (2019) comprehensively draw on bodies of work that examine wider kink play to provide a phenomenological investigation into the psychology behind and motivations for engaging in puppy play. They find five dimensions of motivation for and meaning of pup play – which include, but are not limited to, sexual pleasure; relaxation, therapy, and escape from self; adult play and vibrant physicality; extending and expressing selfhood; and relationships and community – for those who engage in this practice. Many participants in their sample expressed that the sexual pleasure largely derived from the power play between dominant and submissive roles, in particular being emotionally, relationally, and sexually subservient to a handler. However, inasmuch as many aspects of pup play are not inherently submissive (e.g. escaping from self, relaxation, extending and expressing selfhood)submission *per se* should not be used to define the complex dimensions of pup practice and identity. Indeed, Langdridge & Lawson (2019: 2211) understand that 'puppy play involves more playfulness, less pain, and—most importantly—more agency and independence' as opposed to traditional Dominant/submissive roles, which "is somewhat ironic that the reduction of person to animal within a D/s sexual setting results in a practice where the submissive has more independence."

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Although not all pups have or desire handlers, the use of butt plug tails, chastity devices, and dog collars can aid in the sexual experience of being 'owned' by a handler. The playful performativity of behaving like a dog, such as fetching toys and being given treats, can be used as a relaxation tool that allows one to escape from the stresses of everyday human life. A handler takes responsibiltiy for the pup, relieving them of the adult responsibilities required in their day-to-day lives and facilitating the pup to enter into a 'puppy headspace' that mindfully focuses on the present, stripping away past and future worries. 'When in puppy headspace, an individual adopts the affective, behavioral, and cognitive performances of puppies. While pups do access a different frame of mind in pup headspace, it is important to note that they do not abandon their sense of reason and can still understand consent and the difference between right and wrong" (Matchett & Berkowitz, 2023: 86). It can be quite difficult for some individuals to enter a pup headspace, and can require deep mindfulness, meditation, scripted or ritualistic behaviors, and/or applying pup 'gear'.

Underpinning these sexually and emotionally pleasure-based benefits are the relational dimensions of pup activitity. For instance, the majority of participants in Wignall and McCormack's (2017) study emphasised that puppy play involved deeply intimate and relational connections with other pups and handlers, and the wider pup community. Indeed, the bond between a pup and handler is incredibly intimate, as both share a deep connection that requires navigation to explore the risks, consent, vulnerability, and pleasure with one another and with the wider 'pack' if available or desired. Ultimately, the roleplay of pup and handler is largely founded upon the exchange of power and autonomy to varying degrees, for the purpose of play. The pup who approached the researcher at a local Pride event was with a 'pack' who were under the supervision of their handlers.

In what Matchett & Berkowitz (2023) term the 'new puppy movement', there has been a marked shift in community ideology and perspectives from their historical conceptualization, in that there is less emphasis on 'rules' and a higher emphasis on 'play' and flexibility in how pup play is performed. Contemporary pup culture, according to Wignall (2017) and Wignall & McCormack (2017) emphasizes role-play above 'real life' sexual humiliation. This role-play largely involves taking on the physical and emotional characteristics of a canine companion. Hence why actors adopt and embody 'pup' roles rather than 'dogs' due to the emphasis placed on playful behavior. However, it is observed that the shared sexual kink history between BDSM and pup communities significantly informs some of the dynamics enacted by some pup individuals. Indeed, pup-play shares and involves many aspects of BDSM practices, especially during activities of pup or canine training. Such activities can involve training the pup to obey and serve the handler in particular ways, and can include obedience activities, discipline, reward play, corporal and non-corporal punishments, submission, restraints, and playtime (Lawson & Langdridge, 2019). Thus, pup roleplay is distinct but interrelated to wider kink play and bases its dynamics on similar subversive power dynamics.

The respondent who approached the researcher was wearing a tight leather body suit, a pup mask, a lead, paw gloves, and was thus in roleplay. He was walking on two feet rather than on all fours when interacting with the researcher, whereas his handler was observing our interaction while standing among a wider group of handlers. He disclosed that his handler was in control of his diet and 'feeding time' for 48 hours over the Pride weekend. To the author's

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knowledge, all other studies engaging with members of the pup community have interviewed or surveyed participants who are not actively in roleplay. This piece reflects on the participation of a pup to complete a paper survey while a) in roleplay, b) currently in power exchange with a handler, and c) being physically restricted by pup gear.

Participation in the Survey

Before participating in the survey, the pup introduced himself to me (as the researcher) while I was conducting a paper survey with a group of people who were enjoying the Pride festival. He stated that he had been watching me approach various groups of people and was intrigued over what I was doing. The pup was on his own when he approached and interacted with me, but we were both being observed by his handler who was personally identified by the pup and visible to both of us. The handler was standing, socialising with other handlers and pups a short distance away. I informed the pup of the project I was conducting, and we built a rapport over how our Pride event was 'going' (e.g., whether we were having a good time, what we thought of the Pride march etc.). I asked if he would like to participate and provided him with an information sheet. After reading through the information, he assented to the project[1] verbally but could not sign a consent form and give written consent or fill in the survey by himself as his hands were restricted by paw gloves. I did not ask the pup to remove his paw gloves. I instinctively offered to sign the pup's print name on his behalf and fill out his answers to the questionnaire while he dictated. The Information Commissioner's Office – the UK's independent supervisory body for data protection – specifies that "explicit consent must be expressly confirmed in words. Individuals do not have to write the consent statement in their own words; you can write it for them. However, you need to make sure that individuals can clearly indicate that they agree to the statement – for example by signing their name or ticking a box next to it" (ICO, 2018: 4). The UK does not have specific regulations that mandate written consent. Indeed, the ICO further explain that consent must be freely given, specific and informed, and that an individual must clearly and unambiguously affirm consent through means outlined in Recital 32 of the GDPR "such as by a written statement, including by electronic means, or an oral statement." (ibid.: 26). For the ICO, "clear affirmative action means someone must take deliberate and specific action to opt in or agree to the processing, even if this is not expressed as an opt-in box. For example, other affirmative opt-in methods might include signing a consent statement, *oral confirmation*, a binary choice presented with equal prominence, or switching technical settings away from the default" (ibid: 26, emphasis added). If taking oral consent, the ICO emphasises that "you need to make sure you keep a record of the script" (ibid.: 29). In this case, the consent form acted as a statement informing respondents of the requirements of participation, and how their data would be used. The pup indicated verbally that he agreed with the statement, and I signed his name on his behalf, keeping a record of this consent in line with GDPR guidance.

