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Characteristics of a Sex-Positive Attitude: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

The term *sex positivity* is present in recent years in academia, in activism, and in media, and *sex-positive* is used by individuals for self-description – but the meaning varies and can even be contradictory. This research aims to understand sex positivity from an individual's perspective as an attitude, considering different contexts of the current discourse. In this article, I apply a qualitative research approach through interviewing experts working on sex positivity. The results of a focused analysis demonstrate that a sex-positive attitude can be operationalized according to twelve characteristics. Based on this, sex positivity can become comprehensible and applicable to individual societal actors and contribute to further research on the measurability of sex positivity.

Keywords: *sex-positive attitude, sex positivity, positive sexuality, expert interviews, focused analysis*

Introduction

In past decades, using the terms *sex-positive* or *sex positivity* or also *positive sexuality* has increased in academia, in activism, in media, and by individuals – but depending on who is using them, the meaning varies and can cause misunderstandings (Langer, 2025). The current discussion of sex positivity is cross-disciplinary and neither led by one discipline nor by a certain or single aspect. Moreover, it includes critical and partly contradictory perspectives from scientists to activists. Similarly, the understanding of sex positivity is distinguished by a definitional variance, which has shown shifts in recent years (Langer, 2026). In addition to considering the perspective or context for defining sex positivity (Ivanski & Kohut, 2017; Jones, 2022; Queen & Comella, 2008), I argue elsewhere (Langer, 2026) that it is important to recognize that the discourse itself can be structured in three distinct contexts: an institutional context, a participatory context, and a private context, as shown within publications that include the keyword *sex-positive* and related terms. Since this discussion on sex positivity is primarily conducted in English and includes contributions from many voices, I find this structure beneficial. First, it highlights the construct of *sex positivity* in its overall complexity as well as within each specific context. Second, it provides insight into the extent that sex positivity has permeated public life, sexual culture, and private spheres. Third, assuming that sex positivity is desirable, it underscores the challenges individuals may face in comprehending the term *sex-positive*. Furthermore, these contexts connect to an individual's perspective of encountering various direct as well as indirect implications through sex positivity.

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Institutional Context

The institutional context applies on an institutional level that frames the public life and the perception of sexuality within societies, including medical or educational institutions, science and research, or political developments. The World Health Organization's current definition of sexual health is influential for understanding sex positivity; however, the described connection to sex positivity varies (Langer, 2026). Many scholars assert that a diversity of definitions is healthy and productive (Klein, 2021; Williams et al., 2015), although other scholars argue that science and research would benefit from a clear definition when applying sex positivity as an approach (Ivanski & Kohut, 2017; Watjen, 2020). For integrating sex positivity in science and research the *positive sexuality framework* (Williams et al., 2015) is widely but not solely used. However, under this term a conceptual diversity evolves, and additionally frequently used terms are *sex-positive framework* (Burnes et al., 2017; Fava & Fortenberry, 2021; Harden, 2014; Kimmes et al., 2015) or *sex-positive approach* (Baggett et al., 2017; Burnes et al., 2017; Cruz et al., 2017; Fava & Fortenberry, 2021) – alongside *sex positivity* and *sex-positive*. That certainly can cause confusion and lead to misunderstandings. Furthermore, the terms *positive sexuality* and *sex positivity* are often used synonymously, however Williams and Prior (2025) argue that the first is broader, more inclusive and less likely to be reduced to good sex.

In recent years, sex positivity has been incorporated into various research disciplines to enhance understanding, foster awareness, and address issues related to sexuality in various aspects of life, including health care (Nimbi et al., 2021), social work (Williams et al., 2016), multicultural education (Burnes, 2017), and psychology (Baggett et al., 2017; Burnes et al., 2017; Fava & Fortenberry, 2021). Sex positivity is also discussed in scientific literature concerning politics (Fahs, 2014; Mintz, 2019). However, critics argue that current discussions on sex positivity often overlook issues of multiple discrimination, and that future research should incorporate an intersectional approach (Alexander, 2019; Crowell et al., 2017).

Participatory Context

The participatory context describes a public, partly commercialized togetherness shaped by people's involvement and interactions. This occurs in various spaces online and offline, such as (online) communities, educational events, or kinky play parties, and is associated with the term *sex-positive*. Predominantly popular and activistic texts emphasize two partially overlapping aspects: challenging traditional sexual morals and critiquing sexuality from political and power perspectives. This is seen in different understandings of the terms *sex-positive* and *sex-negative*, and the additional use of *sex-critical*.

Within the participatory context sex positivity is discussed as a multifaceted movement (Gabosch & Shub, 2019; Neff, 2020), and also identified both as a sex-positive mainstream and as a sex-positive subculture, owing to increasing normalization associated with sex positivity (Barker & Hancock, 2017, 2019; Hanson, 2021). Barker and Hancock (2019) argue that the sex-positive mainstream focuses more on pleasure and great sex, and less whether good sex is based on consent. From a sex-critical perspective, which seeks to move beyond the binary of positive and negative, critics note the absence of critical analysis concerning power dynamics, such as determining who is included or excluded (Downing, 2012; Fabello, 2014; Stryker, 2013). The sex-positive

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subculture overlaps with a feminist perspective, as sex positivity includes a political aspect (Hanson, 2021). Furthermore, a feminist perspective on sex positivity within this context connects to deep feminist discourse and considers the terms *sex-positive* and *sex-negative* as contradictory, yet both progressive – challenging to overcome *sexmoralism* and *compulsory sexuality* (Millbank, 2012). In this regard, sex negativity aims to untie the knot of sex, power and violence tied under male dominance, critiquing sexuality on a political basis (Millbank, 2012). Otherwise, *sex-negative* refers to normative or moral behavior, and an understanding of sexuality reduced to reproductive functions (Mosher, 2017; Williams et al., 2015). That also outlines *sexmoralism*, the outdated version of *compulsory sexuality* (Millbank, 2012).

Sex positivity encompasses an array of themes, including not only pleasure, consent and relationships, but also eco sexuality, spirituality, kink, sex work, pornography, gender, disability, and education (Gabosch & Shub, 2019). While increasingly visible and used in various ways, the term *sex-positive* fosters breaking down norms. Nevertheless, a careless use also can cause misunderstandings. For example, one may understand the *positive* in *sex-positive* as mandatory to have good sex and continuously optimize one's own sexuality. However, *positive*, in terms of good, can hardly represent a universal quality (Downing, 2012). Furthermore, it is less about sexual performance, but rather "working towards a more positive relationship with sex" (Glickman, 2000).

Private Context

The private context centers on the individual, with the term *sex-positive* functioning as a self-description for a positive attitude toward sexuality. Though the institutional as well as participatory contexts contribute to individual development, such a process also requires reflecting on one's sexuality, which certainly can be challenging if sexuality is present in all forms from pleasure to proscription; thus individual support can be helpful. Accordingly, the literature pays particular attention to professionals reflecting on their own attitude to provide unbiased support for individuals (Watjen, 2020), as well as to enable communicating about sexuality and intimacy (Dodd, 2019). A language is needed to meet diverse social challenges (Glickman, 2000; Williams et al., 2013) – such as conflicts in a partnership or more broadly knowing your sexual rights. Moreover, Glickman (2019) points out that sex positivity is more a set of principles than rules. This highlights the importance of ensuring that, in challenging existing norms, new norms are not inadvertently constructed due to misunderstandings or a failure to distinguish between oneself and others – specifically, between moral principles and moralizing (Srinivasan, 2022).

Sex Positivity through an Individual's Perspective

However, for an interested as well as questioning individual, the current discourse on sex positivity may cause challenges through various direct as well as indirect implications. With the definition of sexual health by the World Health Organization, the foundation for societal development in a sex-positive sense is institutionalized. This offers certainty and reliability for entitling further progression. With incorporating sex positivity in various research disciplines, individuals can and hopefully will encounter an increasingly changing attitude towards sexuality in professional contexts. At the same time, participating in the sexual cultural togetherness can be its own challenge with sex positivity opening a continuum: on the one end, it could tempt

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individuals to produce a new "normal" in the name of simple solutions, without critically reflecting on what is their own. On the other end, it could support the further dismantling of traditional sexual morals and the promotion of critical perspectives on sexuality. Moreover, the private sphere focuses on individual development by promoting an individual understanding of sexuality, rather than comparing oneself with a societal "normal" or "abnormal."

Noteworthily in the current discussion, sex positivity is often contrasted with established social morals and generally accepted norms in western societies regarding relationships as well as sexual preferences (Alexander, 2019; Burnes et al., 2017; Ellison & Papps, 2020; Neff, 2020). Additionally, in the media, sex positivity is often connected to open relationships or kinky parties as well as sexual practices. This can cause hesitance, for example, by monogamous, heterosexual individuals to engage with sex positivity – even though sex positivity challenges a view of normality versus pathology and allows one to escape this false dichotomy (Burnes et al., 2017). With sex positivity, stereotypes about sexual orientation and gender identity are broken down, and awareness is raised about multiple types of discrimination, exclusion, and rejection (Alexander, 2019; Neff, 2020). Regarding the body with sex positivity, the focus shifts from optimization and performance to self-determination, recognizing one's own body, and integrating mind and body (Neff, 2020). Similarly, a holistic view and mindful connection with oneself can enhance confidence in one's sexuality and facilitate the transition from theoretical knowledge to practical experience, ultimately fostering connections with others. Embodiment serves as a key aspect for reorienting one's sexuality (Ellison & Papps, 2020). Furthermore, as a practical experience, sex positivity is described in various ways, often regarding kink or consensual non-monogamy. These practices emphasize competencies such as consent, respect, and open and honest communication in contrast to shame, insecurities, or condemnation based on societal norms (Alexander, 2019; Burnes et al., 2017). Yet it is important to highlight that sex positivity is not about eliminating monogamy or heterosexuality but instead critically examining them (Mense, 2021). This allows for consensual sexualities and relationships to be separated from norms and better understood as a spectrum. Moreover, Glickman (2019), Mense (2021), Neff (2020), and Roidinger and Zuschnig (2021) argue that sex positivity is an attitude.

In the literature I found initial suggestions relating to how a sex-positive attitude could be described, as well as factors that may promote such an attitude (Mense, 2021; Murray et al., 2017; Roidinger & Zuschnig, 2021). First, the philosopher Mense (2021, pp. 28–29) articulates: "Sex-positivity is an attitude that addresses the question of how people want to live with each other, how they can connect and stay connected and how they can enjoy themselves individually as well as in each other's company. In this sense, *integrated sex-positivity* [emphasis in original] addresses fundamental communal principles of living in a society." In her article, she engages with deregulated sex-positive spaces, defined as semi-public communal meeting spaces allowing sexual interaction (Mense, 2021). She argues that these spaces are part of sex-positive culture as well as activism and, as such, address fundamental aspects of social life, particularly shaping interpersonal encounters. She succinctly outlines the aspects in an unfinished how-to list, which begins with "how to show and communicate affection, how to relate to yourself and to your body, how to relate to other people and their bodies, how to find an appropriate proximity […]" (Mense, 2021, p. 42). Reflecting those questions may be supportive to developing a sex-positive attitude. Fittingly, Mense (2021, p. 42) concludes: "The crucial point […] is that sex-positive culture needs to be good in practice and not only in theory." Second, the sexual therapists Roidinger and Zuschnig

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(2021) conclude their popular German book on sex positivity with 16 criteria for a sex-positive intimate relationship. For example, these begin with “self-responsibility and sexual learning” and “talking about sexuality” followed by “seeking consent” then “attention: presence and connection” and all being explained shortly (Roidinger & Zuschnig, 2021, pp. 189–193). With these criteria, they complete their historical contextualization of sex positivity, their engagement with the sex-positive movement and scene, as well as the distinctions they draw from norms structured around preferences and non-monogamous relationships. The authors emphasize that not all criteria are equally important for all people at all times, as life circumstances and priorities may change (Roidinger & Zuschnig, 2021). Since a sex-positive relationship emerges from at least two individuals, the 16 criteria may also be understood as characteristics of a sex-positive attitude. Remarkably, they are neither about specific forms of relationships nor about sexual preferences. Third, the scientists Murray, Pope and Willis (2017) present a list of factors that support developing a positive attitude toward sexuality. Based on an extensive literature review, they identified contextual influences for better understanding sexuality and outlined them with the *Contextualized Sexuality Model*. They conclude with introducing *positive sexuality* as a new paradigm for sexual counseling, including the factors. The list counts 25 factors (Murray et al., 2017, pp. 273–285); they are connected to the individual through “problem-solving and decision-making”, “receptive to pleasure” or “self-awareness” but not solely. Other factors are more relevant on an institutional level such as “access to quality sexuality education” or “public policies that promote positive sexuality.” The variance of the factors underscores not only the complexity but also the contexts of sex positivity. Thus, certain factors may be understood as characteristics of a sex-positive attitude. However, a sex-positive attitude, which shapes an individual’s thoughts and behavior, has not yet been systematically investigated.

Research Purpose and Significance

This study explores sex positivity from an individual’s perspective as an attitude. It was led by the research question: is a differentiated understanding of a sex-positive attitude, at least with a common core, within the context of the current discourse and the outlined theoretical contexts of sex positivity possible? Thus, my research objective was, if possible, to identify characteristics that define a sex-positive attitude. Since a qualitative approach was applied, the decision was made to interview individuals who contribute professionally to the development of sex positivity.

The operationalization of a sex-positive attitude is significant for understanding sex positivity as a genuinely comprehensible “set of principles” (Glickman, 2019, p. 23). This is followed by contributing to further research on the measurability of sex positivity. Although various scales on sexuality exist, they are often based on outdated sexual morals, lack important elements of a contemporary understanding, or focus only on single aspects of sex positivity (Belous & Schulz, 2022; Casu, 2018; Hangen & Rogge, 2021; Maes et al., 2022).

In the last few years, three measures for sex positivity and positive sexuality have been published. First, with the *Positive Sexuality in Adolescence Scale* (PSAS), the multifaceted nature of positive sexuality among adolescents can be assessed (Maes et al., 2022). Second, the *Sex Positivity Inventory for Counselors* (SPI-C) has been developed to measure sex positivity among counselors to improve counseling competency (Burks, 2022). Third, the *Sex Positivity Scale* (SPS)

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evaluates a person's level of sex positivity (Belous & Schulz, 2022). Recently, the SPS has first been used in a population of doctoral psychology trainees and found to require further validation in diverse populations and contexts (Aigen, 2025). Furthermore, as noted by Aigen (2025) regarding research in psychology, there still is a lack of measures that explore sex positivity empirically. Based on a qualitative methodology, the results of this study could provide a different starting point compared to a thorough literature review as conducted for SPS (Belous & Schulz, 2022). Nevertheless, Belous and Schulz (2022, p. 2) articulate importantly about measuring how sex-positive a person is that "as researchers we are walking a thin line between judging what is sex positive, and what is not."

Methods

This study utilized a qualitative methodology, designed based on the introduced theoretical contexts of sex positivity. This approach aimed first to obtain broad interpretive insights, and second to abstract findings from specific instances for theory generation (Akremi, 2019; Bogner et al., 2014). Therefore, the chosen participants were experts as their knowledge can be seen as relevant and thus guiding for others (Bogner et al., 2014). Furthermore, the expert's knowledge can be detached and understood in a general sense (Helfferich, 2019).

For this purpose, I identified experts for each of the theoretical contexts. The experts are present in the literature, or practically involved in the sex-positive scene, or visibly integrate sex positivity in their work, and thus contribute to the development of sex positivity. I ranked them by attributed expertise and contacted one after the other via e-mail until each context was covered by two experts. For the institutional context, I interviewed Emily Prior and DJ Williams, both from the United States and with a background in research who significantly contribute to the theoretical development of sex positivity. For the participatory context, I interviewed Reinhard Gaida from Austria who organizes sex-positive spaces for education and exploration, and Eva Hanson from Germany who is part of a project to promote sexuality as an important part of the societal togetherness and writes for the associated blog. For the private context, I interviewed Beatrix Roidinger from Austria and Daniel Vonwil from Germany who are both sexual therapists and hold up a sex-positive perspective in their work. Regarding self-identification with sex-positivity, five experts identified as sex-positive, and one hesitated to use labels.

