# Consent, Harm and Responsibility in BDSM Encounters: A Thematic Analysis of Violations and Restorative Justice Approaches

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## ABSTRACT

Recent scholarship increasingly recognizes Bondage, Discipline, Dominance, Submission, and Masochism (BDSM) as a legitimate form of erotic self-expression, shifting attention away from pathologization and toward communication, trust, negotiation and consent. However, less empirical attention has been given to situations where consent violations occur. Legal systems often fail to capture the complexity of such violations, with a significant proportion going unreported. Seven semi-structured interviews with self-identified submissive cisgender women in heterosexual BDSM dynamics were conducted, followed by reflexive thematic analysis. Four themes were identified: self-blame and the burden of personal responsibility, consent as a dynamic and situated process, the importance of intent and post-incident communication, and community support as both protective and limited. The findings suggest that harm in BDSM contexts is shaped by both boundary crossing and also how play partners and communities respond afterwards. The paper argues that restorative justice offers a useful framework for thinking about accountability and validation alongside repair in BDSM consent violations, while also cautioning against informal community processes that may reproduce disbelief, exclusion or survivor burden. Implications are discussed for sex-positive education and community accountability.

**Keywords:** *BDSM, consent, sexual violence, victimization, restorative justice, consent violation, negotiation model*

## Introduction

BDSM, an acronym referring to Bondage, Discipline, Dominance, Submission, and Masochism, encompasses a broad spectrum of consensual erotic practices that center around the exchange of power, sensation, restraint and negotiated roleplay (Simula, 2023). Recent scholarship has begun to destigmatise BDSM, recognizing it as a healthy form of sexual self-expression rather than pathological deviance (Erickson & Sagarin, 2021; Wright, 2018). Nonetheless, people who practice BDSM may anticipate or experience stigma and discrimination from the general public, healthcare professionals and the police. This can discourage disclosing of sexual practices and reduce access appropriate health and legal support when needed (Hansen-Brown & Jefferson, 2023; Herbitter et al., 2024; Ratcliff et al., 2024).

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BDSM involves an array of identities, subcultures, practices, and actions focused on dominance and submission, including psychological and emotional forms, as well as the physical (Jozifkova, 2013; Langdridge & Barker, 2007). A core aspect of BDSM is that all practices must be consented to by all individuals involved, regardless of the relationships between them (Langdridge & Barker, 2007; Simula, 2019). Unlike mainstream sexual practices, BDSM requires a heightened level of communication, negotiation and trust between participants. While BDSM practices are often framed in terms of mutual consent and trust, there is little empirical work addressing situations where this consent becomes ambiguous or where violations occur. In such cases, the legal systems of many Western nations fail to adequately recognize the nuances of BDSM consent, often treating these violations as straightforward criminal acts of assault or violence (Parchev, 2026; White, 2006). In legal discourse, BDSM-related harm is often difficult to interpret because criminal law tends to ask whether bodily harm occurred and whether consent can legally operate as a defence. In the United Kingdom, for example, consent to bodily harm for sexual gratification has been legally restricted, partly in response to concerns that the so-called ”rough sex” defence could be used to excuse or minimize serious violence (Crown Prosecution Service, 2021). This legal position is important for survivor protection, but it can also create uncertainty for BDSM community members whose consensual practices involve negotiated pain, restraint or power exchange. For those who do not seek formal justice, concern about criminalization or uncertainty about how their experience will be understood, navigating consent violations can be isolating and emotionally challenging. Victims often face secondary trauma, invalidation and self-blame, compounded by the ambiguity surrounding responsibility for the violation (Bowling et al., 2022; Freyd, 1997; Ling et al., 2022). This study explores how individuals involved in BDSM encounters handle incidents of consent violations and how personal responsibility, communication and community support can either mitigate or exacerbate the harm.

This study asks, “How do self-identified submissive cisgendered women in BDSM communities make sense of violated consent, and how do responsibility, accountability, communication and community support shape their experiences of harm and recovery?” The paper contributes to sex-positive scholarship by examining not only how BDSM consent is negotiated but also how participants interpret and respond when consent processes break down.