The survey opened with four open self-declaration questions asking for the respondent's age, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. The main survey contained closed-ended questions such as 'would you report your hate crime experience to the police?' with a series of check boxes, for example 'always, only on some occasions, never.' The survey finalized with a comment section

[2]Assent is an expression of approval or agreement to participate in an activity. It is often used in lieu of 'consent' within research on children (see Lambert & Glacken, 2011).

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where respondents could write down any additional comments. Each section was dictated by the pup and written verbatim or, in the case of check boxes, checked by the researcher. The handler was visibly observing this interaction from a distance and did not intervene; the researcher and the handler never interacted.

Traditionally, respondents would fill out a survey, individually, and would only consult the researcher if they are present when raising a query over a certain question. The dynamics of this scenario meant that every response required being dictated to the researcher, so that it could be filled out on behalf of the pup. Further, the pup disclosed that he was under close supervision of his handler, who had taken control of his 'body' for the Pride event. For example, he was instructed not to drink or eat 12 hours prior to and during Pride, feeding times would be under the handler's control for 48 hours, but that he could enjoy himself separately with others under his handler's supervision. This created a unique ethical dynamic between the researcher and respondent, specifically in terms of the power relations being navigated. It also caused potential violations of anonymity whereby the pup had to orate his responses in front of other people while I dictated these responses on his behalf.

Ethical guidance (see British Society of Criminology, 2015) indicates that informed consent should be gained from a respondent, whereby full details of the project are provided to the individual participating so that they can give consent that is fully informed of how their data will be used. However, this case involved a respondent who had consensually given 'ownership', or partial ownership of himself to a handler, who had taken control of the pup's decisions and individual agency to a large degree, potentially impacting the pup's ability to provide consent that is free from their handler's permission.

Cascalheira, Thomson, & Wignall (2021) have interviewed participants who engaged in 24/7 Dominance/submission dynamics, such as those who practice total power exchange (TPE); the giving up of total control to another person in a consensual situation so that all decisions are made by that person. The authors maintain that 24/7 dynamics are "a socially constructed, consensual, full-time adherence to kink related roles and behaviors untethered to time-limited scenes, woven into other life domains, and operating as an umbrella term to encompass other perpetual power dynamics" (Cascalheira, Thomson, & Wignall, 2021: 1). Although they achieved informed consent from participants to carry out their fieldwork, they do not offer details as to the exact nature of this consent, such as whether the Dominant or Handler consented on behalf of the slave or whether both slave and Dominant had to consent to participate. In addition, by contrast, most pup dynamics tend to be roleplay orientated and thus aspects of the power exchange are time-limited and negotiated flexibly. To the author's knowledge, all previous work recruiting pups to participate in research has largely been conducted on pup individuals when not in role play. Further, this research has been conducted online rather than in person (e.g., Wignall, 2017), bypassing the physical limitations of completing consent forms and filling in a survey when restricted by pup gear such as the paw gloves restricting the ability to physically hold a pen and sign a paper survey in this case study. This presents a unique ethical quandary as to how to achieve consent from those who subvert normative power relations when in roleplay and/or in power exchange.

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There are many instances when participants may be unable to physically sign a consent form, such as people with certain disabilities. What is unique about this case is the direct, consensual transfer of power between two or more individuals as part of their relationship dynamic, and how social researchers navigate that transfer of power to honor consensual practices – including the ability to give consent when in 'play' – between participants. The researcher accepted the pup's verbal consent without the need for approval of the handler and filled out the survey on his behalf. It is important to stress that this was an instinctive decision and is not advocated as best or worst practice in this reflection. The unique power dynamics described require careful navigation and reflection, presenting specific ethical considerations that ought to be discussed for the purposes of ethics-related discourse and research. Before providing my own reflections on the case described and the protocols followed, I pose the following questions that sexuality scholars may wish to consider. These questions can in turn be posed, for the purpose of research pedagogy, with undergraduate and postgraduate students to discuss how best to navigate scenarios where unique power dynamics are upheld and displayed. Specifically, these questions center the parameters of the pup's freedoms and challenge the prevailing ethical concept of 'freely given consent' within traditional research practice.

Questions:

1. Should the pup's handler have also been approached to provide consent for his pup to participate in the survey?
2. What were the issues of upholding the pup's anonymity in this case, and how could these be rectified?
3. Has the researcher executed their responsibilities in a manner that is respectful of the pup and handler?
4. How should the researcher proceed if there was disagreement between the (dissenting) handler and (assenting) pup over whether to participate or not?
5. Did the researcher undermine the power dynamics displayed and performed in the pup/handler relationship?
6. If the handler – based on their established power dynamics – has a right to compel the pup to participate, how could the researcher negotiate this to ensure they fulfil their obligation to their participant and that best practice for data collection is upheld for the integrity of their project?
7. How can researchers navigate disruptive and non-normative power relations when accessing and seeking consent?