For the interviews, I applied a semi-structured, non-individualized approach with open and non-directive questions. First, I asked about the individual relation to sex positivity aiming to get into the topic, and to understand their progress into experts in depth. Second, I focused on the general understanding of *attitude* as a central term for the study. Third, I covered *sex-positive attitude* with various questions to capture aspects that characterize it as well as how a sex-positive attitude evolves and is influenced. I started this section with the question: "What characterizes a sex-positive person? Or in other words: How would you recognize a sex-positive attitude in a person?" followed by more specific questions, such as: "Which aspects of interpersonal relationships reflect a sex-positive attitude?" to obtain further details and request substantiation. Fourth, I focused on critically discussed aspects in the discourse to address their potential relevance for a sex-positive attitude. Fifth, I asked to investigate the future to determine how the experts would recognize the success of their work as well as to presume context-specific influences. Therefore, I asked: "How would a society be recognizable that is predominantly characterized by

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people with sex-positive attitudes? How would interpersonal relationships be characterized?" This procedure created an open space for the experts to unfold their knowledge, interpretations, and attitudes concerning the research objective from a variety of angles. Previously, I acknowledged my dual role as both co-expert and accomplice to intentionally separate my personal and professional perspectives, although the latter became apparent during the interviews (Bogner et al., 2014). The interviews, two in English and four in German, were recorded and verbatim transcribed without translation. For this article, however, German quotes have been translated into English. Quotations within this article have been lightly edited for grammar and clarity.

For the analysis of the interview transcripts, I applied Rädiker and Kuckartz's (2020) focused analysis which is designed for semi-structured interviews, inspired by thematic analysis as well as grounded theory, and includes different aspects of a quantitative analysis. After conducting the interviews and exploring the transcripts for the first time, I developed a category system from the interview guideline to structure the data in segments, at least of sense, and then systematically differentiated each category in sub-categories, and if necessary sub-sub-categories. That led to operationalizing characteristics of a sex-positive attitude. The systematic process required both a conscious withdrawal from my own experiences and a repeated focus on the research objective while exploring the data.

Results

Twelve characteristics emerged from the interviews that define a sex-positive attitude, reflecting a broadly shared understanding of sex positivity among the experts across the institutional, the participatory, and the private contexts. Even though some differences in their perspectives emerged, all were grounded in a common understanding of attitude. Overall, the interviewees indicated that attitude is a set of values and experiences that guide individual behavior and may evolve over the course of a lifetime, as it is shaped by numerous factors. Equally, a sex-positive attitude is subject to factors that promote or hinder its development. Factors such as family, social environment, culture, education, knowledge, challenges in social interactions, and the creation as well as construction of spaces all help contextualize a sex-positive attitude in society (Langer, 2024).

As I will detail below, a synthesis from these interviews emerged that begins with understanding that a sex-positive attitude is characterized by viewing sexuality as an individual experience, approaching differences with curiosity through being open, interested, and accepting of others and oneself (*openness & acceptance*). It involves tolerating and respecting others' experiences while keeping personal boundaries (*tolerance & respect*). It emphasizes taking responsibility for one's own sexuality (*responsibility*) and accepting both personal and others' needs without perceiving differences as obstacles (*acceptance of needs*). It includes discussing sexuality and talking about desires as well as boundaries honestly (*communication*), with consent as a necessary element (*consent*). Whether alone or with others, it underlines exploring sexuality in a conscious manner (*exploration*) and incorporating lifelong learning (*continued development*). It encourages understanding and empathy toward differences and the emotions they may evoke (*peacemaking*). It further involves recognizing others holistically (*humanizing*), as well as embracing oneself fully – including sexuality as a component of authentic selfhood (*authenticity*). Ultimately, it affirms acknowledging sexuality as self-determined for oneself and others (*recognition of sexual self-determination*). In the sections that follow, I describe and illustrate each

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of the twelve characteristics in more detail and connect them to the previously mentioned first available suggestions for a sex-positive attitude.

Openness & Acceptance

The characteristic *openness & acceptance* refers to being open and accepting both of others and oneself, conceptualized as an active process, an authentic interest, and the willingness to communicate. Sexuality is perceived as an individual experience, yet differences arouse curiosity. It is precisely described through, first, the adjective *diverse* which focuses on the diversity of sexualities. For example, Williams laid out: "by acceptance of lots of diverse behaviors, by not stigmatizing people, by recognizing equality and equity in people's preferences and experiences." Thereby diversity incorporates positive perspectives as well as challenges, such as differences: "Be open, tolerant, interested. Again, without dogma, [...] but in terms of attitude. Non-sex-positive people always shut down as soon as there's a difference [...]. And that has an effect on the mood, on the openness" (Roidinger). Second, is the adjective *affirmative*, which describes a positive, affirmative approach to sexuality. Rather than perceiving sexuality and sexual variety as compulsory, sexuality is associated with joy, pleasure and enjoyment and a "fundamentally positive attitude towards sexuality" (Vonwil). Third, is the adjective *attentive*, which frames the attention for each other. Hanson articulated: "There is much more interest in the other person; people don't talk for the sake of talking, but rather they talk to each other to get in touch and to know each other; there is a great curiosity about what kind of person you are." In distinction the negative is about condemnation, exclusion or reflexive rejection. Fourth, the adjective *present*, which stands for the immediacy of sexuality and relating uncontrollability. It is about accepting sexuality as a part of life but not overrating it and placing it "somehow on a huge pedestal" (Hanson), as well as being in the present moment by "letting go of goals or purposes or results" (Hanson) and allowing it to be something "joyful, pleasurable" (Vonwil). And fifth, is the adjective *individual*, which underlines the uniqueness of sexualities. For example, Gaida formulated: "meaning that one can truly accept that almost every person's sexuality is different or that almost every person has different preferences, and to understand and accept that." A comparison with the literature also shows a connection to encountering sexual self-disclosure with openness and respect, reflected in individuals' ability to disclose and discuss openly with each other (Murray et al., 2017). Likewise, it is important to understand differences in a relationship as resource and chance instead of an obstacle (Roidinger & Zuschnig, 2021).

Tolerance & Respect

The characteristic *tolerance & respect* describes tolerating and respecting others' sexual experiences. In contrast to *openness & acceptance*, it is conceptualized as a passive process that entails an awareness for experiences differing from one's own without active engagement. For example, Vonwil framed it as "openness to difference, in that sense a kind of tolerance" and Gaida expressed it as "simply the understanding that not all people are the same." More specifically, Prior underlined it with "being willing to take a step back, being willing to recognize that your experience isn't the only experience going on," but likewise she was explicit that "I don't have to like it, I don't have to engage in it. […] I think the core of it is being very accepting with other people and as long as no one's doing anything that's not consensual, as long as no one's action is harming others without consent let it happen." Thus, it means to overcome a general normality and

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to be supportive through tolerating and respecting the other, while still recognizing one's own limits. Nevertheless, Roidinger pointed out that tolerance "isn't something we are born with." Additionally in the literature, *tolerance & respect* extend beyond sexual experiences and apply to respecting one another more broadly (Murray et al., 2017).

Responsibility

The characteristic *responsibility* denotes feeling responsible for one's own sexuality. For example, Roidinger shared her belief deriving from therapeutic practice that "relationships improve when people take more responsibility for their feelings and their being. I see many couples who want their partner to do what they want and feel what they want. And that, of course, rarely works." Thus, *responsibility* involves being aware of one's own emotions or emotional pain points and acting carefully as well as consciously. In practice, that means "confronting the so-called triggers, traumas, the things that hurt, the things you keep stumbling over" (Roidinger) as well as a responsible use of mind-altering substances because people "might do things they wouldn't do sober" (Gaida). This includes the willingness to question and reflect on emotions as well as behavior. Therefore, Prior spoke about a healthy curiosity: "you need to be willing to ask questions, you need to be willing to question things, you need to be able to wonder why and how stuff happens." For *responsibility* the ability to reflect is fundamental for a sex-positive togetherness and "this presupposes that one is willing to reflect in the first place, that one says that this is something good […] I do not assume that this is always self-evident for everyone" (Roidinger). Similarly in the literature, *responsibility* is about not expecting others to be responsible for one's well-being and instead be self-responsible (Roidinger & Zuschnig, 2021).

Acceptance of Needs

The characteristic *acceptance of needs* refers to being aware of and accepting both one's own and the needs of others. In an intrapersonal sense, this involves recognizing that some needs may not be preferred while still accepting their existence, remaining open for change, and creating space for unpreferred needs that will eventually require attention. For example, Vonwil emphasized: "to deal with the fact that needs have a place regardless of whether I like them or not," and Gaida further explained that a need which is "always repressed and, above all, not lived out, will eventually surface. The unlived needs react and then govern you from the shadows. That's why I believe it's so important to confront sexuality." In an interpersonal sense, the *acceptance of needs* entails maintaining openness toward differing longings and not perceiving them as obstacles. For the future, Prior described dealing with both perspectives in practical terms: "I hope what we see again are people being more accepting of others, chilling out, just being a little bit more relaxed, recognizing that one person's choice is not another person's have to. What works for me doesn't have to work for you. And what works for you doesn't have to be dictated to me as what should work for me." Furthermore and deriving from the literature, self-awareness can help to understand one's own responses to sexual experiences with others (Murray et al., 2017).

Communication

The characteristic *communication* denotes communicating verbally and nonverbally about sexuality, expressing one's own needs and limits in an open and honest way. At least one should

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be “clear as best as possible, as honest as possible” (Prior), or put slightly differently to be “able to simply name things as they are, to describe again what you might have just done during sex with your partner, what might not have worked so well, or what felt really good. In short, being able to talk about many aspects of the experience” (Vonwil). The aspect of nonverbal communication refers to more physical interacting. For example, in a playfight: “People come to fight in order to get to know each other, not to make contact through words or talking, but through physicality” (Gaida). It also emerges that communication contributes to relationships in general and has a connecting and relieving effect. For example, when “sex-positive couples have developed a language for themselves to talk about their sexuality, about their relationship, and not just when they are in crisis, they simply have established a conversation and feedback culture” (Roidinger). Furthermore, the literature emphasizes that communication about sexuality presupposes basic communication skills (Murray et al., 2017).

Consent

The characteristic *consent* represents the willingness to discover, discuss and negotiate sexual interaction, with the corresponding requirement to be able to do so. Vonwil emphasized the importance of consent for sexual interactions: “everything that happens sexually has to be consensual for me, and that’s the bottleneck.” Further described by Gaida as “establishing a consent culture.” In a more practical sense, Prior stressed that “in fact, I think it means [to have] more clear boundaries that can be discussed and negotiated and figured out.” A related aspect is the capability to deal with a “no.” Gaida articulated: “I believe that you also need the ability to deal with rejection, meaning you need the ability to accept a ‘no’ […] if you can’t do that, then you’re lost, then there’s no consent. That’s really important to be able to do that or to learn to do that.” Additionally mentioned in the literature are aspects such as how to communicate boundaries firmly or how to reject someone with respect (Mense, 2021). Yet fundamental is the ability to consent at all, meaning that people “are in control of their senses” (Gaida). Moreover, consent reaches beyond sexuality: “trying to be aware of consent in no matter what the context is. It’s like consent isn’t only just for sex consent is for everything” (Prior).

Exploration

The characteristic *exploration* entails exploring sexuality with consciousness by oneself, or together with others. Concerning the self, it is associated with aspects such as “curiosity, courage, a spirit of experimentation, and playfulness” (Roidinger) as well as the skills to reflect, communicate, and negotiate. More regarding together with others, exploration is seen in interactions described by “where people sometimes try new things and also allow themselves to experience joy and fun in sexuality” (Vonwil). Underlying is an understanding of sexuality as “independent action, as an independent hobby” (Hanson) as well as “mere pleasure or artistic activity” (Hanson), rather than sexuality being functionally involved in a relationship. Furthermore in the literature, *exploration* focuses on exploring sexuality together with others, primarily in intimate relationships (Murray et al., 2017; Roidinger & Zuschnig, 2021).

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Continued Development

The characteristic *continued development* refers to the willingness and the interest to develop one's own sexuality, thereby also influencing one's life. Slightly differently in the literature, development relates to figuring out answers to diverse how-to-questions concerning the personal and the social life (Mense, 2021). On the one hand, development is inherent to sexuality as "you can't avoid learning something about yourself in sexual encounters" (Hanson) and is further outlined by Roidinger: "this is where growth happens […] because I simply don't assume something fixed, [something] that has to be a certain way because it's always been that way." On the other hand, development is a decision, such as accepting sexual education or working on "strength and benefits" (Williams). Thereby it is not necessarily about solving problems but a better self-understanding and a "certain degree of flexibility for change" (Gaida). This involves being aware that sexuality is "something we can learn, something we can also change throughout our lives" (Vonwil) and thus being open to new information. In practice, it means the "openness to research even if it's on a basic level, like I want to look into that […] before I decide how I feel about [it]. I want information rather than just a gut reaction" (Prior). Further in the literature, *continued development* means searching proactively for accurate (sexual health) information (Murray et al., 2017).

Peacemaking

The characteristic *peacemaking* represents building human connections through understanding and empathy, even if fear is involved as an emotional reaction to individual as well as societal change. Williams underlined the relevance of *peacemaking*: "we have to address people's fears and build human connections that is a really important piece in all of this." Although *peacemaking* is challenging, it strengthens the ability to deal with differences, as Vonwil pointed out for the future: "through a healthy approach to differences […] significantly more understanding and empathy than currently exists in a rather divided and sometimes harsh world." This also goes hand in hand with "welcoming differences and not panicking. I believe this is also a very important issue that really needs to be practiced" (Roidinger). For example, revealing one's own sexuality makes one vulnerable, even if sexuality is a self-evident option in the social togetherness and interactions are benevolent and prudent. In this sense, *peacemaking* opens a space where sexuality can be present as "impressive aspect of life […] because you have a kind of recognition for how raw and vulnerable people can be" (Hanson). Furthermore, in the literature *peacemaking* can be connected to solving conflicts as a community while respecting personal space (Mense, 2021).

Humanizing

The characteristic *humanizing* signifies seeing others holistically, including everything that relates to being human. Moreover, it involves understanding others as fellow human beings instead of constructing them as avatars. In this sense, sexual activities are about ethical behavior and not general normality. "Humanizing people probably focuses more on ethical behavior of sexuality, in what people are doing is supposed to be what's normal, or considered to be not normal," explained Williams. Prior explicated: "it's harder to humanize those who are not like you and don't think the way you think and don't believe what you believe." Behavior-wise it is about describing instead of rating others. As Roidinger explained: "I simply say on a very basic, descriptive level,

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‘okay, the man likes to wear dresses,’” instead of immediately interpreting such behavior through a pathologizing lens. Similarly, it is about “awareness” for human beauty and devotion (Hanson). Also, drawing on the literature, *humanizing* can be associated with engagement with diverse emotional experiences within and among people (Mense, 2021).

Authenticity

The characteristic *authenticity* entails viewing oneself holistically and recognizing sexuality as part of being an authentic human, as well as a self-evident aspect of interaction. This includes being aware that not all sexual experiences are pleasant and that failing is possible. For example, Roidinger mentioned “the courage to fail” and explained: “So, that things don’t always work out when you do something [...] that failure is simply considered from the outset and that one is benevolent and generous in this regard.” Especially failing is further emphasized in the literature, as, first, freeing oneself from worrying about negative outcomes of sexual activities (Murray et al., 2017), and, second, figuring out how to deal with failure and error (Mense, 2021). Being authentic is accentuated by “whether it’s about sex or another issue, just trying to be honest, trying to be clear, trying to take other people into consideration” (Prior). And besides the cognitive and emotional aspects one should also be aware of one’s body and in particular nudity as part of the authentic self: “for this nakedness, which is always completely ignored in normal life, so to speak, that we carry around a completely different part of being human, which we always hide” (Hanson). An underlying aspect in the literature is also figuring out how to relate to oneself and one’s body (Mense, 2021), which extends *authenticity* beyond the context of sexuality to a more general sense of being authentic.

Recognition of Sexual Self-Determination

The characteristic *recognition of sexual self-determination* refers to recognizing one’s own sexuality and the sexuality of others as self-determined, which is associated with positive effects on health and well-being. For example, Williams underlined the aspect of “allowing or supporting people’s self-determination and autonomy with regard to sexual and reproductive experience” and expanded on the importance: “[sex] contributes to health and wellbeing, I don’t think you can be sex-positive without recognizing that.” Further, Roidinger emphasized the right to live one’s sexuality yet “the indivisible right of every person to sexual self-determination is not a given,” as can be seen in “how people who are different from the majority don’t have it so easy.” In the literature, for promoting *recognition of sexual self-determination* the attention is drawn to the institutional level, to the hesitation as well as possibilities of governmental agencies and organizations (Murray et al., 2017).

Discussion

With this research, I argue for comprehending sex positivity from an individual’s perspective as a sex-positive attitude. The question in this study sought to determine a differentiated understanding of a sex-positive attitude and, if possible, to identify characteristics that define it with respect to the various contexts in which sex positivity is negotiated.