## BDSM, Stigma and Sex-Positive Framing

Historically, BDSM practices have been viewed through the lens of pathology, often linked with paraphilias or other forms of sexual deviance (Richters et al., 2008). Recent work in the field of psychology and sexuality studies has redefined BDSM as a legitimate form of eroticism, particularly for individuals who find emotional and sexual satisfaction through the power dynamics intrinsic to these practices (Graham et al., 2016). Research has shown that the psychological well-being of BDSM community members does not differ significantly from that of the general population (Erickson & Sagarin, 2021). In fact, Wismeijer and colleagues (2013) found compared to non-community members, those in the BDSM community score higher on extraversion, openness to experience and conscientiousness, and lower on neuroticism and agreeableness, and self-report higher subjective well-being. Heckl (2022) also found generally high life satisfaction in community members, while Strizzi et al. (2022) found high sexual and relationship satisfaction. In a small study, Klement and colleagues (2017) also found that individuals involved in the BDSM’s culture of affirmative consent and mutual respect may have

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lower negative attitudes of rape myths acceptance, victim blaming and benevolent sexism. These findings indicate that BDSM can be psychologically, emotionally and socially beneficial for those interested in it.

## Consent Models in BDSM

Legal definitions of sexual consent vary by countries and jurisdictions. In sexual relationships within mainstream practice, people have differing, poor and inadequate perceptions of consent in part due to the multiple, verbal and non-verbal ways in which consent and nonconsent are expressed and understood (Popova, 2019). However, the concept and practice of consent is what distinguishes BDSM from abuse (Ortmann & Sprott, 2013). At the core of healthy BDSM interactions is consent as an informed, enthusiastic and ongoing agreement between participants regarding the boundaries and actions permissible in a scene (Pitagora, 2013). BDSM community members generally follow one of two main consent models. The first, ‘‘Safe, Sane and Consensual’’ (SSC), asserts that all activities are conducted in a physically and emotionally safe, rational and fully consensual manner. Due to ”sanity” and ”safety” being subjective concepts dependent on personal experience and varying thresholds, some individuals have instead adopted the newer ‘‘Risk-Aware Consensual Kink’’ (RACK) model. It also prioritizes consent but moves away from rigid definitions of safety and sanity, encouraging instead participants to make informed choices by assessing potential risks and determining their own acceptable boundaries (Williams et al., 2014); however, it may not fully account for the diverse way in which play partners express themselves, understand each other and relate to one another throughout scenes. These frameworks indicate that consent in BDSM is a more fluid and complex construct than in mainstream sexual practices. Williams and colleagues (2014) further develop these debates through the ‘4Cs’ framework of caring, communication, consent and caution. This model is useful for the present study because it moves beyond consent as a discrete agreement and places it within a broader ethic of relational care. In this framing, ethically negotiated BDSM is not only about whether a participant agreed to a particular act but whether those involved communicated clearly, approached risk cautiously and maintained care for one another before, during and after the scene. The 4Cs provide a useful bridge between BDSM consent frameworks and restorative justice principles, particularly where harm occurs and participants must make sense of accountability, repair and ongoing relational or community safety.

BDSM play entails negotiating the terms of an encounter as well as a nuanced interplay of exploring and testing those boundaries. Agreed-upon limits can be pushed while still operating within the framework of consent, unless the act of deliberately crossing boundaries has been explicitly or implicitly accepted as part of the dynamic (Pitagora, 2013). Concepts such as ‘‘consensual non-consent’’ [CNC], where the submissive partner agrees in advance to certain actions that may simulate non-consent, or negotiations around ”hard” and ”soft” limits introduce a unique set of challenges for both legal and psychological interpretations of consent (Williams et al., 2014). The balance between respecting and challenging limits is a key aspect of BDSM interactions, highlighting the delicate and continuously evolving nature of consent negotiations which are underpinned by trust and understandings of risk. Community members themselves recognize the complexity of consent in BDSM, where explicit and direct consent is the norm, actively encouraged and openly discussed, but implicit, assumed consent can sometimes happen (Holt, 2016); for example, consent norms between longer-term partners can be more flexible,

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regardless of the community's standards (Tarleton et al., 2025) and consent can be mistakenly assumed in public sessions at community events (Beres & MacDonald, 2015). This means that all participants, but especially the dominant, should pay consistent attention to the "flow" of non-verbal cues across the scenes, especially if safeword free, pre-negotiated sessions take place (Beres & MacDonald, 2015, p. 424).