Reflections on ethics

The research project explored the experiences of anti-LGBT hate crime in the North-East of England. The project was undertaken as part of a doctoral research program and was granted ethical approval by the author's University ethics committee. Gaining informed consent through the use of documentation – consent forms and information sheets – and retaining individual anonymity was a key condition of being granted ethical approval. Deviation from this, with this specific respondent was not reported to the committee as a) written consent *was* taken from the pup respondent, although dictated by the researcher on behalf of the pup, and b) reflections on this scenario occurred by having general conversations on methodologies and ethics with

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colleagues and other doctoral graduates after the project was completed. It was only after a significant amount of time following completion of the project that these reflections came to be. Traditionally, it is considered best practice to obtain a written confirmation of informed consent before data collection commences (British Society of Criminology, 2015). However, there are circumstances where this may not always be possible, such as when trying to recruit children, people with low levels of literacy, and physically and/or visually impaired individuals. Potential issues and difficulties in gaining written consent should be addressed in the research plans prior to collecting data. Realistically, however, researchers can only plan for foreseen potential issues that may arise during data collection. The researcher obtained ethical approval for the hate crime project prior to commencing fieldwork. However, the ethical dilemmas highlighted were not a foreseen occurrence in the planning of the research.

Where a participant is unable to physically sign a written form, as in this case, arguably, verbal consent is more appropriate (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2010). Verbal consent may be suitable where: there are physical or literacy issues, no identifying information is being collected, cultural or political apprehensions exist in signing an agreement, there are disclosure concerns by the existence of a paper record, or time for an interview or survey is limited. It must be affirmed, however, that when verbal consent is opted for, it is not a replacement for proper planning and preparation of data collection. As the pup could not physically sign the consent form or fill in the survey, I accepted his verbal consent and filled the survey out on his behalf while the answers were dictated by the pup. The oration of these responses in front of other people passing by or by the other groups previously surveyed who were seated in the local vicinity, potentially disclosed the pup's responses to others and compromised the anonymity of his responses. On reflection, it would have been more appropriate to ask the pup whether he wanted to orate his answers to the survey in a more private setting, or, given the bustling and vibrant context of Pride events which limits access to private spaces, asked if he wanted to return to his 'pack' – who were all gathered in a group – so he could be with other members of his community, and potentially a more comfortable and secure space. In addition to this, it would have been methodologically appropriate to approach the pup's pack generally to explore whether any potential respondents could be sampled. Although, I did do basic 'check ins' with the pup respondent to assess how he wanted to participate, and the pup gave no indication of being uncomfortable at any time, a more thorough probe of his comfort would have built a stronger rapport and shown a higher consideration for his potential needs as a pup respondent.

Individuals engaged in kink are actively playing with power in complex ways and reshaping existing power structures by ultimately playing with the boundaries and edges of pleasure. It involves playing with identity, roles, rules, boundaries, risk, and the exchange of power to varying degrees, including the ability to consensually transfer consent. When reflecting on these boundaries, Thompson and Miss Couple (2020) maintain that a key issue for researchers is navigating the politics of one's primary contact with the kink community. In the case of Thompson's field research, which took place in a professional BDSM household and dungeon, this manifested as her losing access to existing participants if there were conflicts or if they left on bad terms, consequently losing the ability to hear a more critical side of the profession in which she was observing. This also involves careful navigation of the power exchange and power play between BDSM practitioners, and in this case, the transfer of power and agency from pup to handler. Given the historic context of pathologising individuals for engaging in kink

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practices (Turley & Butt, 2015), it is improper to reinforce normative notions of consent on those who engage in power exchange, as it undermines the established roles within kink relationships. By not fully checking in with the pup respondent, for example by asking if I should consult his handler, offer more private venues, or ask if he would feel more comfortable participating in the company of other members of his community, it is possible that I undermined these established roles. One may argue, therefore, that in order to respect and navigate the intimate politics of the pup dynamic while in roleplay, the pup's handler should have been approached to provide consent for his pup to participate in the survey. The scenario described throughout was 'an unforseen' scenario that I, as the researcher, did not plan for. I dealt with it, in action, and took my cues from the pup by building a rapport with him, in the same way I would with any participant. On reflection, if this scenario occurred again, I would ask the pup more specifically whether his handler would like him to participate in the research and whether we should confirm with his handler if it was okay for him to participate. The pup would then have more optionality to consider whether they could provide solo consent and more time to check and confirm with their handler to maintain the established protocols that had been established for the given play time.

The handler, having been granted authority over the pup – in the context of this dynamic – arguably has the power to affect or shape the pup's ability to offer independent, informed, and freely given consent for participation. I argue that the actions of researchers must be respectful of a participant's agency, which in this case is inclusive of the dynamic between pup and handler. Thus, one must be attuned to whether their own actions appear to impinge upon the established boundaries of participants from pup communities – for example, by not approaching the handler for their permission – and consider how their conduct may cause embarrassment or conflict between either party. To the author's knowledge, most research on kink dynamics has been conducted when participants are not in play. However, in Cascalheira, Thomson, & Wignall's (2021) study on 24/7 power exchange, the participants were already known to the researchers through their own community links to kink subcultures – so were not approached spontaneously while conducting a different research project – and were recruited as co-consenting couples rather than as individuals. Co-consenting as a couple – where both Dominant and submissive consent as a pair to participate in research – is somewhat distinct from a person in a submissive role individually consenting without their Dominant's input or co-consent. In their research, both parties navigate their relational power dynamics and (seemingly) co-consent to being interviewed for a specific project aimed at kink dynamics. However, the pup participant in the case described spontaneously approached the researcher and participated in a project that was not specifically kink oriented.