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The results of this study show that a sex-positive attitude is operationalizable as a set of principles where the identified characteristics are neither about specific forms of relationships nor sexual preferences. They partly connect to the initial available suggestions in the literature but also go further, capturing sex positivity in its complexity. The most important finding from the differentiated description of the characteristics is that three different qualities for a sex-positive attitude emerged:

1. A sex-positive attitude involves an ongoing process of learning and development that extends far beyond initial learning, reflecting continuous growth and perpetual changes. In the literature, development is described as a process that takes time and is neither natural nor happens quickly (Murray et al., 2017), and that proactive learning and continuous self-experience are a necessity (Roidinger & Zuschnig, 2021). The results indicate for the characteristics *openness & acceptance*, *consent*, and *communication*, that a certain amount of practice is required, both with oneself and with others – such as formulating a clear yes or no or jointly establishing a culture of discussion and feedback. Likewise, *tolerance & respect* cannot be considered inherent skills and are an aspect of learning. Similarly, the characteristics *responsibility*, *acceptance of needs*, *authenticity*, and *humanizing* involve critical reflection as well as conscious engagement, first with oneself and then with others. Further, *exploration* requires the willingness and courage to leave the familiar behind. Ultimately, the characteristic of *continued development*, which explicitly refers to the willingness and interest in development, seems to be implicitly inherent in the other characteristics.

2. A sex-positive attitude is highly individual and person specific, so that the importance of single characteristics can vary – relating to changes in life and/or priorities (Roidinger & Zuschnig, 2021). Consequently, the characteristics can be seen as fluid and probably are rebalanced corresponding to the current life situation. Additionally, the characteristics challenge everyone differently, and accordingly not all are equally present at the same time, so that the focus can vary. Nevertheless, none of the characteristics are dispensable. For example, what would remain of *openness & acceptance*, *communication*, and *consent* without *recognition of sexual self-determination*? And even though the characteristics can be described individually, the relation between them varies – some are connected, others overlap and cross each other.

3. A sex-positive attitude refers to both the self and the self in relation to others, which can influence interpersonal relationships generally – and beyond that the whole life. Sex-positive relationships are described as nourishing, fulfilling, and pleasurable yet they also offer the space to fail (Roidinger & Zuschnig, 2021). Mense (2021, p. 42) argues that "relating to one another is exactly what people do in practice no matter whether they are in professional, personal or sexual contact." More specifically, the results show that *responsibility* refers to the self as well as *authenticity*; whereas *authenticity* is strongly connected to *humanizing* – for the same trait but now the self in relation to others. Furthermore, *acceptance of needs* incorporates both perspectives. Differently, but both *tolerance & respect* as well as *openness & acceptance* describe the self in relation to others, whereas the latter also refers to the self; here the distinction is based on an active versus a passive trait. Further in regard to influencing the whole life, the results show that some characteristics explicitly extend beyond sexuality, linking back to life in general. More precisely, the characteristic *communication* builds on basic communication skills, *tolerance & respect*

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emphasizes respecting one another broadly as well as *consent* is important in every interaction, and also *authenticity* incorporates more aspects of life than sexuality.

Explicitly in regard to the various contexts in which sex positivity is negotiated, this study found that an influence of a sex-positive attitude by the contexts is identifiable. Moreover, the institutional, participatory, and private contexts were central for selecting experts with different expertise and perspective on the research objective. Here, it's important to also draw attention to limitations of this study. As for the contexts, two points stand out. First, the experts Prior and Williams are among the authors of the *positive sexuality framework* that is widely but not solely used for the integration of sex positivity in science and research, which is an important contribution in the institutional context. Likewise, the authors argue that positive sexuality is relevant across all levels and types of social structure (Williams et al., 2015). Interviewing both Prior and Williams for the institutional context for this study can be considered a limitation because, even though they have different backgrounds, their work is closely linked and their perspectives are therefore closely related, limiting the diversity of perspectives represented. Consequently, the results from the institutional context reveal a focus on *communication*, *peacemaking*, and *humanizing* as these are also key dimensions of the *positive sexuality framework*. Despite the limitation, the three characteristics cannot be attributed only to the institutional context but to all three contexts. Second, a compelling finding is that from the participatory context and the private context, a strong practical and body-related focus emerges. For example, the characteristic *exploration* is neither related to the institutional context nor a dimension of the *positive sexuality framework*. Moreover, *acceptance of needs* and *responsibility* are mainly practically driven and with a focus on the individual. Undoubtedly, the *positive sexuality framework* is relevant across all levels and types of social structures, but it can be argued that it is distinct from explicitly taking the perspective of the individual. This encourages promoting the transfer from theory to practice, aligning with sex-positive culture needing to be good in both practice and theory (Mense, 2021). Similarly, a practical approach for sex-positive relationships is offered by Roidinger and Zuschnig (2021), the authors of the first popular German book on sex positivity. Their approach is one of the first suggestions for a sex-positive attitude even if it focuses on relationships. Thus, for this study interviewing Roidinger for the private context can also be considered a limitation. However, there were no contradictions with the results, rather they underline that a sex-positive attitude is neither about specific forms of relationships nor about sexual preferences.

Furthermore, the results of this study relate to social psychological research on attitudes. Based on a largely congruent understanding of attitude, the interesting finding is that the theoretical approach to attitude shows an overlap with the current results. In general, attitudes are described by first, a cognitive component, encompassing beliefs, thoughts, and attributes; second, an affective component, referring to feelings and emotions; and third, a behavioral component, relating to past, present, and anticipated behavior; for example, expanding from exploring the environment to role playing (Haddock & Maio, 2014). An attitude can be black and white, but it does not have to be, as a two-dimensional perspective considers possible ambivalences (Haddock & Maio, 2014). For example, a person who is into BDSM might enjoy a hard spanking and at the same time be annoyed by remaining marks. In reference to a sex-positive attitude, it seems that each of the identified characteristics could combine the three components. For example, this is seen in the characteristics *humanizing* and *authenticity*. With *humanizing*, both the affective and behavioral components are described, while with *authenticity* it is all three components. It can be

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assumed that the three components are not necessarily present at the same time, nor equally pronounced, but rather emerge depending on the situation. More precisely, this can be outlined with *humanizing*: the cognitive component, like an ethical consideration of sexual acts, is strongly pronounced, but at the same time, the behavioral component, like describing sexual acts rather than evaluating them, can be challenging. However, it may be insufficient to assign the characteristics only to certain components, like to consider *exploration* as purely behavioral.

Finally, based on systematically investigating sex positivity, it is definable as an attitude – a sex-positive attitude constituted by twelve different characteristics. The characteristics are somewhat surprising as they are mostly affirming fundamental aspects of simply being human and interacting with other humans. Moreover, that is remarkable as it underlines how deeply sex positivity may be engraved in the self, especially by detaching from established social morals and generally accepted norms relating to sexuality. However, the observed qualities indicate that a sex-positive attitude is highly influenced by various societal and cultural factors throughout the lifetime.

Conclusion and Future Research

This research was dedicated to understanding sex positivity from an individual's perspective based on an extensive literature review and a qualitative research approach. The study confirmed the consideration that sex positivity is an attitude, as such being strongly connected to the private, yet impacted by institutional as well as participatory contexts. Furthermore, it is the first study to operationalize a sex-positive attitude and to define it by twelve characteristics. These results add a unique perspective to a growing transdisciplinary development and research field.

In fact, the results of this study have several practical implications. For interested and questioning individuals, engaging with the characteristics may be likely to pose less of a challenge regarding established social morals and norms for relationships as well as sexual preferences, given that a sex-positive attitude proves to be detached from them. Moreover, as sex positivity becomes applicable, it may help deal with sexuality in a new way in practice and strengthen the development toward a self-determined sexuality. For example, individuals, alone or with partners, in a group, or community, can reflect and discuss the different characteristics and explore a sex-positive attitude in themselves. Thus, the results underscore sex positivity promoting and contributing to personal growth and sexual well-being, building on the *positive sexuality framework* – though not from an institutional level but directly out of the private sphere through taking an individual's perspective. However, a sex-positive attitude is influenced by different social factors and needs to be contextualized within the complex field of tensions of Western societies – such as the issues of norms, inequality and the political, which are discussed critically in the sex positivity discourse. In a professional and clinical context, the results may support and encourage counselors and therapists reflecting their own attitude for providing unbiased support for individuals. Likewise, the results may be helpful to communicate about a positive attitude toward sexuality with clients; being able to speak about specific characteristics that define a sex-positive attitude and are applicable. Thus, the characteristics may be explored in counseling and therapy.

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This study has provided a deeper insight into the challenges and the complexity evolving around the terms *sex-positive*, *sex positivity* and *positive sexuality*. On the one hand, this strengthens the idea that science and research would benefit from a definition of sex positivity, when sex positivity is applied as an approach (Ivanski & Kohut, 2017; Watjen, 2020), as even though positive sexuality is operationalized by the *positive sexuality framework*, various approaches have evolved under the term. And on the other hand, it may encourage conceptualizing future research as interdisciplinary if not transdisciplinary to benefit from the many voices contributing to the current understanding and recognizing the diverse influences. Besides, a natural progression of this work would be developing a measure for a sex-positive attitude. Doubtlessly, there is an overlap with the SPS (Belous & Schulz, 2022), and further comparative analysis may be beneficial.

Overall, the present study lays the groundwork for future research on sex-positive attitude and a continuously better understanding of how far the social development in a sex-positive sense has come – based on an individual's perspective and development.

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The Power of Anonymity: California Students' Opinions of Their Sex Education

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ABSTRACT

Four seniors majoring in Gender Studies at UCLA participated in a focus group to discuss their experiences with the sex education they received after the passing of the California Healthy Youth Act. This study compares the current literature to the findings from the focus group to examine participants' opinions. Specific focus is given to participants' thoughts on discussions being included in sex education in hopes of normalizing the topic and reducing shame. Results showed that participants desired many changes and were uncertain about discussions in sex education. They instead greatly valued question boxes that allowed for anonymity.

Keywords: *comprehensive sex education, California Healthy Youth Act, anonymous sex education, discussion-based sex education, sexual shame*

Introduction

Legally Mandated Sex Education

In 2016, California updated its sex education requirements with the passing of the California Healthy Youth Act. It requires sex education to be taught once in middle school and once in high school, as well as requiring certain topics to be discussed ("*California Healthy,"* 2016). Mandated topics include: STIs, growth, gender, sexual orientation, relationships, contraceptives, pregnancy, and more ("*California Healthy,"* 2016). It also requires that "knowledge and skills necessary to have healthy, positive, and safe relationships" must be taught, and an affirming stance must be taken towards the diversity of sexual orientation and gender ("*California Healthy,"* 2016, General Provisions section). In addition, California Education Code § 51225.36 states that any school that teaches health education must include information on affirmative consent, which is defined by code § 67386 as "affirmative, conscious, and voluntary agreement to engage in sexual activity" ("*California codes,"* 2025). The goal of this education, as seen by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Healthy People 2030 plan, is to reduce underage sex and STI transmission (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2026).

Due to a lack of a federal mandate, sex education differs from state to state, with only 30 states requiring that sex education be taught, four of which do not require the information to be medically accurate. For 34 states, if sex education is taught, it must "emphasize abstinence as correct or preferable to sexual activity," and only 18 states require that consent be mentioned (Guttmacher Institute, 2025, Table 1). In addition, California is one of only nine states that require

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that LGBTQ+ individuals be discussed inclusively. In six states, it is illegal to discuss LGBTQ+ people, and in seven, information about queer people must be presented in a stigmatizing way, meaning educators must present queer identities as "shameful, unacceptable, or illegal" (Guttmacher Institute, 2025, Table 1).

Students' Perceptions of Sex Education Across Countries

Even though sex education is mandated in California, that does not mean it is completed successfully. In prior research, participants stated an overwhelming lack of information and desired major changes. One of the most extensive research papers was a meta-analysis by Pound et al. titled, "What do young people think about their school-based sex and relationship education? A qualitative synthesis of young people's views and experiences." The paper includes 55 papers and 48 total studies conducted from 1991 to 2015 from across the globe. The studies include participants ages six to twenty-five, with a majority of participants ranging from twelve to eighteen. A majority of the studies, twenty-five, originate from the United Kingdom, followed by ten from the US. Other countries include: Canada, New Zealand, Australia, the Republic of Ireland, Japan, Sweden, Brazil, and Iran. Some fascinating conclusions were that "despite the wide geographical reach of the studies, young people's views are strikingly consistent" (Pound et al., 2016, p. 11). It was also found that "students in the USA who had abstinence-only-based SRE [sex and relationship education] were not markedly different from those whose SRE was more comprehensive" (Pound et al., 2016, p. 11). Lastly, there were no major changes in participants' opinions over the twenty-five years. Rather, as society and participants got more progressive, they continued to state their disappointment in outdated education (Pound et al., 2016). Overall, this study found participants' opinions to be similar regardless of country of origin, type of sex education, or year receiving sex education.

Sex Education Frequency, Teachers, and Media Use

Students often voiced that sex education was not taught soon or frequently enough. Data collected for the National Survey of Family Growth by the National Center for Health Statistics supports this statement with the finding that 57% of female adolescents and 53% of male adolescents had already had sex by the time their school addressed it (Guttmacher Policy, 2022). Many participants desired sex education that started earlier, with a benefit being that it may be easier to discuss at a younger age (Pound et al., 2016), therefore normalizing the topic and reducing shame and stigma. An additional study by Hobaica and Kwon (2017) supports this and found that due to the open-mindedness of young children, having a queer-inclusive sex education at a young age helps children become more accepting of queer people. It was also found that sex education varies in the number of sessions that students receive (Koepsel, 2016), with many students voicing a desire for more frequent sessions (Phippen, 2012; Proulx, 2019; Seiler-Ramadas et al., 2021). Once sex education is checked off the school's list, the topic is not usually brought up again for another couple of years, leaving students without a comfortable way to address their questions.

A large majority of students felt uncomfortable with their teacher leading sex education. In one study, when asked whether they would like this, only nineteen percent of students said yes (Pound et al., 2016). Teachers often struggle with this topic, as seen by a student sharing, "we had Miss Plum she was a PE teacher but she cried" (Pound et al., 2016, p. 9). Students are very aware

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of their teachers' reactions, and it sends a loud message. One teacher in a study shared that “if your teacher who’s a grown up can’t talk about it, how are you (supposed to)? That gives you the impression that, oh I’m not really supposed to talk about it” (Pound et al., 2016, p. 9). This may lead to isolation and shame. In addition to the discomfort teacher-led sex education produces, Pound et al. (2016) also mention how the power imbalance between student and teacher, and the blurring of some boundaries that this topic entails, makes this situation somewhat unethical. Instead, many students suggested the use of outside experts or peer educators (Pound et al., 2016; Seiler-Ramadas et al., 2020; York et al., 2021). Outside experts were seen as “unshockable” and more knowledgeable (Pound et al., 2016, p. 11), allowing for more comfort and confidently presented factual information. This subject requires teachers to not only know the information but also how to deliver it.

Students disagreed on how teachers should utilize media. In some studies, students thought that teachers didn’t take enough advantage of media that could help explain complex topics and share personal stories (Seiler-Ramadas et al., 2020, 2021; Thianthai, 2019). In other studies, students felt that media was impersonal and that teachers relied too heavily on websites and videos (Jørgensen et al., 2019; York et al., 2021). Pound et al. (2016) found that when teachers were uncomfortable, they would rely on media to teach the class, which limited student engagement. Using media, but not solely relying on it, may be a middle ground that students prefer.

LGBTQ+ Representation

Students frequently mentioned that sex education was heteronormative and lacked LGBTQ+ content. With twenty-two to twenty-eight percent of Generation Z now identifying as LGBTQ+ (Public Religion Research Institute, 2024; “LGBTQ+ Identification,” 2024), it is pertinent that sex education includes the identities of all students. Across a plethora of studies, all of which took place in countries that were accepting of LGBTQ+ people, students stated a lack of education on queerness and a desire for it (Forrest et al., 2004; Hobaica & Kwon, 2017; Pound et al., 2016; Proulx, 2019; Thianthai, 2019). A lack of representation not only harms queer students but can also lead to riskier sexual behaviors as queer students are not taught how to protect themselves physically and emotionally (Hobaica & Kwon, 2017). Without this information and support, feelings of shame and self-blame may arise (Hobaica & Kwon, 2017). With a group that already has high rates of depression and suicide, queer people must be included.