**Consent Violations, Harm and Ambiguous Responsibility**

Despite the existence of clear negotiation protocols and safety mechanisms within the BDSM community, such as safewords and aftercare, consent violations do occur (Beres & MacDonald, 2015; Holt, 2016, 2023). A 2015 international survey by the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom found that 29% of respondents had experienced a consent violation, with a significant number describing the violation as coerced, forced or manipulated (Wright et al., 2015). These violations often occur within established relationships, where trust is presumed and boundaries can become blurred. Wright and colleagues' 2020 follow-up survey indicated that 26% of respondents experienced consent violations and 4% suffered injuries due to them, with violations often, but not always, mimicking mainstream sexual assault, such as unwanted penetrations and nonconsensual touching, rather than being kink-related behaviors (Wright et al., 2022). This is in line with the literature suggesting that when consent violations do happen, they can take multiple forms, from dismissing pre-negotiated limits, or ignoring safewords, to nonconsensual kink behaviors and sexual assaults (Bowling et al., 2022; Dunkley & Brotto, 2019; Holt, 2016; Ling et al., 2022). Regardless of type, these violations are experienced as harm (Holt, 2016). Sheff's (2021) discussion of 'kinky sex gone wrong' highlights the practical and legal difficulty of distinguishing between consensual risk-taking, miscommunication, negligence and abuse in BDSM encounters. Participants may experience harm even where there was no straightforward intention to violate consent, while legal or institutional responses may struggle to accommodate the relational and negotiated context in which the harm occurred.

In legal discourse, however, the question of harm and responsibility in BDSM encounters is often reduced to simple binaries—whether or not harm was inflicted, and whether or not the victim "consented" to that harm (Galilee-Belfer, 2020). This fails to capture the nuanced ways in which BDSM community members navigate and interpret their experiences, especially when harm occurs unintentionally. Reporting sexual assault to official channels like police or even disclosing it to friends and family is difficult and uncommon even in mainstream sexual encounters (Ahrens et al., 2010; Henninger et al., 2020). The stigmatization of BDSM further complicates reporting consent violations, as it requires disclosures of misunderstood and misrepresented intimate practices (Bowling et al., 2022). Community members often fear legal repercussions or social judgment, rejection, misbelieving and shame, particularly in jurisdictions where BDSM activities are criminalized (Weait, 2007) or social groups not part of the BDSM community, including friends and family. Often other support and advocacy organizations do not fully understand BDSM (Haviv, 2016; Ling et al., 2022). This legal ambiguity exacerbates the marginalization of BDSM community members and often forces individuals to navigate incidents of unclear or violated consent without institutional support, relying instead on community-based resources or personal coping mechanisms.

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### Community Accountability and Restorative Justice

BDSM communities may shift consent from an individualized model toward a more collective accountability model where responsibility for upholding consent and addressing violations is shared (Barker, 2013). Structured, community-led interventions may include warnings, exclusion from events, peer support, informal mediation or legal action by organizers where a person is known to have crossed boundaries (Dunkley & Brotto, 2020; Holt, 2016). These informal systems can be protective, particularly where formal reporting feels inaccessible or unlikely to produce a meaningful response.

Restorative justice is a process which seeks to repair the harm done by bringing together the affected parties in a moderated dialogue. Although not an alternative to legal punishment, it is important because it focuses on the needs of the person harmed, acknowledgement of the harm caused, accountability from the person responsible and where appropriate, repair of individual and community relationships (Gavin et al., 2023; McGlynn et al., 2012). In this paper, restorative justice is not used to suggest that all BDSM consent violations should be handled informally, nor that community-based processes should replace criminal justice where serious violence or abuse has occurred. It does however use it as a framework for thinking about what BDSM participants may need after harm.

However, community accountability is not automatically restorative or safe. Informal systems may reproduce disbelief or protection of well-liked community members. Understanding how participants navigate these tensions is important for building better support systems within and outside BDSM communities as well as for developing sex-positive and trauma-informed responses to consent violations.

## Methodology

### Researcher Positionality

This study was approached from a critical feminist, trauma-informed and restorative justice-informed perspective. A critical feminist lens was used to attend to power, gender, agency and the social conditions under which sexual harm is interpreted. This was particularly important given the study's focus on submissive cisgender women in heterosexual BDSM dynamics where negotiated erotic power exchange may coexist with broader gendered expectations. A trauma-informed lens was used to avoid treating participants' accounts only as descriptions of discrete events and instead to consider how harm may be shaped by fear, ambiguity, betrayal, invalidation and the responses of others after the incident. This lens also informed the interview approach. Restorative justice was used as an interpretive framework for examining accountability and community response. The study does not assume that restorative justice is appropriate for all consent violations but does consider how restorative principles, such as such as reparation, restoration, reconciliation, and reintegration, may help highlight what participants needed in the aftermath of consent violations.

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## Research Design

This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis to explore how self-identified submissive cisgender women in BDSM communities made sense of violated consent in heterosexual BDSM encounters. A qualitative design was appropriate because the study aimed to examine participants' interpretations instead of measuring the prevalence of consent violations or testing predetermined hypotheses.