In the case described, I followed what instinctively 'felt right' at the time and took verbal consent on behalf of the pup participant, in view of their physical restrictions. I instinctively wanted to be inclusive to everyone LGBTQ at the Pride event and thought it would be interesting to gain a response from someone who was part of the pup community. I felt intrigued over their dynamic and built a rapport on that basis. The pup was intrigued that I was giving out paper surveys and moving between groups of people. Overall, we had a friendly rapport and I felt I did my best to facilitate his participation in the survey, in the moment. It is upon reflection that questions over best conduct are posed. Readers may consider that when the researcher appears to be presented with a willing participant who, after reading an information sheet, states explicitly

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that they are happy to proceed, informed consent has been provided. Especially as the pup gave no indication that they would need to consult their handler first. Fundamentally, in the moment, the pup wanted to participate, and the researcher wanted the pup to participate. After participation, we carried on a rapport until I departed. It instinctively felt like a positive encounter that included friendly rapport with a research respondent. It is with hindsight and reflection that I question whether I carried out best methodological practice to suit the specific relational dynamics of the pup respondent. As with all ethical procedures, determining best practice must be contextual, nuanced, flexible, and tailored to specific dynamics and settings. I argue that researchers must be mindful of the specific boundaries and rules that kink participants have arranged as part of an exchange of power, when including them - particularly those who are adopting a submissive role, such as pups - in their research. Given the paucity of methodological and ethical commentary in this field, this reflection advances the mindfulness of sexuality positive research protocols to consider the relational dynamics that involve consent and power transferal. It further contributes towards a reflexive understanding of how researchers may unintentionally undermine subversive but pre-arranged sexual scripts and power dynamics and provides discussion on how to navigate these potential pitfalls.

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The Impact of Communication on Sexual Response: A Summary of Findings

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Abstract

This paper examines how sexual communication impacts both sexual desire and sexual satisfaction. The purpose is to assist clinicians in understanding how these components of human sexuality interrelate so that they may use these findings to inform their clinical practice and improve outcomes for clients. Key dimensions of effective sexual communication are explored, and how those dimensions interact with experiences of sexual desire and sexual satisfaction. Consideration is given to the additional factors of relationship satisfaction and non-sexual communication and how these may mediate the relationship between sexual communication, desire, and satisfaction. The need for further research in this area outside of heterosexual and monogamous relationships is emphasized. Implications for practice highlight the importance of clinicians being able to screen for sexual communication skills in their clients, and upskill accordingly, particularly when issues of sexual desire and satisfaction are present, to enhance clinical outcomes.

Introduction

We may imagine that the *quality* of the sex we are having, and being able to *talk* about the sex we are having, go hand in hand. That is; we might presume that being able to discuss our sexual experiences, desires, likes and dislikes will naturally lead to being more satisfied with the sexual experiences we are having. Conversely, it could also be presumed that if we are having great sex, it will follow that we can consistently communicate about sexual matters with our partners more easily.

However as with most matters related to sex and sexuality, it may not be that simple. Sex itself is not a straightforward process; it encompasses many different processes, including our thoughts, attitudes and beliefs about sex, our desire for sex, our arousal response when presented with sexual stimuli, engaging in sexual activity, orgasm, and our appraisal of the sex we have just had (Metts et al., 1996). Anecdotally, it appears natural to assume that communication about sex with our sexual partners will lead to higher levels of sexual satisfaction. Generally speaking, couples who report openly communicating about their sexual needs and preferences tend to report higher levels of satisfaction in both their relationships and their sex lives (Mallory, 2022). But why? Do couples who communicate more effectively about sex tend to have better communication skills in general? Does talking about sex more frequently increase desire and does that in turn increase frequency of sex? Is the increase in desire alone enough to result in higher rates of self-reported sexual satisfaction? In attempting to answer these questions, consideration needs to be given to the widespread cultural sex-negativity that may serve to directly impede, and in some cases prohibit, discussions about sex. This sex-negative environment provides significant challenges in being able to adequately research the topic and thoroughly understand how matters of sex are discussed in relationships (Sævik & Konijnenberg, 2023), and much

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of the literature currently available contains data drawn primarily from cisgendered, heteronormative and monogamous couples.

The complex nature of both sex and human interaction, and questions such as the ones posed above, indicate that there is significant nuance to be found in the original proposition that better communication will equal better sex. Clinicians need to better understand the interplay between sexual desire, sexual satisfaction, relationship satisfaction and the quality of dyadic communication, both sexual and non-sexual, in order to better support clients with relationship and sex-related concerns. This enables the development of targeted treatment plans, focused on supporting clients and upskilling them in the right areas, in order to maximize clinical outcomes. To that end, a summary of some of the current literature has been compiled here to assist clinicians to understand how sexual communication impacts desire and sexual satisfaction and how non-sexual communication and relationship satisfaction, might mediate these findings.

Sexual Communication

Communication has long been considered a crucial ingredient when it comes to successful, functional, romantic relationships, but it presents many complex challenges for many people. When it comes to sexual relationships in particular, communication becomes arguably even more complicated because sex itself is complicated; it comprises a range of physiological, emotional and psychological effects about which the ability to communicate effectively is key (Metts et al., 1996). Assessing sexual communication skills is critical in the therapeutic space. It allows clinicians to better understand relational dynamics, address potential barriers to sexual satisfaction and intimacy, and provide more tailored and effective therapy. There are a number of individual factors at play when it comes to how we communicate about sex including family of origin, sexual scripts, religion, gender, and trauma (Rehman et al., 2011). Understanding sociocultural context is key here. For example, if an individual belongs to a culture where discussing sex-related matters is considered taboo, they may have limited language and tools available with which to navigate sexual communication confidently, and clinicians need to be able to look for this and moderate treatment approaches accordingly (Mallory et al., 2019). Mallory (2022) summarized findings from previous studies related to cultural context and sexual communication and noted that the very direct communication style that might typically be associated with effective sexual communication could in fact clash with cultural norms regarding communication, sex and relationships. It appears that how an individual appraises the effectiveness of sexual communication in their relationship differs depending on the culture within which it occurs, as results from countries with more individualistic cultures showed a stronger positive link between sexual communication and sexual satisfaction (Mallory, 2022). In addition, talking about matters of sex too directly, or too early in a relationship, has the potential to be a source of conflict rather than connection depending on the cultural context (Faulkner & Lannutti, 2010).