Students’ opinions differ on whether sex education should be taught in single-sex groups. One study found that women preferred separated groups, whereas men preferred mixed groups (Pound et al., 2016). This is likely explained by the fact that in many studies, men would disrupt class and harass women who paid attention to sex education (Pound et al., 2016). In other studies, students, regardless of gender, preferred gender separated groups (Jørgensen et al., 2019; Phippen, 2012). One benefit of this may be that students can form a deeper connection with students of the same gender; however, students lose out on information when separated (Hobaica & Kwon, 2017). Separating students by gender may also reinforce heteronormativity and the gender binary and harm students who do not fit into it and are forced to pick a gender.

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Lack of Social and Emotional Information in Sex Education

One major theme that frequently arose was the overrepresentation of biological information and a lack of information on the social and emotional aspects of sex. In one study, a student stated, "everything we got in our class had a really clinical feel, it's just like information but it's not related to yourself" (Pound et al., 2016, p. 9). It was commonly reported that sex education was too biological and lacked emotional topics that students wanted to discuss (Pound et al., 2016; Proulx, 2019; Thianthai, 2019; Seiler-Ramadas et al., 2020). While biology is important and should be taught, there is other information that must be included too. How are students supposed to manage their desires, fears, and range of emotions about such a complex topic and experience without any support? Students stated a desire to learn about relationships, feelings and emotions, how to have sex, how to say no to sex, and how to talk about pressure and abuse (Pound et al., 2016). The information taught in sex education does not mirror what students desire to learn.

Research Question

Although this project is guided by the existing scientific literature, it is also highly personal and shaped by my experiences with sex education. My sex education ended in ninth grade, years before I realized I was queer. I was not interested in the topic in the slightest and was highly uncomfortable with it. This resulted in little to no conversation about this topic with friends, making it feel private and shameful. Once I realized I was queer, I developed a passion for this topic, but these feelings still plagued me and took years to undo. Discussing this topic with friends, in therapy, and with others who work in this field really normalized it and allowed me to realize my thoughts and feelings are quite common. For this paper, I hoped to see what students thought about their sex education, how they would change it, and if they had similar feelings of shame. If those feelings were present in sex education, I proposed that including more discussions would help lessen shame. Prior research supports the idea that students want more discussions in sex education (Jørgensen et al., 2019; Phippen, 2012; Pound et al., 2016; Seiler-Ramadas et al., 2020; Thianthai, 2019; York et al., 2021). Students stated that they want teachers to talk with them, not "*at* them" (Jørgensen et al., 2019, p. 35). However, in one study, the participants agreed that while discussion should be encouraged, many students would not be comfortable with it (Goldstein, 2020). Pound et al. (2016, p. 8) found this too and stated that "some found the idea of talking straightforwardly about their sexual needs difficult, but others wanted to learn these skills and become more confident in sexual negotiations and discussions." In doing this study, I want to continue this discussion.

Methods

Study Design

I conducted a focus group with four fellow UCLA seniors. I chose a focus group over individual interviews as I was interested to see how participants would discuss the topic and feel about the experience, since discussions in sex education were one of the major focuses of this study. Additionally, I wanted the focus group to focus on women's experiences, as I was curious to see the role shame played in sex education, and I believed that emotion to be more prevalent in women when receiving sex education. Out of convenience, I reached out to four friends with whom

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I took my core gender studies classes, and all agreed to my invitation to participate in the group. We all transferred to UCLA in 2024, and for a year, we saw each other at least twice a week for classes.

Procedure

We met for a one-hour and ten-minute discussion after our classes were finished in a private study room in Powell Library. The room was the most private space we could find on campus, but we could occasionally hear the group next to us, and we assumed they could hear us too. In addition, one of the walls was made of glass, so it was not the most private area for a topic that is often very sensitive. Participants signed consent forms to be included in this project and were told the goal was to hear about their sex education experiences. Before the focus group, I came up with the questions listed in Figure 1 below. Questions were formed through my discussions with my professor, reviewing prior literature, my own sex education experiences, and my genuine curiosity. Many questions got added as they came to mind in the days leading up to the focus group. All of the questions were asked of the participants, with many more questions arising during the discussion. Participants were encouraged to talk with each other and ask questions that came to mind. We sat in a circle around a table, which allowed for easy interaction and hopefully limited some power imbalance between researcher and participants. I made sure there was some structure to the group, but I was equally interested to see where the conversation would lead.

Analysis

The audio was later transcribed and coded for patterns. For my first round of reviewing the transcript, I familiarized myself with it and started to notice topics that repeated and stood out. For the second round, I highlighted quotes and topics that stood out and transferred them to a new document. From there, I noted the topics that each quote touched on, which resulted in the following nineteen topics: anonymous question boxes, students separated by gender, social emphasis, STIs, fear/shame, fanfiction, lack of pleasure information, masturbation, discussion, LGBTQ+, not prepared to have sex, underage sex, sex learned socially, scientific emphasis, abstinence, sex education as important, periods, consent, and college sex education. Lastly, I noted which topics were mentioned most and grouped ideas together.

Participant Demographics

All participants in the focus group were Gender Studies majors, female, used she/her pronouns, and were either 21 or 22. They all asked to remain anonymous and chose their aliases. In addition, they all went to public California high schools and received their sex education after the passing of the California Healthy Youth Act. The goal was to focus mainly on high school sex education, but all school sex education ended up being covered. All participants attended elementary, middle, and high school in the Los Angeles area. Participant one, Iris, is a white, Jewish, lesbian who is middle-class. In addition to her Gender Studies major, she is also a Film, Television, and Digital Media minor. Participant two, Katherine, is white, straight, lower middle class, and is not religious. Participant three, PollyD, is Latina, bisexual, atheist, and lower class. Participant four, Stella, is Persian, Agnostic, and middle-class. While I did not share my experiences in the focus group, some are present in this paper, and my identities are as follows: I

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am white, gay, upper-middle-class, and not religious. In addition to my Gender Studies major, I am also a Sociology major.

Figure 1 – *Focus Group Questions*

Background	Do you remember your sex education well? Was there anything done really well or really poorly? Tell me about your sex education (funny stories, things that stood out, etc.).
Reflection	After sex education, did you feel knowledgeable on the topic? Please explain. How did you feel emotionally during and after your sex education? How do you feel your sex education has impacted you, your relationships, and sex life? Did you feel emotionally prepared to have sex? Knowledgeably prepared? (As in how to have sex, be safe, etc.) Did you have to look for more information elsewhere?
Improvements	What topics, if any, would you have liked discussed in your sex education? Was the clitoris ever mentioned? Pleasure? Masturbation? Lube? From what viewpoint would you have liked sex education discussed? (neutral, factual, sex positive, pleasure-focused, etc.) Please explain. How often would you have liked sex education? What format of instruction would you prefer for sex education? (peer educators, outside educators, discussion-based, videos, etc.) What could have been done to make your sex education amazing, memorable, positive, etc.? How did it feel to talk about all of this?

Limitations

Before discussing the results, it is important to note some things that may have impacted the results. The fact that the interviewees are my friends whom I have known for a while and see frequently likely impacted what information was divulged. It is possible that they felt more comfortable talking with me than they would have with an unknown interviewer, but our frequent interactions may have led them to keep some information private. Our identity as Gender Studies majors also impacts how we view and discuss the topic, as we likely have much more experience thinking about these issues. The use of a focus group instead of individual interviews also impacted the results. The ability to interact with others reminded participants of past experiences they had forgotten, and they also got to compare sex education experiences, with some realizing that their

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sex education was better or worse than they thought. It is also possible that participants may have limited some information due to the limited privacy of the focus group, but this did not appear to be the case.

I am also aware that this project had a very limited number of participants with similar identities. This paper was originally my capstone for one of my degrees, meaning I had 11 weeks to complete my research and paper. Ideally, more people would have been involved in the focus group, but due to time constraints, this was the best I could do. The focus group aligned well with what the author of "Qualitative Research Methods," Monique M. Hennink, says it should include. She advises groups to be five to ten people with similar backgrounds, meet for an hour to an hour and a half, focus on a core topic, and explore different perspectives (Taylor et al., 2016). When it comes to the number of participants in a study, "what is important is the potential of each case to aid the researcher in developing theoretical insights into the area of social life being studied" (Taylor et al., 2016, p. 108). A small number of participants can still be valuable in producing important findings (Toner, 2009). Even with a limited number of participants, the focus group produced a vast amount of information and unique stories. It was an honor to listen to the lived experiences of queer women of color, and their rich experiences add a new perspective to the present topic.

Discussion

Participants' Diverse Experiences

As expected, participants had differences in their sex education, but what continued to stand out throughout the focus group were Iris's and PollyD's experiences. They went to the same high school but were a year apart, with PollyD being one year ahead. As Iris detailed her experience learning about the Santa Monica Rape Treatment Center, LGBTQ+ sex, and consent, PollyD continued to respond in shock as her education lacked all of those topics. When asked if their education included consent, Iris replied with "very much," whereas PollyD replied with no. Through this experience, Iris came to recognize that her sex education was quite phenomenal, while PollyD kept her opinion that hers was just fine. This small example shows just how diverse sex education can be. If students one year apart at the same school are receiving completely different education, then that is likely also true for students across California and the country.

Consistency in Identifying Problems

Participants all agreed on the use of media within sex education, how often it should be taught, and who should be teaching it. Stella mentioned that there are great videos that explain topics easily, but that teachers don't often think to use them. She referenced a video called *Tea Consent* which covers consent in a simple and somewhat funny way, which may help students absorb the information better. This desire for media use is somewhat inconsistent with prior research and may be explained by the fact that media wasn't used much in Stella's education. Had that been the sole mode of transmitting information, she likely would have wanted other methods too. Opinions on the frequency of sex education were also shared by participants, but were different from prior research. They liked having education that grew as they did, and thought that having it once in elementary, middle, and high school was ideal. There was no desire to have it

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more frequently or have it start earlier, although Stella and PollyD did note that they started their periods before that topic was brought up in school. Lastly, consistent with the literature, no one wanted their teacher to lead sex education and instead desired outside experts. Both Iris and PollyD received their sex education from Planned Parenthood, and while PollyD had only a decent experience, she still preferred them over her teacher. These three ways of teaching sex education were unanimous among participants.

A Need for LGBTQ+ Inclusivity

A topic that all participants wanted to learn more about was LGBTQ+ identities. This aligns with prior research and is unsurprising considering participants' identities as gender studies students and queer people. Including queerness in sex education validates and protects queer students. When I was unaware that I was queer, the lack of queerness in sex education was never on my mind. However, as I have entered the world of sex education, I have received a few presentations where my identities were completely ignored, with one presenter stating it was just easier to use cisheteronormative language. I am extremely proud of my queerness, but those experiences hurt and reminded me that to some, I am deviant. The negative impacts of this would likely be greater for those who are not yet confident in their queer identities.

In the focus group, two of the four participants received information on the LGBTQ+ community. However, even though Iris was one of the two who received this education, she stated that she had "gay sex education but not lesbian sex education." This is somewhat surprising as lesbianism is more acceptable in our society than being a gay man. However, this is in large part due to the sexualization of lesbians for the male gaze, which erases women's pleasure and emphasizes men's. Only discussing gay men and not other identities continues the message of men as active and sexual, and women as the opposite. In addition, Iris's experience relates to Kimberle Crenshaw's famous piece on intersectionality and her idea of 'but for' analysis. She states that "sex and race discrimination have come to be defined in terms of the experiences of those who are privileged *but for* their racial *or* [emphasis added] sexual characteristics" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 151). Where lesbian sex education would focus on the minority groups of sexuality *and* gender, gay sex education only focuses on one minority group: sexuality. While schools may be including LGBTQ+ education, they may also be focusing "on the experiences of the most privileged" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 151), which ignores those who experience discrimination in multiple categories.

Continuing with Iris's experience, because of her lack of lesbian sex education, and because she did not recognize that she was queer when receiving her education, she felt wildly unprepared to have sex. Similar to Iris, I did not realize I was queer until after my sex education; however, I did not receive queer sex education. I remember being told to use condoms, with it being stressed that using two is actually more risky, but none of that aligned with my sex life. Not only was protection only mentioned in regard to heterosexual sex, but it was also mainly focused on as a means to prevent pregnancy. Without a penis in sight, I never even thought to use protection when I first started having sex. I'm not even sure I knew what a dental dam was, as using protection during oral sex was never mentioned. By focusing on heterosexual penetrative sex, it negates sexual practices that may be safer in regard to STIs (Pound et al., 2016). Including queerness in

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sex education would highlight the diverse ways one can have sex and use protection, benefiting all.

The last topic within queer inclusivity that participants discussed was whether students should be separated by gender when receiving sex education. Just like the prior research, participants were divided. Three of the four participants were separated by gender, with Stella and PollyD noting a special sense of community and bonding that occurred within the same sex group. PollyD not only liked the same sex group, but was also wary of having sex education with men. She stated that "our experiences are going to be different because of our gender… You can't really relate to me in that aspect." However, Iris made two good points against gender separated groups. She explained that after receiving sex education, all of the students would discuss the similarities and differences in the information they received, therefore defeating the purpose of separating into two groups. In addition, Iris explained that she has a nonbinary sibling, for whom "sex ed was probably especially hard…. because there was no representation at all" and it must have been "really awkward for kids who don't feel aligned in their gender categories they're given" when separated by gender. No clear solution for this was suggested by participants, as it is hard to balance the sense of community in gender separated groups without alienating queer youth and excluding information.

Conflicting Views and Fear of Promoting Underage Sex

When discussing whether sex education should focus more on biological or social, emotional information, a lively discussion occurred around the fear of promoting underage sex. In prior research, participants were not as worried about this, which may be due to many studies taking place when students were still in middle or high school (Pound et al., 2016). The ability to reflect on past experiences while older and more mature likely made a difference. Stella's education was very "cut and dry" and included coloring in and labelling genitalia. She was content with this. Katherine's education also focused on the biological and constantly mentioned STIs. She stated that "if they ran out of stuff, they'd be like "and don't forget about AIDs, HIV!'" This aligns with the Healthy People 2030 goal of reducing STI rates (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2026). Stella also noted how they inadvertently pushed celibacy, further aligning with the government's desire to reduce underage sex and pregnancy. By emphasizing that "the only way to protect yourself from pregnancy and STDs, like the only bulletproof way to do it is celibacy," it sends the message that this form of protection is more valued than others. Iris's education, on the other hand, had "more of an emphasis on the social aspects of sex." This, however, worried Stella, who feared it might promote sex at a young age, and thought a more neutral position would prevent this. Iris responded that while her education was very sex positive, it did not encourage her or her friends to have sex. She stated, "I don't think more education leads to more sex. I think it just leads to more informed sex." Stella then agreed that as long as it was "sex positive, rather than sex promotional," she would support it.

Participants desired more of a focus on the social and emotional aspects of sex. Topics that were not covered, or only mentioned in passing, included: consent, pleasure, masturbation, foreplay, aftercare, why people have sex, kinks, and power dynamics, among others. Consent stood out as extremely important, with Stella stating, "I didn't need to draw in the anatomical penis and vagina, but I did need to be taught consent." Whether it was regarding sex or not, participants saw

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consent as crucial. They acknowledged that their sex education took place at the beginning of the #MeToo movement, and hoped that sex education now focused more on consent. Some of the topics, however, brought up a conversation about just how much should be covered in sex education and where people should learn certain topics. In regards to pleasure, Iris stated that "I know we mentioned, like the clitoris… that's the pleasure center… that was basically it" with PollyD replying "It was like 'what are you supposed to do with it?'" Their education did not include any methods or tips for making sex easier and more pleasurable, which participants felt would promote sex, but also left them unprepared to have sex. In addition, Iris felt that a topic such as kinks shouldn't be included. Participants felt more comfortable with some things being learned socially, as they all agreed with PollyD's point that "a lot of sex education is social learning." Stella specifically stated that "media was a huge thing for me to figure out how sex and everything worked. Not just fanfiction, but like TV, YouTube, commentary YouTubers." These sources helped Stella feel more prepared to have sex, while preventing what she feared would be sex education's promotion of sex.

Even though sex education has its flaws, participants agreed that it is much needed. Katherine stated that:

> even if it's lacking, school is a good introduction into the topic where you can seek out other sources or maybe be approached by other sources and get further information. It may not be perfect, but it's a better start than anything else.

Iris shared in this sentiment, saying, "I don't know where else I would have gotten it if not school." Neither Iris nor Stella received any conversation about sex from their parents, and PollyD's talk was done by her sister. Katherine was the only one who received a thorough conversation with her parents. If it weren't for school sex education, Iris and Stella may have had to rely on information from peers or media, which may be inaccurate at best and harmful at worst.