## Sampling and Recruitment

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling using online platforms associated with BDSM and kink communities, including FetLife and Reddit. Recruitment materials invited participants to take part if they identified as cisgender women, were aged between 22 and 40, had experience as submissives in heterosexual BDSM dynamics and had experienced an incident they understood as violated consent. Participants contacted the researcher directly and were provided with information about the study.

## Participants

Seven participants took part in the study and all identified as cisgender women and as submissive within BDSM encounters with cisgender male partners. Participants were aged between 25 and 38 and were based in different locations across the United States. Pseudonyms were used throughout to protect confidentiality. See Table 1.

Demographic data were limited to age and broad geographical location. Additional demographic variables such as race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, socioeconomic position, relationship status and length of involvement in BDSM communities were not collected.

**Table 1 –** *Participants' ages and geographical spread*

| Pseudonym | Age | Location |
|---|---|---|
| Anna | 38 | Portland, OR |
| Beth | 26 | Maine, USA |
| Carrie | 37 | Arkansas, USA |
| Danielle | 37 | Pennsylvania, USA |
| Emma | 34 | Salt Lake City, UT |
| Fiona | 34 | Gainesville, FL |

## Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting between 35 and 55 minutes. Interviews were conducted by video call, allowing participants to take part from a private and familiar setting. The interview schedule explored participants' understandings of consent, experiences of boundary crossing or consent violation, perceptions of responsibility and intent, experiences of aftercare or post-incident communication and sources of support or accountability

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within BDSM communities. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

### Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitivity of discussing sexual practices and consent violations, ethical considerations were central to the study. Participants were informed that they could pause the interview, skip questions or withdraw from the study. They were also reminded that they did not need to disclose details they found distressing or unsafe to discuss. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured and identifying details were removed or altered during transcription and reporting. Ethical approval was sought and obtained through the School of Psychology ethics board at the university.

### Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. First, transcripts were read and re-read to support familiarisation with the data, with initial notes made on recurring meanings, emotional tone and descriptions of consent, responsibility and harm. Transcripts were then coded inductively with attention to participants' own language around boundary crossing, self-blame, intent, accountability, aftercare and community response. Next, codes were reviewed and grouped into superordinate themes. These themes were refined by checking them against the full dataset to ensure that they captured both shared patterns and meaningful differences across participants' accounts and themes were named and defined in relation to the research aims. Themes were interpreted through the study's critical feminist, trauma-informed and restorative justice-informed lenses.

The analysis did not aim to quantify the prevalence of experiences but to identify patterns of meaning in how participants understood and processed consent violations. Reflexive notes were used throughout the analytic process to consider how assumptions about gender, harm, agency and accountability shaped interpretation.

## Findings

Four themes were developed: (1) carrying the burden; (2) consent in motion; (3) after the scene; and (4) community as refuge and risk. These themes capture how participants interpreted consent violations not only as boundary-crossing events but as experiences shaped by role expectations, altered states, post-incident responses and the availability or absence of community support.

### 1. Carrying the Burden - Self-Blame, Responsibility and the Submissive Role

Participants often described consent violations through a language of personal responsibility. This did not mean that they believed the dominant partner was blameless. Rather, participants frequently moved between recognizing that a boundary had been crossed and questioning whether they had done enough to prevent it. This tension was especially pronounced

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where participants had not used a safeword, had frozen, wanted to preserve the scene, or had felt pressure to be a compliant submissive.

> I blamed myself because I didn't say no or use my safeword, so I felt like I allowed it to happen. (Anna)

Anna's account shows how BDSM consent norms can become double-edged. Safewords and explicit negotiation are intended to support agency and safety, but when harm occurs the non-use of those mechanisms may be retrospectively interpreted as a personal failure. The emotional burden of the violation can shift back onto the harmed participant even where the dominant partner had failed to monitor distress or respond to non-verbal cues. This pattern of self-blame is not unique to BDSM contexts but reflects a broader societal expectation that victims are responsible for preventing harm, particularly in scenarios where communication is non-verbal.