Most research into sexual communication is conducted via self-report measures, and studies indicate that the quality of sexual communication is typically determined by a combination of how satisfied one is with the type of communication they have with their partner, the perception that they can openly discuss all aspects of the sexual relationship with that partner (Mallory et al., 2019), and the experience of emotional safety necessary for the communication of sex-related issues (Galizia et al., 2023). In addition, for sexual communication to be appraised by an individual as both satisfactory and effective, it typically has to be perceived as an interactive, balanced, dyadic process (Hatfield et al.,

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2013). Both the *content* of what is discussed – the topic and material of conversation - and the *process* by which the communication takes place – dyadic dynamics, perceptions of power and safety, and sexual attitudes – are critical factors when it comes to determining the effectiveness of the communication (Jones et al., 2017). Mallory's 2022 meta-analysis looking at the interplay between sexual communication, relationship satisfaction, and sexual satisfaction found that there are different dimensions of sexual communication such as frequency, comfort and quality that play distinct roles in influencing sexual satisfaction. There is an additional factor to consider here, which is the presence of non-verbal sexual communication. In one recent study, many participants indicated a preference to communicate non-verbally when it came to conveying pleasure, encouragement or affirmation (Lutmer & Walker, 2024).

Nevertheless, much of our sexual communication is verbal, and one way in which humans communicate verbally is through self-disclosure. Self-disclosure, although considered a one-sided communication process, makes up over one-third of all human communication (Hatfield et al., 2013). General self-disclosure typically involves sharing information about one's personal background and experiences as an indicator of intimacy, and it has been shown to be positively correlated with perceived success in relationships, including friendships, as well as being a subjectively rewarding experience that activates the same regions of the brain as other pleasurable activities (Hatfield et al., 2013). Sexual self-disclosure, which is just one aspect of sexual communication, has some qualities that set it apart from general self-disclosure, even within the same individual in the same relationship. Sexual self-disclosure involves the sharing of one's own sexual thoughts, feelings, experiences, preferences, and desires with one's partner (Hatfield et al., 2013). It is a crucial component of both effective sexual communication and the building and maintaining of an intimate connection. Because an individual's preferences likely differ in some ways from their partner's, and are likely to change over time, communication enables couples to modify their sexual behavior to potentially address any new difficulties that arise relating to sexual function or satisfaction (Mallory et al., 2019). For sexual self-disclosure to be an effective part of sexual communication both partners need to not only be willing and able to express their feelings and desires, but also to seek and accept feedback and guidance without defensiveness or judgment; this requires high levels of trust and acceptance from all parties involved (D'Augelli & D'Augelli, 1985).

Sexual Response: Defining Desire and Satisfaction

Human sexuality is multifaceted and for clinicians supporting clients with issues relating to relationships and sex, it is likely that there will be a combination of physical, emotional and relational components that require attention. The human sexual response is a complicated process that is generally considered to still not be fully understood or agreed upon, with its elements remaining difficult to define. One such element of sexual response is sexual desire.

Sexual desire, although generally considered to be multifaceted, remains hard to define as it raises questions about its origins; is it biological in nature, or relational, and can it be considered an emotional state or is it something quite different altogether (Metts et al., 1996)? It can be useful to think of desire as the sum of the forces that lean us toward and away from sexual behavior and that it is changeable over the course of the lifespan depending on many variables including age, health, gender, relationship satisfaction, the presence of sexual stimuli, lust, and relational familiarity (Levine, 2003). Levine (2003) proposes that there are three components to sexual desire that are always interacting to

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directly influence our desire: The biological *drive*, which has a physiological basis, *motivation*, referring to the psychological component of desire influenced by interpersonal, social and mental contexts, and *wish*, stemming from our values, cultural context, and sexual scripts (Levine, 2003). Desire can be experienced in many ways – daydream, fantasy, arousal, connection, love – and may be acted on or not (Metts et al., 1996). It is generally considered to be a separate process from the physiological arousal response which occurs when one is presented with sexually arousing stimuli, and desire and arousal can occur at the same time or be experienced separately. Desire may precede arousal; that is, one feels like having sex, so they engage with sexual stimuli, and therefore become aroused, otherwise known as *spontaneous* desire. However, desire can be understood to also be *responsive*, whereby someone begins to engage with sexual stimuli and experiences physiological arousal, thereby sparking sexual desire (Baxter, 2022). What is clear is that how we experience and express our desire is influenced by a number of factors and comprises several distinct processes.

Defining sexual satisfaction is no more straightforward than defining desire. It is generally considered to be subjective and, like with desire, changeable across the lifespan depending on a number of circumstances (Pascoal et al., 2013). Sexual satisfaction can be simply summarized as being how one *feels* about their sex life when they consider all the positive and negative aspects of it (Lawrance & Byers, 1995). It is considered a key component of sexual health, which the World Health Organization emphasizes as a state of well-being that is more than just the absence of disease or dysfunction and instead incorporates elements of sexual pleasure, respect, self-esteem, and self-determination (World Health Organization, 2022). It can be useful to consider sexual satisfaction as comprising both individual and interpersonal themes. *Individual* themes pertaining to sexual satisfaction include arousal, pleasure, positive feelings about the sex one is having and orgasm (Pascoal et al., 2013). *Interpersonal* themes are dyadic processes, relational in nature relating to our sexual partner such as expressions of feeling and closeness, trust, mutuality, feeling we can ask for what we want, having our desires enacted, and frequency and nature of sexual activity (Pascoal et al., 2013).