Discussions in Sex Education

In the focus group, a common feeling experienced during sex education was shame. Stella explained that "they didn't recognize that there's a stigma around this topic." PollyD noted that a lot of the shame: "is more geared towards the woman than the man. Like if a woman has sex with multiple people they're a slut, but if a man does it, he's an ace, he's a king." She goes on to mention the additional stigma that students may feel if coming from certain cultural or religious backgrounds. Students enter sex education not with an open mind but rather with a plethora of prior feelings about the topic. Teachers then add new experiences and feelings to the mix, with Stella stating that "they didn't shame us for anything, but they didn't bring a lack of shame either." Many students already feel discomfort or shame, requiring teachers to go beyond a neutral stance. Neutrality will not counter or reverse the impacts of shame, but rather add to it and drive students away.

To address this shame, I proposed that including discussions in sex education would help normalize the topic and lessen shame. However, participants strongly disliked this idea, differing from prior research, and felt it would be too awkward to encourage discussion. They brought up the fact that students may have crushes or sexual experiences with people in their class, making

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discussion that much more uncomfortable. This was not something that had crossed my mind since I did not experience attraction until I realized my sexuality after sex education, but it is an extremely valid point. Participants also stated that even as college seniors, they would not want to discuss sex with people they did not know.

Instead of discussions, participants highly recommended the use of anonymous question boxes.[1] Stella's teacher had boxes:

> set up, like in a specific spot in the classroom and at any point in the class, you could put [a question] in there, and at the end of each class, she would go through the newer ones and read them out and answer them out loud.

Instead of having a dedicated time to answer questions, this would allow students to form questions as they learned. This would also benefit students like Iris, who felt very "ashamed and scared to ask questions" and "very safe" with the anonymity. Through this format, students would likely realize that others have similar questions and uncertainties, therefore normalizing the topic and reducing shame without creating as much discomfort as conversation. When this method was used in my sex education, it also facilitated more discussion, as students became more comfortable once the topic was broached by the teacher reading the question.

To address the lack of education and discussion in prior sex education experiences, I also proposed mandated college sex education, which participants greatly despised. Katherine was firmly against the idea of requiring sex education in college, while others thought it would be beneficial to have an optional place to ask questions and learn. Towards the end of the focus group, with the knowledge that participants did not like discussions in sex education or want it mandated in college, I asked them how it felt to discuss this topic. PollyD stated that it was nice, a sentiment shared by Iris, and that "having a conversation like this is kind of needed, even if we're not technically having the education all over again." So while they voiced a dislike of discussions, it appears that under the right conditions, they enjoyed it. Stella stated that she felt slightly uncomfortable with the topic, since it was still taboo in her household, but felt this discomfort would help her grow. This shows that even if it is uncomfortable to discuss this topic, that feeling is likely temporary, and the importance of discussion often outweighs the awkwardness.

[1] When presenting this project to my peers, I ran a small experiment with them to test whether they also valued anonymity in sex education. This was a Gender Studies class with twenty students, and before I discussed my research, I gave them a link to a Google form and asked them to write any questions about sex or relationships. I also told them this topic is my niche, and I am an educator for two different sex-positive organizations. Ten minutes later, twelve students, a large portion of the class, replied with questions ranging from consent and relationships to STI testing and dental dams. I answered a few questions, and some students shared their individual experiences with sex education. One student even shared that a question was hers, and we discussed further. This shows that anonymity in sex education needs to be studied more, since a large percentage of students felt comfortable asking anonymous questions in this class.

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Conclusions

As seen in the meta-analysis by Pound et al., participants' opinions remained fairly consistent with the prior literature. They desired more information on the emotional aspect of sex and LGBTQ+ identities, and preferred experts to lead sex education. They were undecided on separating students by gender and differed from prior research on sex education frequency. The queer women of color included in this study also noted the cultural stigma that is present around this topic, and therefore more highly valued anonymous discussion boxes than others in prior research. They felt it to be a safer and more comfortable way to communicate and learn.

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Sunyaxah:
An Autoethnography of the Kristang Creole-Indigenous Practice of Dreamshining

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a first formal full-length academic description and analysis of *sunyaxah*, or the Kristang or Portuguese-Eurasian Creole-Indigenous practice of dreamshining: a form of semi-spontaneous body performance art that intentionally creolizes or processes collective and intergenerational trauma related to the prior fetishization, hypersexualization and objectification of Kristang men. I explore how I came to creolize and conceptualize the term "dreamshining" as part of ongoing long-term Kristang cultural revitalization efforts led by myself as *Kabesa* or Chief of the community, and thereafter pursue an autoethnography of my own dreamshining. I also present a first academic definition of dreamshining and the sequencing of the process behind it.

Keywords: *Kristang, Singapore, Creole, dreamshining, Indigenous, autoethnography, cultural revitalization*

Introduction and Literature Review

Scholarship on embodiment, performance, and autoethnography has increasingly recognized the body as a site of knowledge production rather than mere representation (e.g. Armstrong, 1994; Stinson, 1995; Viteritti, 2013). For example, performance studies and anthropology have examined how embodied experience is translated into concrete knowledge and meaning (e.g. Jackson, 2013; Latimer, 2008; Marchand, 2010), while autoethnographic traditions related to this have emphasized evidence-based reflexivity, positionality, and ethical self-disclosure (e.g. Spry, 2009; Uotinen, 2011); meanwhile, Indigenous and decolonial methodologies have foregrounded relational accountability, situated knowing, and resistance to extractive research practices (e.g. Wilson, 2008), and at the same time, studies of queer visibility in Southeast Asia have also documented the effects of moral surveillance, stigma, and political regulation on embodied expression (e.g. Chua, 2014). However, these bodies of work have only very rarely converged in sustained analysis of how embodied practice functions simultaneously as personal processing, knowledge infrastructure, and leadership method within Creole and Indigenous communities. This study thus builds on and extends these traditions by examining embodied expression within the Kristang or Portuguese-Eurasian Creole-Indigenous community – itself already known to be highly performance-oriented (Sarkissian, 1997, 2000, 2002) but relatively underdocumented in terms of its own approaches to embodiment and physicality – as a systematic, relational, and historically grounded form of public knowledge-making. It is also written in a Kristang-ontology-grounded and fully autistic (i.e. extremely high-density and high-detail)

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paradigm to exemplify the functionality of both of these positions, which are rarely allowed to appear as themselves in academic work.

Background and Positionality

I am the current 13th *Kabesa*, Cowboy of Heaven or singular non-hereditary Indigenous Chief of the Kristang, Serani or Portuguese-Eurasian ethnic community of Melaka, Singapore, Perth and Kuala Lumpur, publicly recognized as such by the National University of Singapore since 2024 and the Singapore state since 2025 (Wong, 2026c, 2026d). I am also a Kristang Creole-Indigenous scholar-practitioner and the primary scholarly authority on Kristang worldwide, an internationally-recognized science fiction and fantasy writer, a native speaker of the critically endangered Kristang language, and the first openly gay, non-binary, actively polyamorous, neurodivergent (autism, ADHD, High Sensitivity / Highly Sensitive Person (HSP), Stacked-Sequence Synesthesia (SSS) and Time-Space Synesthesia (TMSPS)) and atheist *Kabesa* in the entire history of the community since it began in the 16th century from intermarriages between arriving Portuguese soldiers and local Malay residents in the city of Melaka in present-day Malaysia (Baxter, 2005). I am further a direct-line descendant of two of the most well-known and universally respected previous *Kabesa*, John Edwin Richard Tessensohn OBE (b. 1855 d. 1926, the 4th *Kabesa* from 1874 to 1926 and my great-great-great-grandfather), and Tuan Raja Muda Adriaan Koek (b. 1759 d. 1825, the 1st *Kabesa* from 1795 to 1824 and my great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather (De Witt, 2005)), such that in my childhood I was anticipated and groomed to eventually be a leader in the community in the same fashion as both of these figures. Finally, I am also a survivor of unrelated severe childhood sexual abuse that ultimately sought to turn me into a cult-like neo-Christian messianic figure or reincarnation of Jesus Christ. The consolidation, processing and creolizing of all of these forms of trauma and facts about myself starting from 2019 while in therapy after encountering of further intense sexual and psychoemotional abuse from another Kristang person, together with my own subsequent training in Solutions-focused Brief Therapy (SFBT), is what prompted me to become the first publicly body-positive and sex-positive *Kabesa* starting from September 2021, and the *Kabesa Ultramar* or the *Kabesa* most focused on decolonization, cultural revitalization and reinvigoration, trauma transmutation and processing, and the integration of Kristang epistemologies, philosophies and ways of thinking about and perceiving Kristang language, culture and identity self-reflexively and/or "on Kristang terms." A core part of all of this work as the *Kabesa Ultramar* is the use of a Creole-Indigenous process particular to Kristang known as *sunyeskah* or dreamfishing to either rapidly consolidate and/or integrate previously unconscious, suppressed, unnamed or unconsolidated elements of our culture and identity, or excavate and identify completely new elements that are consciously hybridized, transmuted or creolized into Kristang. I accomplished this following and in adherence to prior historical unconscious use of dreamfishing before I became *Kabesa* in 2016 and named the process itself through a recursive use of dreamfishing itself in late 2022 (Wong, 2024). The highly egalitarian and diffuse nature of the Kristang community or, as is understood from a Kristang-internal ontological viewpoint, *eleidi*, means that any Kristang speaker of any social status can generally dreamfish new elements of Kristang language, culture and identity at any time, and they may do so while leaving a strong "personal" or "individual" mark on both, due to an inherent core epistemological uncertainty, fuzziness and fluidity about what exactly constitutes Kristang culture and identity, due to the unique sociohistorical conditions and trauma that inform what it means to be Kristang today. At the same time, as *Kabesa*, I (initially unconsciously and now much more

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consciously) tend to be regarded as – and expected to be – the core and major source of legitimate linguistic and cultural innovation in Kristang, a role which I have consciously leaned into since August 2022 (Wong, 2026c).

My autoethnographic work is thus likely to be extremely unusual by neurotypical and Western academic standards, because by default (and, based on observations in clinical therapy, very likely as a result of the complex of neurodivergent and Kristang characteristics I consciously and unconsciously possess and the particular forms of personal trauma I have been through) I have very little to no core conscious, subconscious or unconscious interest in hiding anything from either myself or from the collective at large. This occurs often to my own detriment and exploitation by the latter, and beyond even the degree that neurodivergent people are often said to "over-share" or "info-dump". This has also led to me struggling with extremely low self-esteem in spite of my own achievements as *Kabesa* and as a public figure, as I still have great difficulty emotionally accepting the "chameleon-like" nature of the *Kabesa* role (where to me I have to "hide" or "mask" parts of myself in order to be accepted in neurotypical larger society and academia). I was generally ostracized, humiliated and abused in most contexts of my life before May 2025 *because* I was able to achieve significant personal success while also being able to generally fully be myself in all contexts of my life. This was something that I was not aware most other people were not able to do and for which I received a great deal of envy (which I was also almost completely blind to). I do not remotely qualify for any personality disorder or psychoemotional disorder other than periodic depressive bouts and suicidal ideation due to the trauma I have experienced. Due to one of these instances in particular, I have also struggled with almost obsessive-compulsive fears that I am narcissistic, borderline or abusive to others I love since July 2019. My interest in body positivity, and my ability to *sunyaxah* or dreamshine, also emerges from this particular instance of very severe sexual and psychoemotional abuse in July 2019. As part of trying to process this abuse in therapy, for the first time in my life I became aware that I am not only generally highly physically and sexually attractive, but also come off as highly conventionally cisgender masculine in general – something I was completely unaware of for most of my life. This was at complete odds with my own self-perception, where from my earliest memories I had seen myself as physically incapable or unathletic, scrawny, femme or feminine, sensitive and overly emotional, weak and physically and sexually unattractive. This way of viewing myself was compounded by strong, existing cisgender masculine norms within the Kristang and Eurasian communities, which tend to consistently valorize and idealize physical prowess, athletic abilities, brawniness, monogamous heterosexuality, and (physical, emotional and psychological) ruggedness. I was subsequently diagnosed with muscle dysphoria in September 2024, and also now recognize that my trauma, autism, ADHD and High Sensitivity all additionally severely affect my ability to sensorily recognize my own physical attractiveness and alignment to cisgender masculine norms.

My dreamfishing of the term and concept of dreamshining is therefore undoubtedly a personal response to deep existential hurt and/or catastrophic trauma, especially centered around the fact that many people otherwise consistently failed to recognize that I am autistic and speak and understand the world literally, and therefore needed a jarring and repeated reminder in embodied or behavioral form that this was the case. However, because it intersects with collective and intergenerational trauma that affects other members of the Kristang community and other people in Singapore in the same way, it also carries strong collective resonance that, like most of

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the material I have dreamfished since 2022, has been quietly organically expanding throughout the community. This has allowed me to recognize the role of *sunyaxadorang*, dreamshiner or Indigenous body performance artist as one of the four key leadership roles in addition to the *Kabesa* role within the Kristang community since June 2025.

A Timeline of the Consolidation and Formalization of Sunyaxah or Dreamshining

Stage 1: Clothed Mirror Selfies

Although I formally locate the emergence of *sunyaxah* or dreamshining in September 2021, its prehistory can be traced to September 2020, when I first began posting mirror selfies on social media while already serving as the 13th *Kabesa*. At that time, these images were not yet consciously framed as cultural practice; rather, they functioned as tentative acts of visual self-recognition following prolonged periods of dissociation from my body caused by childhood, adolescent, and adult sexual trauma. The mirror therefore became an intermediary technology through which I could slowly re-establish perceptual contact with myself as an embodied Creole-Indigenous subject rather than as an aracial and dissociated object shaped primarily by external projections. This early *sunyaxah kung kamiza* or mirror phase (September 2020–August 2021) was characterized by cautious self-observation rather than public declaration, especially because I was still serving as a Ministry of Education Teaching Scholar in Singapore's Civil Service: all images were clothed, often carefully composed, and accompanied by relatively restrained textual commentary. Nevertheless, this period established a crucial methodological foundation: systematic attention to how bodily representation interacted with memory, affect, and audience response. In retrospect, it constituted the experimental ground from which dreamshining later emerged.

Stage 2: No Shirt

I thereafter first began to more radically creolize the above-mentioned trauma related to my body and attractiveness, or to *dreamshine*, on World Suicide Day 2021 (Friday, 10 September 2021) when, after coming out as Singapore's first openly gay serving Ministry of Education Teaching Scholar, government school teacher and civil servant, I began posting shirtless images paired with more explicitly confessional and/or poetic text than had previously occurred in a public context that focused on creolizing or transmuting trauma related to my body. This *sunyaxah seng kamiza* or "no shirt" phase unfolded while I was still employed within the Singapore teaching service and formally embedded within state institutions; however, at this point, bodily exposure functioned primarily as a therapeutic intervention directed inward, and aimed to counteract deeply internalized narratives of physical inadequacy, weakness, and undesirability produced by earlier abuse, while also exemplifying healthy and appropriate approaches to body visibility and positivity as one might expect from any other adult educator. However, this phase also acquired unintended political and cultural dimensions. As a government scholar and public educator, my visibility rendered these posts institutionally legible, and what had begun as personal healing became an accidentally quiet but persistent challenge to state-sanctioned respectability norms surrounding sexuality, masculinity, and minority leadership because I was gay and comfortable in my body – radical notions in conservative and patriarchal Singapore. In this period, early dreamshining thus existed in a liminal state: simultaneously private coping mechanism and emergent public praxis.

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Stage 3: No Pants

My resignation from the Civil Service in August 2022 following severe homophobic and institutional abuse thereafter marked a third structural turning point, where for the first time since early adulthood, I was no longer directly governed by institutional hierarchies regulating speech, appearance, and moral presentation. This shift was further consolidated in April 2023, when I was publicly recognized as *Kabesa* by the Eurasian Association of Singapore. Together, these events began to reposition all of my own endeavors and behaviors, including dreamshining, from marginal expression to leadership practice. My own posts therefore became even more explicitly honest, candid, reflexive, and historically grounded, and the pairing of bodily imagery with dense metacognitive commentary intensified. Audience responses also shifted, where informal reactions from the Kristang community increasingly suggested my embodiment as such was symbolic of Kristang resilience, queer dignity, and postcolonial autonomy as opposed to mere self-expression.