> I didn't want to upset him or break the scene, so I stayed quiet. Later, I was angry at myself for not speaking up. (Beth)

Beth's account highlights how the desire to maintain the emotional and erotic flow of a scene can make consent withdrawal feel socially and relationally difficult. The issue was not that she lacked the language to stop the encounter but that stopping the scene carried emotional meaning, including disappointing a partner or failing to perform submission correctly. This suggests that consent violations in BDSM may be shaped by explicit communication failures and by role expectations and relational pressure. Across these accounts, self-blame appeared to operate as a form of retrospective sense making. Participants tried to locate the point at which the violation could have been prevented and often focussed on their own silence and hesitation or the fact that they did not use their safewords. This finding does not suggest that submissive participants were responsible for the harm they experienced; however, it shows how BDSM's emphasis on communication and negotiation can be internalised as an individual burden.

**2. Consent in Motion – Ambiguity and Making Meaning Afterwards**

Participants described consent as an unfolding and revisable process instead of a single agreement made before the scene. This was clear in accounts involving consensual non-consent, changing emotional responses and the retrospective realization that something felt wrong even where it had technically been negotiated. Consent was experienced as both pre-agreed and situational, requiring ongoing interpretation during and after the encounter.

> When you're in subspace, your judgment is impaired, and you might agree to things you wouldn't otherwise. Afterward, you realize that you didn't really consent in the way you thought. (Georgina)

Georgina's account demonstrates why consent in BDSM cannot be understood only through pre-scene agreement. Her description suggests a context in which judgment and communication may become altered and this places greater ethical responsibility on the dominant partner to monitor verbal and non-verbal cues, especially where the submissive partner may be less able to clearly withdraw consent.

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> We had a consensual non-consent agreement, but afterward, I realized I didn't feel right about what happened. It was hard to process because technically, I had agreed, but in the moment, it felt wrong. (Carrie)

Carrie's account illustrates the ambiguity that can arise in consensual non-consent dynamics. The fact that an act was pre-negotiated did not fully resolve how it was experienced in the moment or interpreted afterwards. This captures the gap between formal consent and embodied experience. This gap is important because participants may need space after a scene to revisit whether what occurred still felt consensual and relationally acceptable, as well as safe. These narratives indicate that consent in BDSM cannot be reduced to a simple contractual agreement; rather, it is an ongoing process of negotiation that must be revisited throughout a scene. This fluidity requires dominant partners to actively engage in consent monitoring, particularly when submissives may not be in a mental state to vocalize discomfort.

Across this theme, participants' accounts show that consent was not only something given or withheld but something interpreted over time. Pre-scene negotiation remained important, but it did not remove the need for ongoing monitoring or mid-scene check-in and post-scene reflection. This was important in scenes involving altered states, power exchange or pre-agreed forms of resistance.

**3. After the Scene - Intent, Accountability and Validation**

Participants' interpretations of harm were strongly shaped by what happened after the scene. The same boundary crossing could be understood differently depending on whether the dominant partner chose to acknowledge it or apologized; showed concern or minimized it; or became defensive. For participants, intent was often inferred retrospectively through the other person's response.

> You can usually tell if it was a mistake or on purpose based on how they respond afterward. If they take responsibility and apologize, it feels like a genuine misunderstanding. If they get defensive, it feels like they meant to hurt you. (Beth)

Beth's account shows how accountability can alter the meaning of a consent violation and how acknowledgement and apology do not erase the harm but make it easier to interpret the incident as a mistake or miscommunication rather than deliberate disregard. In this sense, post-incident communication became part of how participants assessed both the event itself and future safety.

> When I brought it up, he brushed it off and made me feel like I was overreacting. That hurt more than the actual violation. (Danielle)

Danielle's account shows the compounding effect of minimization. The original violation was harmful but the subsequent dismissal intensified the sense of betrayal. This suggests that harm in BDSM consent violations can be deepened or mitigated by whether the harmed person is believed, taken seriously and emotionally cared for afterwards. In addition to verbal

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communication, participants emphasized the importance of aftercare—a critical period following a BDSM scene where partners provide physical and emotional support.

> There was no check-in, no acknowledgment of what had happened. It made me feel like I didn't matter. (Fiona)

Fiona's account links aftercare to recognition and relational safety. The absence of a check-in communicated that her distress was not important and, in this context, aftercare would have served as a mechanism through which she could have processed the ambiguity, received validation and re-established a sense of personhood after an intense power exchange. Across participants' accounts, accountability was relational and communicative. Participants did not always frame the violation solely in terms of punishment or formal justice. They often focused on whether the other person recognized the harm or took responsibility and showed evidence that the behavior would not be repeated. This finding is central to the paper's restorative justice contribution.

**4. Community as Refuge and Risk - Support, Warning Systems and Social Consequences**

Participants described BDSM communities as important sources of education, validation and safety but also as spaces where disclosure could feel risky. Community support helped some participants reinterpret what happened and identify safer practices. At the same time, participants worried about disbelief and social consequences of naming harm, especially where the person who crossed a boundary was well-known or liked.