Sexual desire and sexual satisfaction can be related, but that relationship may not be straightforward. For example, people can experience periods of strong sexual desire without having partnered sex; they may not have an available partner, the relationship could be unhappy, or the sex could not be the type of sex that person wants to have. In that scenario, desire is present but sexual satisfaction is likely to be low. Conversely people can experience low or no desire, but may have sex for a number of reasons, and may still report being reasonably satisfied with their sex lives (Metts et al., 1996). This can occur because there are many different drivers to having sex – people have sex to reproduce, because they are aroused, because they are bored, for validation, to feel connected, or to repair a relationship rupture, to name a few. What is common to both desire and satisfaction is that both are related to, and impacted by, our ability to communicate satisfactorily with our sexual partners.

How Sexual Communication Impacts Desire and Satisfaction

Desire

In recent years there has been a burgeoning body of research conducted to try to better understand the elusive concept of desire (Dewitte et al., 2020; Pfaus, 2009). This is likely because problems of desire, especially desire discrepancy in long term relationships, has fast become one of the leading reasons people seek out sex therapy (Ramanathan & Redelman, 2020). Most of the studies carried out in this space have concentrated on cisgendered, heterosexual relationships, which means

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there is some understanding about reported gender differences when it comes to how communicating about sex impacts one's interest in it. Ciswomen in heterosexual relationships tend to report a positive relationship between their levels of desire and how satisfied they are with the quality of the sexual communication they are having with their partner (Mallory et al., 2019). Interestingly, even the mere act of discussing sexual desire discrepancy between partners has been shown to increase levels of desire for women (Galizia et al., 2023). More specifically, ciswomen tend to report that sexual communication increases their desire to have sex and it is possible that this can be explained by the suggestion that perhaps women are more likely to experience responsive rather than spontaneous desire (Mallory et al., 2019). Many women also attribute sexual communication as the primary vehicle through which desire discrepancy difficulties are addressed and resolved (Murray et al., 2014) and in fact couples who report high levels of satisfaction with their sexual communication are less likely to perceive issues of desire discrepancy in their relationship (Mallory et al., 2019).

Sexual communication has been found to be positively associated across all domains of sexual response, including desire (Mallory et al., 2019). It has been found to protect against loss of desire in long-term relationships (Herbenick et al., 2014). Partner variables such as feeling desired, accepted, and safe, which can be directly experienced during sexual communication, have been found to have significant impact on one's interest in sex (Mallory et al., 2019), thereby inferring that an individual's ability to effectively communicate about sex and feel satisfied with the quality of one's sexual communication with their partner will likely have a direct impact on their desire to engage in sexual activity (Velten & Margraf, 2017). Numerous studies have found that communicating about the sexual relationship in general promotes closeness and desire, and, in fact, in some studies, sexual communication was found to be a necessary component of achieving desire in a long-term relationship (Galizia et al., 2023; Mallory et al., 2019.). Being able to speak openly about sexual wishes or problems has also been found to enhance desire, likely because it improves the *quality* of subsequent sexual interactions (Byers, 2011) as well as leads to feeling seen and heard (Mallory, 2022). In addition, it has been shown that a loss of interest in sex in a long-term relationship can be directly correlated with how easy the individual appraises it to communicate with their partner about sexual matters (Mallory et al., 2019). This makes sense when you consider that for people to desire sex with their partner, they need to *like* the sex they are having or at least have some other motivation to have it, such as reproduction. So, it would seem to follow that we are more likely to have the type of sex we want if we can communicate about it, and ask for it. But it is useful to understand exactly *how* this type of communication might impact one's sexual satisfaction.

Sexual Satisfaction

Being able to communicate openly with one's partner about sex has been overwhelmingly shown to enhance sexual satisfaction in a number of ways (Rehman et al., 2011). Both sexual communication in general, and sexual self-disclosure specifically, have been shown to each be uniquely related to sexual satisfaction both in terms of quality and frequency (Galizia et al., 2023; MacNeil & Byers, 1997). How the individual appraises the quality of that communication is key, and in fact sexual communication that is deemed indirect, or avoidant, has been found to be associated with lower levels of sexual satisfaction (Velten & Margraf, 2017). Heterosexual couples in long-term relationships also report that sexual communication allows for adjustments to be made to the sexual rhythm of their relationship, thus increasing satisfaction (Galizia et al., 2023). Interestingly, it has been shown that individuals who tend to sexually self-disclose more are more likely to make positive

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evaluations about their own sexual communication ability and report feeling satisfied with the quality of their sexual communication with their partner (Byers & Demmons, 1999). The relationship between issues of sexual communication and issues of sexual satisfaction appears to be bi-directional, as couples with sexual dysfunction difficulties and/or lower levels of satisfaction with their sex lives tend to be more likely to report challenges with sexual communication (Mallory et al., 2019). Being able to openly express sexual preferences or to communicate issues or concerns with a partner is associated with greater levels of sexual satisfaction (Byers 2011), whereas poorer sexual communication quality has been found to be associated with lower levels of sexual satisfaction (Velten & Margraf, 2017). Overwhelmingly it has been found that sexual communication, and in particular sexual self-disclosure, are positively associated with sexual satisfaction because the sharing and hearing of sexual desires and preferences allows couples to maximize sexual rewards and minimize sexual costs, increasing the likelihood of each person having their sexual desires fulfilled (Mallory et al., 2019).

One specific aspect of sexual satisfaction is the quality and frequency of orgasm. Experiencing orgasm has consistently been shown to be one of the most significant predictors of self-reported sexual satisfaction in ciswomen, but within heterosexual relationships is often a source of poor communication (Haning et al., 2007). Some studies show that men tend to overestimate how often their partners achieve orgasm, indicating a lack of effective communication – or perhaps even the presence of dishonest communication – among many couples (Jones et al., 2017). Women are far more likely to associate sexual communication with the expectation that they will orgasm, as they see it as an opportunity to communicate what arouses them and increases the likelihood of orgasm being achieved (Mallory et al., 2019). They are also more likely to report experiencing higher rates of orgasm frequency in direct proportion to greater amounts of effective sexual communication (Jones et al., 2017). In addition to these findings there is also evidence to suggest a correlation between erectile difficulties and reported poor sexual communication both before and during treatment (Mallory et al., 2019). Taken together, it appears that this is consistent evidence that regular and effective sexual communication between partners has the potential to elicit more frequent and satisfying orgasms, thus increasing sexual satisfaction.