However, psychological projection onto me from various entities within Singapore also unfortunately correspondingly intensified because I remained stubbornly and autistically independent and committed to being myself – hyper-ethical, honest and neurologically unable to compartmentalize my public and private selves. Unable to believe that the version of me being glimpsed in public was the "real" version of me and not an image, this increasingly more intense psychological projection necessitated similarly more and more radical creolisations of it, until by January 2024, a further threshold was crossed when I began posting images featuring myself in my underwear while maintaining strategic framing and textual mediation. This transition to *sunyaxah seng kalsang* was not driven by exhibitionism, but by the recognition that even the slightest indication of anything that could be (inaccurately) perceived as concealment or occlusion had begun to reproduce residual shame structures and to perpetuate harm onto me. Clothing thus had become the last symbolic buffer between vulnerability and full self-ownership, and it had to be removed in order to symbolically demonstrate that I really had nothing to hide. By this "no pants" stage, dreamshining had become a consciously articulated methodology with its own name in Kristang: *sunyaxah*, a calque of the existing words *sunyah* "to plant, to dream" and *xameza* "vigor". Each post thus more consciously functioned as a micro-intervention into racialized, sexualized, and moralized discourses surrounding Kristang, Creole-Indigenous, neurodivergent and queer bodies in Singapore. The body was arguably no longer merely being reclaimed; it was now being actively and consciously re-authored.

Stage 4: No Nothing

In June 2024, I then entered what may be termed the *sunyaxah seng nada* or the "no nothing" phase: the publication of almost or fully naked images without residual spatial or sartorial shielding. This phase coincided with the development of poetry in which my public dreamshining saw erotic imagery, political critique, and psychological affirmation now being densely interwoven, and at this point, dreamshining reached formal cohesiveness as an integrated artistic, therapeutic, and leadership system. Importantly, full artistic nudity did not correspond to loss of boundary, and on the contrary, I argue it marked the stabilization of internal sovereignty, where the absence of physical barriers was matched by heightened symbolic and ethical framing. My physical vulnerability was no longer reactive; it was structurally governed and became something that I, previously terrified of embodying as a public figure, now began to reclaim as my own larger

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sense of joy and love of how my body manifested ideas, symbols and concepts to others, beyond just doing it to creolize trauma.

Stage 5: Institutional Recognition

The first major instance of institutional-academic recognition followed in September 2024, when my work on dreamshining began to be explicitly acknowledged within scholarly and professional contexts with a peer-reviewed public presentation at the 2024 Singapore Queer Symposium. This recognition validated *sunyaxah* as legitimate cultural knowledge production rather than as idiosyncratic self-display, and also marked the beginning of dialogue between Kristang Creole-Indigenous embodied praxis and formal academic discourse. This final phase to date culminated in January 2026 with the consolidation of 144 pieces of my dreamshining art on my Substack platform *Malayan Supersoaker* (Wong, 2026b) after I withdrew from social media in August 2025. This occurred following unsuccessful efforts to force me back under institutional control after I was able to refuse earlier attempts from various actors to coerce me into running for political office from November 2024 to April 2025 ahead of the 14th Singapore General Election on Saturday, 3 May. This in turn led to the outcome of unprecedented political and psychological independence for myself and the Kristang community from the rest of the carefully managed Singapore civil society and ecosystem, where rather than submitting to state-mediated forms of public legitimacy or to versions of myself that were inauthentic and illegitimate, I chose to maintain my own independence and dignity, and in doing so accidentally creolize my own independent intellectual and cultural space and make dreamshining fully infrastructural. At the time of writing, dreamshining is no longer episodic or platform-dependent, and has been validated by various academic, institutional and community entities (e.g. Wong 2026c, 2026d). It has also been acknowledged as functioning as a stable archive of embodied knowledge, political commentary, and communal reflection, such that the practice has completed its transition from private survival strategy to autonomous public institution.

Processual Structure of Dreamshining

Although *sunyaxah* or dreamshining is often perceived externally as spontaneous self-expression, it is in practice a highly structured, reflexive, and ethically governed process, and over time, and especially from 2023 onward, I have come to recognize that it follows a relatively stable sequence of cognitive, affective, somatic, and relational operations. This section articulates that process from a first-person autoethnographic perspective, noting most critically that dreamshining does not necessarily begin with a desire to display my body. Although sometimes it does, this desire is usually reflective of a deeper, more universally-urgent and present recognition: the perception of unresolved psychoemotional material, projection, dehumanization, trauma or abuse, usually originating in interpersonal conflict, institutional pressure, historical memory, political manipulation, or latent intergenerational unresolved fear, insecurity or marginalization. For me, this tends to manifest somatically as restlessness, heightened interoception, intrusive rumination, or (most commonly) affective congestion in my gut. I experience this as a form of epistemic dissonance: a sense that something important has not yet been adequately named, integrated, or understood, to the degree that my body cannot relax or “unfreeze” until the material in question has been processed and named explicitly.

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Phase 1: Affective-Epistemic Activation

The first phase of *sunyaxah* thus usually consists of this heightened affective activation coupled with epistemic uncertainty, where I become aware that an experience or relational pattern cannot be resolved through private cognition alone. Conventional strategies of internal processing, such as journaling or private reflection, generally prove insufficient, and I usually recognize informally that this requires the generation of something aesthetic, creative or expressive. However, at this stage, I do not yet know what I will express, and I only know that something must be articulated publicly through dreamshining in order for it to become cognitively and ethically stable. This also corresponds to what I understand, within Kristang Creole-Indigenous epistemology, as the surfacing of *felisi* or synchronicity: a clustering of emotional, relational, and symbolic signals indicating latent meaning.

Phase 2: Somatic Grounding and Spatial Preparation

Once affective activation is recognized, I move toward bodily and spatial grounding. This involves unconsciously selecting a physical environment that supports vulnerability and attentional focus, most often a domestic space such as a bathroom or bedroom, but sometimes another public space where a tolerable level of body visibility is permitted within conservative Singapore. In the moment, I think of it as "going with where my feelings take me," but analysis after the fact has uncovered a pattern of me attending unconsciously to posture, breathing, and sensory states where I am comfortable and in regulatory alignment with whatever I am feeling (*korsang*), thinking (*mulera*), experiencing sensorily (*korpu*) and connecting to in terms of ideas or inspiration (*alma*), ultimately seeking a bodily state in which neither hyperarousal nor dissociation dominates. This appears to be because successful dreamshining (which, again, in the moment, to me, is basically a piece of dreamshining art that I will consistently feel proud of) requires embodied presence rather than emotional flooding, and aesthetic crafting rather than simple unmediated stream-of-consciousness or trauma dumping. During this phase, decisions regarding degrees of exposure are thus also made, and while these are unconscious, they are never arbitrary, and must always align with how I feel about myself and my body. In other words, I will never "perform" a pose or image to satiate the demands of what I think the dreamshining will or should look like in order to appeal to others; not just because I am neurologically incapable of doing so, but because to me, doing so would no longer be dreamshining. Greater epistemic opacity often requires greater bodily transparency in relation to my feelings, thoughts, experiences and ongoing ideation, and the ideal state with dreamshining is for my body to reflect exactly how I am feeling, thinking, experiencing and ideating at the point in time where the art is produced.

Phase 3: Visual Capture as Reflexive Act

The act of taking the photograph constitutes the third phase. I use mirror-based self-portraiture rather than third-person photography in order to preserve reflexivity, mundanity and naturalness, where the camera records not only my body but my act of self-observation. During this, multiple images are usually taken, and most are discarded as I seek to find the optimally accurate alignment between and reflection of all four parts of my *Kuartukarni Igleza* or Quaternity of Personhood (*korpu* / body, *mulera* / mind, *korsang* / heart and *alma* / soul). Selection is hence based on phenomenological accuracy rather than aesthetic optimization, where I choose the image

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that most closely corresponds to my internal state at that moment, even when it contradicts normative attractiveness standards, so that my physical embodiment and written expression are able to transform diffuse affect into a visible, analyzable object.

Phase 4: Poetic-Conceptual Encoding

Following successful visual capture, I engage in textual production. This typically occurs immediately or within a very short temporal window (immediately after I take the photograph or some minutes after), because delay reduces epistemic fidelity. The writing process is similarly semi-spontaneous but highly structured, where I allow rhyming, associative chains, metaphorical resonances, and multilingual registers to surface, while at the same time monitoring coherence, ethical clarity, and interpretive openness. The poetry associated with each image thus consistently operates through layered semantics, where words are chosen for their capacity to sustain multiple simultaneous meanings across interpersonal, political, historical, and metacognitive registers to achieve deliberate compression and transmission of complex experiential data. I generally revise minimally, preferring to produce a single text without significant drafting or rewriting; excessive polishing risks over-sanitizing the affective truth that I am seeking to express.

Phase 5: Relational Coherence

Once image and text are produced, I assess their relational coherence. The question guiding this phase is: Do these elements mutually regulate interpretation? If either component can be easily misread in isolation, further adjustment is required. The goal is not to eliminate misinterpretation entirely, which is impossible, but to prevent reductive readings that would allow for potential harm to myself, others, and the community. Dreamshining is never used to expose private information about third parties, and any relational material is abstracted into structural patterns or unsaid associations rather than direct personalized accusation.

Phase 6: Public Circulation

Publication constitutes the sixth phase, where once released, the work enters relational space and ceases to be interpreted solely by me. Anticipated and unanticipated responses, silences, projections, and reinterpretations thus become part of the process, and I observe these reactions closely – not for validation, but for diagnostic insight, because they reveal which social narratives are being activated, resisted, or transformed, and how people are responding to the provocations and challenges encoded into the work. I experience strong embodied somatic signals, again especially in my gut, in relation to this phase, and am generally able to use these to construct an approximation of the Kristang community's immediate larger reaction to the art.

Phase 7: Reflexive Integration

The final phase therefore involves using this data for retrospective synthesis, where over days or weeks, I reflect on changes in self-perception, relational dynamics, and cognitive clarity following publication. Successful dreamshining produces measurable positive outcomes: reduced rumination, increased ethical certainty, restored relational boundaries, and enhanced leadership coherence. When these effects are absent or generate discomfort, I also similarly analyze why, and

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use my own natural neurodivergent tendency to aggressively examine the reasons for neurotypical behavior that I do not immediately or instinctively understand to support this.

Taken together, these seven phases constitute a recursive, relationally accountable, and ethically governed methodology that consistently reflects core features of Kristang Creole-Indigenous epistemology, values and behaviors rather than an idiosyncratic expressive habit. Each iteration builds cumulatively on prior technical, symbolic, and ethical learning, in keeping with the Creole principle of knowledge as something that is inherently uncertain and continuously hybridized, refined, and relationally validated rather than fixed or canonized. Meanwhile, meaning is not privately asserted but co-produced through public circulation within the eleidi, where interpretation, response, and silence all function as forms of communal sense-making, and cognition remains inseparable from embodiment, reflecting long-standing Kristang understandings of body, mind, heart, and soul as integrated sites of knowing rather than hierarchically separated faculties. Finally, at the same time, radical transparency is consistently governed by responsibility to relational harmony, historical memory, and collective dignity.

Over time, this process of sunyaxah has thus become infrastructural rather than episodic: a stable Creole-Indigenous technology of knowledge production embedded within my leadership role as Kabesa and within broader processes of cultural revitalization. It can also be glimpsed in the work of other *idaderes* / millennial and *zamyedes* / Gen Z Kristang people who operate as artists or performers in the public sphere, where dreamshining especially operationalizes personal *felisi* as an analytic instrument, treats embodiment as both archive and interface, and enacts creolisations or the transmutation of trauma through the continual integration of personal experience, collective and intergenerational cycles of prejudice and decay, current sociopolitical context, and poetic or aesthetic form.

The following two case studies now illustrate how the Creole-Indigenous methodology behind dreamshining operates in practice through two instances of my own dreamshining art, one publicly available on *Malayan Supersoaker* at time of writing and one privately situated, each demonstrating the integration of embodied exposure, poetic encoding, ethical governance, and communal accountability described above. Each case study section presents the dreamshining artwork in full before proceeding on with the analysis.

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Case Study 1: "The Truths You Didn't Want Me to Process" (Friday, 16 January 2026)

Figure 1 – *"The Truths You Didn't Want Me to Process"* (2026), *dreamshining art (photograph and poem)*

Each time I tried to understand you, it was always
I digress
or *I look for some other*
havoc.
Some other way of knowing.
Some other mess

that you tried to realise.
Getting me to shame myself in public?
I never realised

I was trying to fall in love
with someone so hollow

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those lies
really now
no longer boggle the mind;

competing with the Chief?
Competing with what Kevin could still tell himself
he could find

all the while
you really drew circles
around that endless

winter.
I soldiered on.
You kept daring me
not to break the image.
Not to look even closer

until it all resolved
into a pattern
not even the most energetic use
of manipulation

could deny;

someone had to be playing for
many different teams.
Someone else had to be giving it all up
so that no one,
not even Kevin Martens Wong

would ever ask why
it might take so long
for so many truths
to become one.

And now
that I know,
have your emptiest victory.
Consider at last
what it means
for you

to have undeniably
and irrevocably
won.

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This first case study examines a publicly available piece of dreamshining published on *Malayan Supersoaker* on 16 January 2026, entitled "The Truths You Didn't Want Me to Process". The work emerged during a period of full public formal infrastructural large-scale consolidation of most elements of Kristang culture, philosophy and identity on the Internet following my withdrawal from mainstream social media and the successful establishment of the independence of the Kristang community and my leadership as the 13th Kabesa by October 2025. By this stage, dreamshining had fully transitioned from episodic self-expression to a stabilized Indigenous methodology embedded within my leadership role, and each published work functioned simultaneously as personal integration, communal sense-making, and political boundary-setting. The poem was composed in response to my realization that a former romantic partner who I had also identified as likely to succeed me as Kabesa had likely engaged in sustained psychological and relational manipulation between October 2024 and January 2026 for political and reputational purposes that were at odds with those of myself and the Kristang community. This period coincided with intensified external efforts to redirect my public trajectory toward formal politics, and my own gradual and painful recognition that this person had played a huge unseen role in those. The work thus crystallizes the intersection of intimate betrayal, leadership vulnerability, and postcolonial institutional pressure, while also quietly informing the Kristang community at large about this betrayal and how I was processing it.

Integrated Form: Image and Poem Together as Dual-Key Creole Knowledge System

As with almost all forms of my own *sunyaxah* practice, this work consists of two inseparable components: a photographic self-portrait and an accompanying poem. Together, they form a single creolized unit of meaning, and neither component is intelligible in isolation. This integration reflects a fundamental feature of Kristang knowledge-making: meaning is produced through relational hybridity rather than through isolated genres. Visual, linguistic, emotional, and historical registers are interwoven to generate multi-layered understanding, and with both seemingly distinct halves actually functioning as complementary epistemic instruments which are both needed to understand the full overall tone and tenor of my voice and my own emotional state. The photograph anchors the work in embodied reality, while the poem encodes and interprets that reality, and their coupling prevents both voyeuristic consumption and reductive pathologization or projection.

Visual Analysis: Nakedness as Sovereign Transparency

The photographic component depicts me "standing-seated" (adopting a seated posture while standing leaning against the wall) almost completely nude in the bathroom of my flat, captured through mirror self-portraiture. As with almost all of my dreamshining art, the mirror functions reflexively, not only documenting both the body and the act of self-observation, but mirroring the radically provocative epistemic structure of dreamshining, in which the self remains simultaneously subject, object, and analyst.

At base level, my body is similarly presented without stylization, digital enhancement, or aesthetic optimization, and musculature, softness, and asymmetry remain visible. This reflects my own ethical commitment with my *sunyaxah* practice to authenticity over aspirational representation. In terms of how near-nakedness is used in this poem specifically, meanwhile,

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within Kristang cultural contexts marked by historical sexualization and moral surveillance, such nakedness has often been associated with shame or deviance. Here, I instead unconsciously have re-coded nudity as epistemic transparency, where it signals that nothing is being concealed, compartmentalized, or strategically curated. In relation to the theme of the entire piece of art being focused on relational manipulation, the selfie thus performs a symbolic counter-move, where manipulation usually depends on opacity, fragmentation, and narrative control, and my full physical visibility instead unconsciously asserts coherence and moral continuity, with the body thus becoming accidental evidence of non-duplicity.