> Watching others helped me see what good communication looks like. It also made me feel safer when playing with new people because I knew there were others around who could step in if something went wrong. (Anna)

Anna's account shows the educational and protective value of public and community-based BDSM spaces. Observing others allowed her to learn what healthy negotiation and communication could look like in practice. Community presence also created a sense of external accountability, particularly when playing with new or unfamiliar partners. Beyond providing opportunities for observation and learning, the community also functioned as an informal accountability system. Participants described relying on word-of-mouth warnings to avoid individuals with histories of consent violations or unethical behavior. However, this system of accountability was not without its limitations.

> You don't want to be the one to call someone out, especially if they're well-liked in the community. It's hard to know if people will believe you. (Carrie)

Carrie's account shows the limits of informal accountability. Word-of-mouth warnings and social monitoring may help identify unsafe behavior but they also place a burden on harmed participants to speak up in contexts where they may not be believed. This was especially difficult where alleged violators had status or popularity within the community.

> They validated my feelings and reminded me that it wasn't my fault. Having that support made a huge difference in how I moved forward. (Fiona)

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Fiona's account demonstrates the reparative potential of peer validation. Being told that the violation was not her fault helped interrupt self-blame and supported recovery. However, this also shows the amount of responsibility being placed on informal community networks when formal services are perceived as inaccessible or poorly informed about BDSM. This theme, therefore, shows that the community can operate both as a protective resource and as a site of further vulnerability. Participants valued community knowledge, validation and informal accountability; however, these mechanisms were uneven and depended on social trust. This finding supports the need for clearer, trauma-informed and restorative approaches to community accountability.

## Discussion

This study explored how self-identified submissive cisgender women in BDSM communities made sense of instances of violated consent. The findings suggest that consent violations are experienced not only as discrete boundary crossings, but as relational events shaped by role expectations, altered states, post-scene communication and community response. Three broader contributions are developed in this section. First, the need to move from individualized responsibility toward shared accountability; secondly, the importance of understanding consent as negotiated, embodied and revisable; and finally, the potential and limits of restorative justice as a framework for accountability and repair in BDSM communities.

### From Individual Responsibility to Shared Accountability

The participants' experiences reveal that BDSM community members, particularly submissives, often carry an overwhelming sense of personal responsibility for preventing harm. This reflects broader societal narratives that place the burden of maintaining boundaries and ensuring consent on the individual (Anderson, 2005). The internalization of self-blame can prevent individuals from fully processing the harm done to them, particularly when dominant partners fail to take accountability. Research on sexual consent dynamics suggests that self-blame is more prevalent in social contexts where individuals are expected to be solely responsible for asserting and defending their boundaries (Jozkowski, 2015). This parallels findings in feminist scholarship, which critique the tendency to hold survivors accountable for their own victimization (Buchwald et al., 2005).

While BDSM emphasizes negotiation and communication, the findings suggest that these practices do not entirely protect against self-blame. Submissives may struggle to reconcile their role in relinquishing control with the responsibility they feel to advocate for their own safety. This tension is particularly pronounced given the complexities of consent in BDSM, where explicit pre-scene negotiations do not always account for evolving emotional and physical boundaries during play (Bauer, 2022; Beres, 2014; Holt, 2016). While BDSM communities have developed robust consent frameworks, these structures may still be embedded within larger cultural discourses that privilege traditional power hierarchies and gendered expectations around obtaining and providing consent. Thus, the emphasis on personal responsibility in BDSM may inadvertently reinforce patterns of self-blame rather than fostering shared accountability. This underscores the need for not only knowing how to adequately obtain consent (Dunkley & Brotto, 2019), but for dominant partners to remain vigilant in reading non-verbal cues and to engage in ongoing dialogue throughout the scene, not just during pre-scene negotiations (Beres & MacDonald, 2015).

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Recognizing shifting boundaries and ensuring that consent is an active, ongoing process rather than a static agreement is important, and thus, implementing structured check-ins during play and normalizing post-scene debriefing can help mitigate the psychological burden placed on submissives while reinforcing mutual responsibility.

The implication is not that submissive participants lack agency or should be treated as passive, but that agency in BDSM is relationally produced and depends on the active participation of all parties in maintaining consent. Shared accountability requires dominants to monitor distress, check assumptions and recognize that silence, freezing, compliance or not using a safeword should not automatically be read as ongoing consent.