Relatively little research has been conducted involving non-heterosexual populations and their experience of sexual satisfaction. However, it has been found that many of the core elements that contribute to sexual satisfaction remain relatively stable regardless of gender or relationship organization – including sexual communication (Holland, 2021). Holmberg & Blair (2009) found that in same-sex relationships, both men and women reported higher levels of sexual satisfaction and better communication about sexual needs compared to those in mixed-sex relationships. The study highlighted that same-sex couples often adopt more egalitarian roles, which can help to facilitate open discussions and mutual understanding, as a possibly contributing factor to these findings. Additionally, the research noted that preferences for specific sexual activities varied more within the same-sex groups, perhaps suggesting a broader range of sexual expression and exploration.

The implications for the relationship between sexual communication and sexual satisfaction from these findings are significant. The bidirectional relationship noted in the Mallory et al. (2019) study raises the question of causality; might it be that sexual difficulties present challenges for the individuals involved to communicate, or, could it be that those couples who struggle to speak openly about their sex lives are more likely to develop sexual difficulties? Regardless, it appears that just as

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sexual communication has been identified as a protective factor for desire in long term relationships (Herbenick et al., 2014), it can also protect sexual satisfaction. Galizia et al. (2023) explain this by suggesting that couples who report poor sexual communication may hide issues of dissatisfaction. Based on these findings, it is critical that clinicians assess how effectively and openly their clients are communicating about sex in their relationships, and screening for any difficulties or unhelpful communication patterns that may be present.

How Does Non-Sexual Communication and Relationship Satisfaction Mediate These Findings?

While we have considered the relationship between sexual communication, sexual desire and sexual satisfaction, it is useful to consider how general (non-sexual) communication and overall relationship satisfaction may also interact here, and whether they contribute uniquely to sex. Studies typically show a strong relationship between relationship satisfaction and communication in general (Montesi et al., 2010). When it comes to the nuances of communication, Zimmer (1983) found that couples who were dissatisfied with the state of their relationship were more likely to exhibit avoidance, indirect communication, higher rates of perceived partner rejection and, interestingly, lower rates of self-acceptance. However, most interestingly when difficulties of sexual function and sexual satisfaction exist, effective general communication does *not* appear to generate any meaningful improvement (MacNeil & Byers, 1997). Further, overall relationship satisfaction does appear to be an important moderator for the link between sexual communication and sexual functioning, particularly as the relationship progresses in longevity (Mallory et al., 2019).

However, recent research indicates that sexual communication is more closely related to sexual satisfaction than relationship satisfaction (Mallory, 2022). There is evidence to suggest that sexual communication is uniquely and significantly critical to achieving high rates of sexual satisfaction, far beyond that of satisfactory general communication, and in fact satisfactory sexual communication has the potential to enhance overall relationship satisfaction (Montesi et al., 2010). This is an intriguing proposition. It is possible that this can be explained by the level of vulnerability and connectedness that is required to be able to communicate openly about sex-related matters even in the most satisfying and trusting of relationships, as well as the likelihood that sexual communication can result in improvements in sexual exchanges between partners (Montesi et al., 2010). When considered in this way, it may be that sexual communication enhances satisfaction with the relationship overall *through* the positive impact on sexual desire and satisfaction for each partner involved (Montesi et al., 2010).

Within heterosexual couples, MacNeil and Byers (2005) found that in general, men are more likely to sexually self-disclose across the lifespan of a relationship. Interestingly, they also found that open sexual communication at the start of the relationship was more important in terms of relationship satisfaction for men but by contrast, sexual communication became more important to women's relationship satisfaction after the relationship passed the twelve-month mark. This may be because in the early stages of a relationship, sexual domains are more important to men in developing closeness and assessing overall relationship satisfaction, and sexual communication may be instrumental in achieving this, whereas women may appraise relationship satisfaction and its future potential through feelings of intimacy, trust and emotional closeness.

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Limitations of the findings

There are a number of limitations to note in the available research. One is the lack of longitudinal studies. It would be useful to see how the domains of communication, sexual response and relationship satisfaction evolve and change in their interrelatedness over the course of the relationship lifespan in order to better support individuals and maximize treatment gains. For example, while many couples experience a decline in sex over many years of a relationship, it is not yet fully understood whether this represents a decline in desire, the *expression* of that desire, both, or something else entirely (Metts et al., 1996).

It is critical to further understand these complexities not just across the relationship timeline, but also through the lens of relationships that fall outside of the traditional heterosexual, monogamous relationship model that much of the current research is drawn from. Recent Australian data indicates that over 20% of young people identify with a sexual orientation other than heterosexual (Power et al., 2022). Data around consensually non-monogamous couples is still very limited but best estimates are that between 1.5%-4% of couples engage in non-monogamy and notably, about 10% of adults report being interested in exploring this type of relationship structure (Fairbrother et al., 2019). There is little research available that explores how sexual communication impacts desire and sexual satisfaction across different relationship configurations, but of the research that is available, there are findings that suggest some differences. It appears that the *type* of relationship configuration can play an important role, with people who engage in swinging reporting higher levels of sexual satisfaction than those in both monogamous and polyamorous relationships (Conley et al., 2018). Additionally in a study of cisgender gay men, Gusakova et al. (2020) found that monogamous couples tend to regard their communication about sexual boundaries and agreements more positively than non-monogamous couples. Future research should explore the core components of sexual communication satisfaction and desire that might be stable across all orientations and relationship structures, incorporating insights from both quantitative and qualitative studies, and including groups that have been traditionally excluded. This would be particularly beneficial when it comes to gender diverse and transgender populations, where research is especially limited, though there are some notable exceptions such as Shepler et al. (2018). The LGBTQIA+ community face a number of unique challenges, including internalized homophobia, biphobia and societal stigma, the impact of which is not clearly understood when it comes to sexual desire and satisfaction (Holland, 2021). It is certain that clinicians will be increasingly supporting individuals with sex-related issues within a range of orientations and relationship structures, and the research is urgently needed so that they know how to best target treatment in this space to maximize outcomes for clients.