With this particular person in general, who was extremely masculine-coded and muscular, one of the retrospective signals for me that something was relationally incongruent lay in the discrepancy between their outward bodily presentation and their embodied relational behavior. Although they frequently dressed in ways that were provocative, body-positive, or intentionally musculature-revealing, in person they were consistently avoidant, anxious, and at times visibly frightened of even minimal physical closeness. This disjunction between visual self-presentation and lived bodily engagement functioned, in retrospect, as an early indicator of compartmentalization and performative identity management. Within the context of this dreamshining work, my own near-total nakedness thus also unconsciously operates as a deliberate inversion of that pattern, where rather than using bodily display as a curated surface masking relational withdrawal, I present my body in a context of emotional and ethical availability, owning not just my comfort with physicality but full relational coherence: what is visible corresponds to how I actually inhabit intimacy, accountability, and vulnerability. In this sense, nakedness becomes a semiotic guarantee of continuity between appearance and conduct, and communicates that my public embodiment, private affective life, and leadership ethics are not separated domains but mutually reinforcing dimensions of the same integrated self. Through this contrast, the image implicitly critiques forms of masculinity and desirability that rely on aesthetic display while avoiding emotional and moral reciprocity like the one my partner had embodied, and instead models a Creole-Indigenous ethic in which bodily openness, relational honesty, and epistemic responsibility are inseparable.

Textual Analysis: Reclamation, Counter-Projection, Integration, and Somatic Epistemology

The accompanying text operates as a dense, multi-layered textual system that performs four recurring functions within my own *sunyaxah* practice: reclamation, counter-projection, aesthetic integration, and somatic epistemology. These functions are mutually reinforcing and transform personal narrative into Creole-Indigenous knowledge production.

Reclamation: Reauthoring Agency after Trauma and Shame

At its most fundamental level, the poem functions as an act of reclamation, reasserting my own authorial, epistemic, and moral agency in the aftermath of relational manipulation, sexual trauma, queerphobic conditioning, and colonial-inflected shame. Throughout the text, I reconstruct a narrative in which confusion, self-doubt, and delayed recognition are no longer framed as personal weakness, but as consequences of sustained relational distortion. Lines such as “I never realised / I was trying to fall in love / with someone so hollow” exemplify this literal reauthoring process without blame, where I seek to underscore my own neurodivergent vulnerability as

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evidence of ethical openness rather than naïveté. By narrating the gradual emergence of understanding, I thus try to reclaim interpretive authority over my own experience, without excessively naming or shaming the person who betrayed me. Within Kristang contexts shaped by historical moral institutional surveillance and racialized sexualization, I argue such reclamation carries collective resonance, and models a culturally specific form of survivor agency grounded in reflective re-narration that allows the Unsaid in the poem to quietly do its work, as opposed to aggressive denial or reactivity that also often unfortunately diminishes the persuasiveness of survivor accounts.

Counter-Projection: Redirecting Stereotype and Moral Surveillance

A second central function of the poem is counter-projection: the deliberate negation of externally imposed stereotypes through high-level metacognitive framing. Kristang, queer, and Indigenous bodies in Singapore have historically been positioned as hypersexual, immoral, emotionally unstable, or politically unreliable through projections that operate by displacing social anxiety onto them. Dreamshining therefore does not (and cannot) merely resist these projections; it instead absorbs, reframes, and redirects them.

The poem's sustained analytical tone, conceptual density, and restraint hence actively undermine reductive readings. For example, references to "competing with the Chief" and "playing for many different teams" invoke political rivalry and strategic positioning, but do so without sensationalism or accusation, where I refuse to perform scandal or to create conditions where drama or sensationalization would collapse revitalization. As a result, interpretive pressure is re-displaced back toward the collective: readers are compelled to interrogate their own assumptions rather than consume the body or narrative as spectacle as would be usually done. The poem thus functions as a (counter-)mirror for social projection, returning scrutiny to the observer. This redirection exemplifies a core feature of my own *sunyaxah*: the use of intellectual and poetic complexity as a shield against objectification.

Aesthetic Splitting and Integration: Holding Contradiction without Fragmentation

A third defining function of the poem is aesthetic splitting and integration: the capacity to hold contradictory qualities simultaneously without psychological or symbolic fragmentation, where the text consistently sustains tensions between softness and authority, vulnerability and leadership, eroticism and dignity, humor and gravity, intimacy and public responsibility. For example, the poem's cadence coexists with my own sharp autistic analytical insight, where expressions of emotional exposure are paired with political clarity, and grief and lucidity are interwoven rather than separated. This integrative capacity reflects the deeper logic of *sunyaxah* itself, encoded linguistically in its etymology: dreamshining is not about resolving contradiction by suppressing one pole, but about metabolizing and metastasizing tension into luminosity and numinosity. In Kristang cultural contexts, where colonial governance and religious moralism have historically demanded compartmentalization, such integration constitutes a radical epistemic stance. The poem attempts to demonstrate that queerness and leadership, nakedness and dignity, trauma and joy, can coexist without mutual cancellation.

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Somatic Epistemology: Translating Bodily Knowing into Public Knowledge

Finally, the poem exemplifies somatic epistemology: the recognition that the body registers relational truth prior to conscious verbal reasoning. Throughout the text, cognitive understanding is portrayed as lagging behind embodied perception. Patterns are "felt" long before they are articulated. Phrases such as "until it all resolved / into a pattern" foreground this delayed integration, where for me, knowledge emerges not through sudden revelation, but through the gradual alignment of bodily intuition and conceptual clarity. Dreamshining formalizes this process by pairing embodied imagery with reflective language and converting pre-verbal sensing into socially intelligible knowledge, such that the poem does not merely describe insight, but in a sense meta-reflexively documents its emergence from somatic experience. Within Indigenous and neurodivergent epistemologies, such bodily knowing has already long been treated as central rather than peripheral, and *sunyaxah* simply concretizes this principle, treating affective and sensory data as legitimate analytic sources.

Synthesis of Image and Text

Taken together, the photographic and poetic components of *The Truths You Didn't Want Me to Process* constitute a single, integrated Creole-Indigenous epistemic system rather than two parallel expressive elements. Meaning does not reside in either medium independently but emerges through their reciprocal regulation: the image provides embodied evidence of transparency, coherence, and ethical availability, while the poem supplies conceptual articulation, historical contextualization, and metacognitive framing. Each constrains and amplifies the interpretive possibilities of the other.

The near-naked body that forms the core of the image establishes my own sovereign vulnerability: a state in where exposure is neither coerced nor defensive, but self-governed and relationally accountable, and where it signals continuity between private affect, public conduct, and leadership ethics. Without the poem, this visibility could be misread as exhibitionism or provocation, and the textual layer actively prevents such reduction by situating the body within a narrative of reclamation, analytic clarity, and moral integration.

Conversely, without the image, the poem could be interpreted as abstract grievance or private rumination. The embodied presence therefore anchors the text in lived reality and demonstrates that the insights articulated are not merely cognitive conclusions but outcomes of sustained somatic, relational, and ethical processing, and a constant reminder that this is something happening in real-time to the author of the poem. The body thus functions as archive, interface, and verification site for the poem's claims.

Through their coupling, the entire piece of art thus performs the four core functions of mature *sunyaxah* simultaneously: reclamation is enacted through self-directed visibility, counter-projection is achieved through the fusion of vulnerability and intellectual density, aesthetic integration is embodied in the coexistence of softness, authority, eroticism, and dignity, and somatic epistemology is realized through the translation of bodily intuition into poetic knowledge. This synthesis reflects the Creole logic underlying Kristang knowledge production – in which meaning is generated through hybridization rather than separation of domains, and visuality,

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language, affect, memory, and politics are not compartmentalized but braided into a single communicative form – and ultimately, the work overall therefore tries to exemplify how dreamshining operationalizes creolization of trauma at the level of method, and to underscore how image and text together transform relational injury into culturally legible insight without sacrificing privacy, complexity, or ethical restraint.

Case Study II: "Early Access" (Wednesday, 7 August 2024)

Figure 2 – *"Early Access"* (2024)*, dreamshining art (photograph and poem)*

Have sex with me
while I die, again,
earlier this time,

unable to breathe.

Unable to rewrite
time and probability.
Speed

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cannot bring me to an essence.
Willpower and symmetry
they have no destiny. No replicability.
Entropy brings the far greater resilience

wrapped into the paradox of metacognition.
Transferred across hope and dream
to a reciprocal nonlocality

found deep within what things appear to seem

when things are not awake.
When underwear has been lost.
When image is no longer fake

you taste of my cock
and now I make you a new lake

and sit on top of you like a rock
and make sure that the fountain that we have both become

is great. You twist my nipples until they melt, and still

I remain.

Still, I shiver.
Still, I refuse to forsake

each and every non-Singaporean winter

spent waiting for you to reclaim
each and every psychotemporal splinter
torn anew into my brain.

Excepting this:
I no longer crawl and whimper.
Nor will I ever-more reveal anything
one might call

Profane

or which you might call

a sinner.

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Contextual Positioning within the Dreamshining Trajectory

This second case study examines a semi-public dreamshining work entitled *Early Access*, composed and circulated in August 2024. Unlike the first case study, which emerged during a period of infrastructural consolidation and political independence, this work was produced under conditions of acute vulnerability and sustained external pressure. At the time of its creation, I was experiencing covert and indirect attempts to destabilize, traumatize, and psychologically compromise me through sexual coercion, boundary violations, and the orchestration of environments conducive to sexual harm. These efforts were embedded within broader attempts to render me more pliable to institutional and political manipulation in advance of the 2025 Singapore General Election. The work thus emerged in a context where bodily autonomy, psychological integrity, and leadership sovereignty were being actively targeted, and, within Kristang epistemological terms, to the degree that extreme *felisi* intensity was occurring: a convergence of personal danger, political instrumentalization, and historical patterns of racialized sexual vulnerability. Dreamshining here thus functioned less as reflective consolidation and more as immediate epistemic self-defense.

Integrated Form: Image and Poem under Conditions of Threat

As with mature *sunyaxah* practice, *Early Access* consists of a photographic self-portrait and an accompanying poem that together form a single epistemic unit. However, unlike in Case Study I, this pairing reflects a transitional stage in which stabilized sovereignty coexists with active exposure to harm, where the work was not produced from a position of consolidated independence, but from within an unstable relational and institutional field. As such, the integration of image and text here performs not only meaning-making but boundary reinforcement that functions as a protective mechanism against narrative distortion and bodily exploitation., It pushes back against attempts to force me into a particular sanitized image of a public figure: the image documents presence, the poem articulates resistance and together, they enact survival through coherence.

Visual Analysis: Embodied Assertion under Surveillance

The photographic component depicts me in full artistic nudity in front of the mirror in a private study space, with the setting including visible markers of my own intellectual labor: bookshelves, work materials, and a desk. Unlike the bathroom setting of Case Study I, this environment foregrounds cognition, scholarship, and leadership rather than bodily care, and situates artistic nakedness within a space of intellectual production. This juxtaposition destabilizes dominant binaries between eroticism and seriousness, vulnerability and authority, and ensures that the body is presented not as object for political manipulation but as coextensive with agency, independence and thought. The posture I unconsciously chose reflects this, with its basic form being grounded and stable, one foot planted firmly, the torso positioned upright, and the body generally occupying space without hesitation. Despite full exposure, there is no collapse, shrinking, or defensive withdrawal, communicating fortification and containment rather than dissociation.

At the time of production, my bodily boundaries were being repeatedly challenged through coercive relational dynamics that would later involve attempts to sexually assault or rape me, and

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so in this context, nakedness functions not as invitation but as declaration: I inhabit my body on my own terms. Nothing is being taken. Nothing is being ceded. The presence of headphones and phone further reinforces this autonomy, signifying controlled mediation of sensory and relational input where even in unwanted exposure, I remain self-governing. This image thus documents my embodied resistance in this period, and asserts that intellectual agency, erotic presence, and bodily sovereignty are inseparable.

Poetic Analysis: Reclamation, Counter-Projection, Integration, and Somatic Epistemology

Reclamation: Subversion of Erotic Instrumentalization

The text tries to underscore reclamation by reasserting my sexual and emotional agency under conditions where consent and safety were being strategically undermined. From its opening line, “Have sex with me / while I die, again,” I argue the text names the coexistence of intimacy and harm without romanticization, where rather than aestheticizing suffering, it instead attempts to document the psychic violence of coerced vulnerability and reframe survival not as passive endurance but as active refusal to internalize degradation. By the time of the poem’s conclusion, “I no longer crawl and whimper,” I explicitly reject the subject-position of sexualized subordination, and instead reiterate that reclamation here is not gentle recovery but firm reoccupation of bodily and moral territory.

Counter-Projection: Neutralizing Sexualized Control

During this period, attempts were made to construct me as polyamorously overavailable, erotically overaccessible, emotionally unstable and impulsive, and politically exploitable, with these projections relying on positioning my queerness and openness as liabilities. The poem thus tries to counter this by embedding sexual imagery within dense philosophical, mathematical, and epistemological registers, with references to entropy, probability, nonlocality, and metacognition, and to the spacetime dimensions in Kristang metaphysical theory, repeatedly interrupting any possibility of straightforward reductive erotic consumption.

Sexual language itself, meanwhile, is not offered for voyeuristic pleasure. It is reframed as evidence of cognitive sovereignty, where the reader is confronted not with a “vulnerable body” but with an analytically armed subject that is fully aware of how its own sexuality is being weaponized against it, and “leans in” to these projections and objectifications to neutralize them and force interpretation of the poem to always occur at the level of thought rather than fantasy.

Aesthetic Splitting and Integration: Erotic Intensity and Intellectual Authority

The poem finally sustains extreme aesthetic tension, where explicit sexual imagery coexists with abstract conceptual language, physical sensation is interwoven with philosophical reflection, and desire and defiance are inseparable. For example, the line “You twist my nipples until they melt, and still / I remain” reflects how my own presence holds erotic sensation (“nerdiness”) and existential structural superstability (“jockiness”) in a single frame. Such integration of otherwise intolerable paradoxes exemplifies the core subversive logic of my *sunyaxah*: people may get to see and even make use of my naked body, but the contradictions it engenders are always in return

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forcibly metabolized rather than suppressed by the viewer, such that queerness and authority, sexuality and scholarship, trauma and resilience all get to coexist without fragmentation.

Somatic Epistemology: The Body as Early Warning System

Throughout the poem, reminders of my intense bodily distress during this period precede conceptual clarity, where references to breathlessness, shivering, and temporal distortion document how my body consistently registered threat before it could be fully articulated. Lines such as "Unable to rewrite / time and probability" reflect the limits of my own rational control under trauma, while also ensuring that these limits are indicated as not being accepted passively, but analyzed and converted into new forms of painful but necessary growth. Metatextually, this dreamshining thus seeks to convert these somatic signals into radical public knowledge, where the entire artwork tries to function as a translation device, rendering pre-verbal danger intelligible, and also accidentally exemplifying a core message of Kristang Creole-Indigenous (and neurodivergent) epistemology: the body is not only not subordinate to cognition, but is its primary sensor.

Synthesis of Image and Text

In "Early Access", image and text again operate together just like in "The Truths You Didn Want Me to Process", but this time as a defensive epistemic structure under conditions of threat, where the photograph asserts embodied presence and territorial integrity and the poem articulates resistance, coherence, and ethical refusal. More precisely, the naked body communicates: I am here. I am intact. I am not available for extraction; and the poem adds: I understand what is happening. I will not participate in my own instrumentalization. Again, without the image, the poem could be read as abstract distress, while without the poem, the image could be misread as erotic vulnerability. Their coupling forecloses both interpretations and instead enacts reclamation, counter-projection, aesthetic integration, and somatic epistemology simultaneously, transforming attempted sexual and political exploitation ahead of the General Election – the semantically ambiguous Early Access of the title that also references the often extremely exploitative and super-extractive nature of sex work – into culturally legible and highly subversive resistance.

Discussion and Theoretical Positioning: Dreamshining as Creole-Indigenous Method and Counter-Extractive Public Praxis

The two case studies make visible why I describe *sunyaxah* as Creole-Indigenous rather than merely personal, where both works enact a recognizable Kristang logic of knowledge-making where meaning is generated through relational hybridity rather than through singular authoritative statements. Image and poem are not separate "genres" attached for aesthetic flourish, but form a dual-key system in which each medium constrains the other's misreadings, and meaning emerges from their coupling. This is continuous with the broader Creole condition of language and identity, where legitimacy is rarelycr given by a single source and is instead assembled across multiple registers, audiences, and situations. Dreamshining operationalizes that Creole reality at the level of method, and produces knowledge that can survive contradiction, because our community's survival has always required the capacity to hold contradiction without fragmentation.

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A second reason dreamshining must be theorized as Creole-Indigenous is that it is grounded in collective historical dynamics of sexualization and moral surveillance. Kristang men, and especially queer Kristang men, are not merely "sexualized" in the abstract, but are positioned within long-standing colonial and postcolonial regimes where desirability and shame are structurally entangled, and where bodies become sites through which respectability is policed. Within such regimes, the body is never neutral evidence and arguably has to be read as moral index, political signal, or social threat. Dreamshining further responds to that condition by also refusing the usual bargain that comes with this positioning: to be accepted only through sanitized legibility. My nudity – and my nudity as Chief, *Kabesa* and Cowboy of Heaven – instead functions as sovereign transparency, an epistemic strategy that collapses the space where others attempt to fabricate "what I must really be" behind the scenes. This is not a claim that visibility prevents harm; rather, it is a claim that visibility, when ethically governed and paired with high-density metacognitive framing, can interrupt the mechanics of projection that require opacity and narrative control.