**Consent as Negotiated, Embodied and Revisable**

One of the most significant findings of this study is the recognition of consent as a fluid and dynamic process. Unlike mainstream sexual interactions, where consent is often – albeit problematically – framed as a static, one-time agreement, BDSM community members must continually negotiate consent as a scene unfolds (Dunkley & Brotto, 2019; Ling et al. 2022; Pitagora, 2017). The concept of consent in BDSM, particularly in more intense or emotional scenes, requires community members to engage in a dynamic approach, where consent can be renegotiated throughout the interaction. As the interviewees discussed, consent (re)negotiations are particularly important in scenarios involving altered states of consciousness, such as subspace, where submissives may lose the ability to make clear decisions. In such cases, consent is monitored through physical cues and ongoing verbal reassurances, and held through a deep sense of mutual trust. This is in line with literature discussing the ability to provide and the inability to withdraw consent during subspace or other intense, consciousness-altering play and the higher demands that this type of play places on the individuals in terms of personal responsibility for ensuring safety and well-being (Bauer, 2022; Dunkley & Brotto, 2019; Langdridge, 2007; Pitagora, 2017; Williams et al., 2014).

The use of CNC agreements adds an additional layer of complexity. While consent in BDSM can be seen as a process generating agency for all parties (Langdridge, 2007), these dynamics can still obscure when consent is actually being given or withdrawn. Participants in this study highlighted the need for post-scene discussions to ensure that all parties felt comfortable with what transpired. These debriefing sessions are critical for resolving any misunderstandings and reinforcing trust between partners. As part of an essential aftercare, they serve not only to address physical or emotional discomfort but also to confirm that all parties feel respected and that the boundaries set before the scene were adhered to. Studies emphasize that these discussions and check-ins are vital for ensuring that both parties feel psychologically safe and understood (Holt, 2023; Mercer, 2024). Without post-scene discussions, the risk of emotional or psychological harm increases, as participants may not have the space to process their experiences fully. These aftercare practices help to reaffirm the ethical foundation of BDSM, where consent is not simply about setting limits but also about ensuring that all participants feel safe and cared for after the scene concludes.

The findings also suggest that consent may need to be understood retrospectively as well as prospectively. Pre-scene negotiation is essential but it cannot anticipate every embodied or

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emotional response that may emerge during a scene. Post-scene debriefing is therefore not secondary to consent; it is part of the wider consent ecosytem through which participants make sense of whether boundaries were respected and whether care was maintained and in deciding whether future play remains safe.

**Aftercare as Harm Mitigation and Restorative Practice**

Aftercare emerged as one of the clearest points of connection between BDSM practice and restorative justice. In participants' accounts, aftercare was not simply emotional comfort after intense play but also a space where ambiguity could be named and harm could be acknowledged with responsibility taken. Where aftercare was absent, participants experienced the violation as more harmful and where partners showed empathy, participants were more able to interpret the incident as reparable.

This finding aligns with BDSM literature that identifies aftercare as a central practice of emotional and physical support following a scene, including check-ins and attention to the needs of participants after intense play (Holt, 2016; Newmahr, 2011). Aftercare may be important where participants experience sadness or emotional vulnerability after a scene (Newmahr, 2011; Sprott & Randall, 2016). Recent work on dominants' accounts of aftercare also suggests that post-scene check-ins can help resolve conflict while maintaining interpersonal trust and support wider community cohesion when scenes are interpreted differently by those involved (Mercer, 2024). The present study extends this literature by showing how aftercare may also function as a form of harm mitigation when consent was violated.

Conversely, it was found that when dominants denied responsibility or dismissed the submissive's feelings, the violation was perceived as intentional, deepening the emotional harm. This finding points to the need for BDSM communities to emphasize the importance of post-incident communication as part of responsible play. Dominants themselves recognize aftercare as a way of letting the submissives know they are concerned with their well-being (Mercer, 2024). Therefore, ensuring that play partners feel heard and validated after a scene can prevent misunderstandings from escalating into deeper emotional trauma.

The implication is that aftercare should not be treated as optional, but a fundamental part of the wider consent ecosystem. It provides an opportunity to check whether consent remained meaningful or whether boundaries were respected and whether any harm requires acknowledgement or repair.