More could be learned about the nuance of what constitutes effective sexual communication through the use of observational studies, as most of the research thus far is self-report. Researchers would be wise to consider a range of creative methodologies to better understand the rich complexity of sexual communication and desire, including how these are elicited and perceived nonverbally between sexual partners (Mallory et al., 2019). Further to that, the nuances of sexual feelings and behavior, and how partnered communication impacts those, would be of great benefit in assisting clinicians to further support people with sex-related issues. This includes feelings of sexual shame, guilt and excitation, and the specifics of sexual behavior such as frequency, engagement in taboo or kink-based behavior, or

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engaging in extradyadic relations (Metts et al., 1996). Many of the studies relied on participants that were predominantly Caucasian, and located in North America; it would be valuable to observe what happens to sexual communication across a more culturally and ethnically diverse population. As noted earlier, the culture in many countries around the world is largely sex-negative; it is indeed important to observe sexual communication in more sex-positive environments, and see what could be learned.

Conclusion

The findings summarized here represent an opportunity for clinicians who support individuals with sex-related issues to take the time to thoroughly understand and assess the quality of sexual communication. Sexual communication is a strong resource for relational and sexual well-being in a relationship (Mallory, 2022) and given the unique contribution of sexual communication on both desire and sexual satisfaction, it is recommended that clinicians concentrate on upskilling their clients to be able to communicate effectively in this way, particularly when it comes to making and receiving sexual self-disclosures (MacNeil & Byers, 1997), and building capacity for comfort in these conversations (Mallory, 2022). Clinicians need to be skilled themselves at identifying this need, as couples can excel at general relationship communication but might be communicating ineffectively when it comes to sex (Jones et al., 2017). Clinicians themselves need to be trained and skilled in this area but, perhaps most importantly, be able to navigate the subject with comfort, warmth and ease; any perceived discomfort or awkwardness on the part of the clinician could be unintentionally harming, rather than helping, their client. When supporting clients where desire discrepancy or changes in desire is a presenting concern, (a complex and multifaceted issue) clinicians should explore relational dynamics such as communication, particularly sexual communication, when considering their case conceptualization (Galizia et al., 2023). When it comes to desire, it would serve clinicians well to consider the different components – drive, motivation, and wish – and what contexts may be contributing uniquely to each of these that may also be impacting communication.

It is clear that there is a complex, multi-directional relationship between communication, sexual response and intimate relationships. Each of these elements alone are complex mechanisms, and they only increase in complexity when we seek to understand their interrelatedness. What *is* clear, when considering the findings summarized here, is that effective and satisfactory sexual communication is likely to have a positive impact on how much we desire sex, how satisfied we are with the sex we are having, and how positively we appraise our relationships with partners.

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Submission Guidelines

We invite the submission of original manuscripts on any topics relevant to positive sexuality. We encourage submissions from diverse epistemological perspectives, and we welcome a wide range of quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches, as well as theoretical and conceptual essays. Alongside the work of scholars and students, we are interested in contributions from community, clinical, and other nonacademic professionals, especially contributions that help strengthen the connection between the study and practice of positive sexuality.

While the *Journal of Positive Sexuality* has a preference for shorter manuscripts (2,000–3,000 words), longer manuscripts up to 10,000 words will be considered. In preparation for submission, authors should observe the following guidelines:

- Manuscripts should have a clear sex-positive focus.
- Given the diverse readership of the journal, authors should write in a straight-forward and non-technical manner, avoiding jargon when possible. Manuscripts should be written such that they can be easily understood by scholars and professionals outside of one's own field or discipline.
- Manuscripts should be written in a style consistent with the latest edition of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA). Please include DOIs for all references when available. Instead of endnotes, please use footnotes when necessary.

New submissions should be emailed to submissions@journalofpositivesexuality.org, and should include the following Microsoft Word attachments:

- A title page, including: (1) the title of the manuscript; (2) names, institutional affiliations, and contact information for each author; (3) the word count of the main manuscript; (4) a statement certifying that the submission has not been previously published and/or is not currently under review elsewhere; (5) any pertinent information about the approval or regulatory process for human subjects research; (6) any acknowledgements that the authors would like to include for publication.
- A fully-blinded manuscript, including: (1) the title of the manuscript; (2) a brief abstract, 100 words or less; (3) the body of the manuscript; (4) references
- Tables or figures can be submitted in separate files in either Microsoft Word or Microsoft Excel format, or embedded in the manuscript. If tables or figures are being submitted separately, please provide the preferred location as a reference note within the manuscript.

Manuscripts will be reviewed initially by the Editor-in-Chief and/or Associate Editors. Appropriate manuscripts will then be sent out for double-blind peer review by at least two reviewers. While not always possible, the *Journal of Positive Sexuality* strives to return editorial decisions within two months of submission.

Editorial decisions may include acceptance, minor revisions, major revisions, or rejection. In the case of requested revisions, authors will be asked to resubmit their revised manuscripts within two months. When submitting a revised manuscript, authors will also be asked to provide a detailed response to the reviewers.

Accepted manuscripts will be copy edited, and proofs will be sent to authors for correction and approval prior to publication.

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