**The Promise and Limits of Community-Based Justice**

The BDSM community plays a critical role in both preventing harm and facilitating recovery after consent violations (Barker, 2013). Research suggests that such community-driven education helps to establish norms of ethical engagement, reinforcing informed consent as a fundamental principle (Graham et al., 2016; Tarleton et al., 2025). Moreover, mentorship and peer discussions contribute to harm reduction by equipping individuals with strategies to navigate power dynamics safely (Newmahr, 2011). Indeed, the interviewees indicated that public play events and educational workshops provide opportunities for community members to learn from

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one another and model healthy dynamics. Beyond education, the community also serves as an informal accountability system, with word-of-mouth warnings helping to protect individuals from harmful players (Holt, 2016). Previous work has highlighted the role of social networks in reinforcing the community's norms and identifying violators, effectively creating a self-regulating system (Weiss, 2011). Restorative justice offers a useful framework for interpreting these findings because the participants often described needs that extended beyond formal, legal punishment. They wanted acknowledgement, validation, explanation, changed behavior, protection from repeat harm and, in some cases, reassurance that others would be safer. These needs align with restorative principles of accountability, repair and community safety.

However, despite these protective mechanisms, the community's role in policing itself is not without limitations. Participants in this study expressed reluctance to publicly report consent violations due to fear of social backlash or disbelief. The stigma surrounding BDSM can compound these challenges, making external legal or therapeutic recourse less accessible for survivors. Therefore, the community has to self-regulate but there can be limited resources to do so (Moxie et al., 2025). This highlights the need for more formal mechanisms within BDSM communities to address consent violations, as informal systems alone may not provide sufficient protection for all participants. While community-driven accountability plays a crucial role, establishing structured reporting procedures, survivor support networks, and mediation frameworks could enhance participant safety. The implementation of clear reporting procedures alongside community-wide support, as well as education in using restorative justice principles – such as reparation, restoration, reconciliation, and reintegration (Menkel-Meadow, 2007) – for handling consent violations, would ensure that all members can seek recourse without undue risk and work to reduce the perceived and experienced harm. Thus, the findings also caution against an overly optimistic view of informal community justice. Community processes can reproduce harm where survivors are disbelieved or discouraged from seeking formal support. Restorative justice in BDSM contexts requires safeguards which includes a number of factors such as survivor choice, protection from retaliation, clear boundaries around serious violence or coercion, transparent procedures and access to external support where needed.

## Implications for Sex-Positive Education and Support

These findings have implications for sex-positive consent education and BDSM community practice alongside therapeutic or legal support. Consent education should move beyond "yes/no" models and include discussion of altered states, non-verbal cues, freezing, consensual non-consent, aftercare and post-scene accountability. BDSM communities may also benefit from clearer reporting routes, organizer training, survivor support processes and accountability models that do not rely solely on informal warnings or social exclusion. For professionals outside BDSM communities, including therapists, healthcare practitioners and legal actors, the findings reinforce the importance of responding to BDSM-related harm without stigma or assumptions that kink itself is pathological.

## Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was small and specific, comprised of only cisgender women identifying as submissives in heterosexual BDSM dynamics. As such the

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findings cannot be generalized to all BDSM community members, to trans or non-binary members, or to those in queer, switch, dominant, non-monogamous or other kink contexts. Second, participants were recruited through online BDSM community spaces, meaning the study may overrepresent individuals with some degree of community connection and underrepresent those who practise BDSM privately or outside organized kink networks. Third, the study relied on retrospective accounts of consent violations, which are shaped by many features, including but not limited to, memory accuracy or participants' later interpretations. Fourth, demographic data beyond age and location were limited, restricting any analysis of how race, sexuality, disability, class or relationship status may shape experiences. Lastly, while restorative justice provides a useful interpretive framework, the study did not evaluate formal restorative justice processes. Future research should examine how structured accountability, mediation or survivor-led restorative processes operate in BDSM communities.

## Conclusion

This study contributes to emerging scholarship on consent, harm and accountability in BDSM contexts by foregrounding the experiences of self-identified submissive cisgender women who had experienced violated consent. The findings show that the harm of a consent violation is shaped not only by the boundary crossing itself but also by how responsibility is interpreted and whether the harmed person is validated and whether partners or communities respond with accountability and care. Participants' accounts highlight the double-edged nature of BDSM consent cultures and, while negotiation, safewords, aftercare and community norms can support safety, they may also contribute to self-blame when responsibility is placed too heavily on the submissive partner.

The paper argues for a shift from individualized models of consent toward shared accountability and ongoing consent monitoring. Restorative justice offers a useful framework for thinking about acknowledgement, repair and community safety but only where survivor choice, safeguards and accountability are central. Future research should examine more diverse BDSM communities and evaluate how formal and informal accountability processes can respond to consent violations without reproducing stigma, disbelief or further harm.

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