This is therefore also where dreamshining becomes legible as counter-extractive praxis, because extraction in this context is not only economic or institutional, but psychoemotional and semiotic: the attempt to take my body, my sexuality, my sincerity, my leadership role, or my perceived public value and repurpose them as fuel for someone else's stability, image, agenda, or power. In both case studies and other examples of my dreamshining, the works record moments where external forces attempted to organize me into a role that would be easier to govern, shame, or instrumentalize, and dreamshining counters that by converting the attempted extraction itself into raw material for a new artifact that I author on my own terms. Put bluntly: what is taken is returned as a public object that I control, and a durable form that can circulate and do work among adult members of the Kristang *eleidi*.

The processural structure I articulated earlier also further clarifies why dreamshining is not reducible to "my own individual artistic performance." In performance studies terms, dreamshining is not primarily staged for spectatorship; it is staged for the unconscious epistemic stabilization of an entire community. My body is not displayed to be consumed; it is deliberately positioned to become legible to me and to others as evidence of coherence, historical trauma and growth. This is why mirror-based photography, or any other similar form of reflection of the self, matters theoretically: the mirror preserves reflexivity in how the image records not only "a body," but the act of self-observation under pressure, resulting in the documentation of an ontologically-bounded and discernible event, not merely an aesthetic pose, and the generation of a concrete metonymic site for this event where subject, object, and analyst remain collapsed into one frame. This is precisely the condition in which projection normally thrives, and which is inverted by dreamshining such that the same collapse becomes the mechanism through which that projection is instead diagnosed and refused.

Dreamshining art also can only operate when one understands that they are peppered with Kristang-standard triple or quadruple entendres and layered registers. Because Kristang life has long required speaking across multiple audiences and power gradients, and speaking in roundabout or Unsaid ways (Wong, 2023), Creole meaning often needs to remain simultaneously direct and non-exhaustive, legible and resistant, intimate and public. In my practice, this thus shows up as poems that can be read as interpersonal processing, political critique, historical commentary, and

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metacognitive self-audit at once; the point is never to hide meaning, but to prevent the collapse of meaning into a single reductive interpretation that would re-enable extraction. This layering thus protects the work's integrity and allows it to carry multiple truths without being flattened into scandal, pathology, or pornographic consumption.

Finally, I position dreamshining as Indigenous methodology because it treats embodiment as both archive and interface. The body stores what institutions deny, what communities suppress, and what trauma tries to dissociate. In my case, my body also often registers relational truth faster than explicit verbal reasoning, especially under conditions of chronic projection and moral surveillance, and dreamshining formalizes that embodied sensing as knowledge production. It takes those somatic signals arriving in my body, translates them through image, encodes them through text, and then tests them through public circulation and communal response. This is not knowledge produced despite being embodied, but knowledge produced because embodiment is treated as a valid analytic instrument. In other words: dreamshining is how I "think through my body" in public in a way that remains answerable to the eleidi, answerable to history, and answerable to my own ethical continuity as Kabesa.

The two case studies therefore illustrate the full theoretical claim of this paper: that *sunyaxah* is a structured Creole-Indigenous practice that transforms sexualization, projection, and institutional pressure into durable public artifacts that stabilize dignity and generate knowledge. It is both survival infrastructure and cultural revitalization technique, and does not simply represent Kristang resilience, but actively manufactures conditions under which Kristang dignity becomes harder to distort, harder to extract from, and harder to erase. Placing *sunyaxah* within this frame hence requires resisting the default interpretive reflex that treats nudity, self-portraiture, and erotic language as either exhibitionism or confession: those categories are arguably structurally inadequate for what my dreamshining is doing, because they presume a liberal individual subject who "expresses" private interiority outward, and they presume an audience that is primarily there to consume. By contrast, dreamshining emerges for me from a Creole-Indigenous epistemic condition: Kristang identity has already historically produced through hybridity, moral surveillance, racialized sexualization, and continuous external adjudication of legitimacy, and within that condition, "the self" is never only private, but continuously negotiated across family, community, state, and inherited trauma, especially for a public figure and leader like myself. Dreamshining therefore cannot be analyzed as self-expression alone, and is better understood as a deliberately creolized methodology of public thinking that metabolizes projection, converts bodily knowing into communicable knowledge, and stabilizes dignity under conditions where minority bodies are routinely treated as available for interpretation, extraction, and control.

Conclusion and Directions for Further Research

This paper has argued that *sunyaxah*, or dreamshining, is not reducible to autobiographical display or aesthetic provocation, and is best understood as a structured Kristang Creole-Indigenous methodology that couples image and poem into a dual-key knowledge system, converting bodily intuition, historical sexualization, and contemporary projection into ethically governed public artifacts. Across my own personal timeline, processural structure, and two case studies, dreamshining thus can be construed as a counter-extractive praxis that reclaims agency, negates reductive stereotype by forcing metacognitive self-audit in the viewer, integrates contradiction

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without fragmentation, and translates somatic signal into communicable knowledge. In consolidating and identifying dreamshining in this way, I have also sought to show that it further functions as a unique form of specifically Kristang infrastructural leadership practice and one embedded in revitalization rather than episodic self-expression.

At the same time, this study is necessarily constrained by significant methodological and ethical limitations. First, it is grounded primarily in autoethnographic material drawn from my own practice, which, while offering depth and longitudinal continuity, cannot yet represent the full diversity of dreamshining across the Kristang eleidi. These limitations are then further compounded by severe intergenerational trauma linked to colonial violence, sexualization, religious moral surveillance, and institutional marginalization, which continues to shape patterns of silence, self-protection, and distrust around public embodiment; many Kristang people and emerging dreamshiners remain understandably reluctant to have their work analyzed, archived, or contextualized academically, as visibility has historically carried real social, familial, and political risks. This reticence naturally restricts access to comparative data and reinforces the need for slow, consent-based, and community-governed research practices.

Further research should thus (1) seek to document additional dreamshiners (*sunyaxadorang*) across the Kristang eleidi wherever possible and safe for all parties involved to map variation, shared constraints, and emergent norms; (2) analyze audience reception empirically, including how different publics interpret layered semantics and nudity under Singaporean moral surveillance; (3) compare dreamshining to adjacent Indigenous and diasporic embodied methodologies while retaining creole specificity; and (4) develop an ethics framework for archiving, consent, and interpretive harm in long-term digital repositories of embodied knowledge. Ultimately, such work must prioritize relational trust, community sovereignty, and long-term collective healing over speed, visibility, or academic extraction, if *sunyaxah* is to continue functioning as a living Indigenous methodology rather than being once again reduced to an object of external, hyper-sexualized, shame-based and over-pathologizing interpretation.

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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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Investigating Cases of Potential Adolescent Sexual Abuse: Evaluating the Role of Positive Sexuality in Forensic Interviewing

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ABSTRACT

While a positive sexuality approach has been instrumental in fostering greater recognition and acceptance of diverse sexualities around the world, most legal and criminal justice systems have remained largely resistant to such an approach. This resistance is particularly acute in the United States, where sex-negative policies frequently clash with empirical science. Focusing on the U.S. sociolegal landscape as an example, this article evaluates the implications of this resistance for forensic interviewing in cases of potential adolescent sexual abuse. We highlight critical deficiencies in current practices, including inadequate professional training, misunderstandings of adolescent development, and the failure to recognize gaps in sex education. We argue that integrating a positive sexuality approach allows forensic interviewers to distinguish between healthy, albeit stigmatized, exploration and genuine indicators of abuse. By prioritizing the assessment of consent over moral judgment of content, this approach enhances investigative accuracy and reduces false positives. These findings offer a necessary corrective for forensic practitioners and policymakers worldwide.

Keywords: *positive sexuality, forensic interviewing, sexual abuse, sex-negativity, criminology, sexual development, consent*

Introduction

A positive sexuality approach—characterized by its emphases on personal strengths and well-being, diversity, communication, and empowerment—provides a crucial framework for promoting sexual health and addressing sociosexual problems and issues (Williams, Thomas, Prior, et al., 2015; Williams & Thomas, 2023; World Health Organization, 2025). In recent years, such an approach has been instrumental in fostering greater recognition and acceptance of diverse sexualities, including LGBTQ+ identities (Alexander, 2019; Roach, 2021), non-monogamous relationships (Burnes et al., 2017; Sheff & Wolf, 2015), and BDSM practices and activities (Prior & Williams, 2025; Williams et al., 2020). Yet, despite these advancements, a pervasive social and political climate of sex-negativity persists around the world, threatening to undo this progress (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Prause & Williams, 2020). While this backlash is visible in many countries, it is particularly acute in the United States, where the American Civil Liberties Union (2025) is currently tracking over 600 anti-LGBTQ+ bills proposed by state and federal lawmakers.

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Though our analysis in this article focuses on the U.S. sociolegal landscape as an example, the conflict between entrenched sex-negativity and a positive sexuality approach is a transnational challenge, rendering the insights herein broadly relevant to practitioners and policymakers worldwide.

To counteract these trends, sexuality scholars and professionals have increasingly advocated for the application of a positive sexuality approach to a range of societal domains, including education (Laureano et al., 2025; Roach, 2024), religion (Weiss, 2022), technology (Döring & Poeschl, 2018, 2020), healthcare (Randall & Sprott, 2025), and especially mental and behavioral health (Anderson, 2013; Burnes et al., 2017). However, among societal domains, legal and criminal justice systems have remained largely resistant to such an approach, especially as seen within the United States (Williams, Thomas, & Prior, 2015; Wodda & Panfil, 2018, 2020, 2021, 2025). In this article, we investigate the implications of this resistance for criminology and forensic science, focusing on how a positive sexuality approach could benefit forensic interviewing practices and outcomes in cases of potential adolescent sexual abuse.

Resistance to Positive Sexuality within Criminology and Forensic Science

Undoubtedly, there is a pressing need for the application of a positive sexuality approach to criminology and forensic science. Indeed, research has consistently shown that sex-negative assumptions predominate within corresponding research, policy, and practice (Wodda & Panfil, 2018, 2021). For example, biases against and misunderstandings of sexual and gender minorities are well documented in policing (Goldberg et al., 2019; Owen et al., 2018), in judicial and sentencing processes (Mirabito & Lecci, 2021; Sheff, 2021; Silhan, 2011), and in carceral policies and procedures (Donohue et al., 2021; Rodgers et al., 2017).

Yet, some of the clearest examples of sex-negativity within criminology and forensic science can be seen in relation to sexual offending. In 2004, Quinn et al.'s comprehensive review of the literature found that, contrary to empirical evidence, sexual offending laws are often predicated on widespread myths and misconceptions. More recent research (Harper et al., 2017; Zatkin et al., 2022) continues to validate these findings, revealing that such myths and misconceptions appear to be largely driven by moral panic and conservative political impulses (Fox, 2013), including the erroneous idea that sexual offenders constitute a homogeneous group of morally-depraved individuals, that virtually all offenders will inevitably reoffend, and that treatment is ineffective—even though a substantial body of scholarship indicates otherwise (Laws & Marshall, 2003; Marshall & Laws, 2003; Schmucker & Lösel, 2017; Williams, Thomas, & Prior, 2015). In addition, it is frequently assumed that punitive policies are both necessary and effective in preventing sexual offending, even though research shows that such policies are often costly and ineffective (Cochran et al., 2021). Alternatively, a positive sexuality approach aligns much more closely with actual empirical findings (Wodda & Panfil, 2021).

Thus, while concurring with the broad societal consensus that sexual offending is problematic and certainly must be addressed, the core question for a positive sexuality approach is how should society *best* respond in order to most effectively prevent sexual offending? Accordingly, it is crucial to consider: are current sexual offending laws, which are often rooted in widespread myths and misconceptions, the most effective option? Or should legal and criminal

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justice systems prioritize policies and practices that are grounded in contemporary scientific understanding? A positive sexuality approach strongly advocates for the latter.

Along these lines, we now investigate how sex-positive policies and practices could benefit forensic interviewing practices and outcomes in cases of potential adolescent sexual abuse. Not only is this an unexplored area for positive sexuality, but we suggest it is especially important, as taking a more sex-positive approach to the topic could help mitigate mistakes and consequences that can have inordinately negative effects on the lives of both potential victims and perpetrators. In the text that follows, we begin by considering the current context of forensic interviewing, and we then show how a positive sexuality approach illuminates several areas of deficiency common among forensic interviewers. After this, we explore how a positive sexuality approach could help address these deficiencies, along with the positive outcomes that doing so might produce.

Forensic Interviewing of Potential Adolescent Sexual Abuse: The Current Context

Helping professionals whose work involves forensic interviewing typically receive specialized training for conducting interviews in cases of suspected childhood and adolescent sexual abuse. Such training has improved considerably since the 1970s, when the problem of childhood sexual abuse became widely recognized (for a thorough review, see Faller, 2015). At the time, fear and sensationalizing of such abuse frequently led to problematic practices—such as interviewing potential victims multiple times and asking leading questions—practices that were later challenged when concerns of false allegations and false positives were more widely recognized (Faller, 2015, 2020; O'Donohue et al., 2018). Unfortunately, in many false positive cases, justice could not be restored for those accused, and careers were destroyed and lives were ruined.

In recent decades, numerous research studies of forensic interviewing have been conducted, leading to many helpful insights that have been incorporated into formalized training programs and practice guidelines (APSAC, 2023; Newlin et al., 2015). For example, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Forensic Interview Protocol (NICD, 2021) was developed through strong international collaborations based on a rich dataset of several thousand cases (Faller, 2015).

To be admissible in U.S. federal court, forensic interview testimony must meet the broader standards for expert witnesses (O'Donohue & Fanetti, 2015; Vieth, 2020). Specifically, testimony must be based on valid information and result from reliable principles consistently applied to the facts of the case. Contemporary best practices therefore emphasize a multi-faceted approach. First, interviewers must gain a thorough understanding of the child's age, development, and cultural background through collecting a comprehensive individual and family history. The interview itself should then follow sequential stages—rapport-building, information gathering, and closure—and utilize open-ended questions that respond to the unique characteristics of each situation (Faller, 2020; Hodshon & Maltby, 2019; Newlin et al., 2015). Establishing rapport is particularly critical when interviewing adolescents (Foster et al., 2023; Magnusson et al., 2020; Sauerland et al., 2019). Further, interviewers must remain acutely aware of personal and cultural biases, which can significantly influence both the questioning process and the interpretation of responses (APSAC,

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2023; Melinder et al., 2020). Finally, while the issue remains debated, most modern reports favor a single interview over multiple sessions (Faller, 2020; Newlin et al., 2015).

Clearly, current forensic interviewing, rooted in decades of research, has become far more reliable and valid compared to its unscientific beginnings. That being said, there remains a strong need for current multidisciplinary research on basic sexuality to be incorporated into forensic interviewing best practices, specifically as pertaining to adolescent interviewees. In particular, we identify three key areas of deficiency common among forensic interviewers.

Deficiencies among Forensic Interviewers in Human Sexuality Training and Education

Practitioners conducting forensic interviews typically emerge from helping disciplines such as psychology, social work, counseling, and nursing. While these fields provide robust training in general mental health and development, they frequently suffer from a significant pedagogical gap regarding human sexuality. Research indicates that graduate programs in these disciplines impose minimal, if any, requirements for coursework in sexuality (Allen & Williams, 2025; Dodd & Tolman, 2017; Sanabria & Murray, 2018; Zeglin et al., 2019). Without a foundation of empirically grounded sexual competency, practitioners may default to personal values, cultural upbringing, or media representations—sources that inherently lack scientific objectivity and increase the potential for bias.

This lack of scientific-based education regarding human sexuality has direct implications for the forensic context. In the absence of specialized training, interviewers may inadvertently project personal discomfort or embarrassment when addressing specific sexual acts or anatomies. Adolescents are particularly attuned to such non-verbal cues; if a professional exhibits hesitation or uses euphemisms during an interview, the interviewee is likely to mirror that shame, potentially leading to reticence or withdrawal (Sanabria & Murray, 2018).

Further, when human sexuality is addressed within academic curricula, it is almost always framed through a dominant discourse of pathology and risk (Dodd & Katz, 2020). Clinicians are trained primarily to identify trauma, disease, and dysfunction. While this diagnostic skill set is essential, it establishes a skewed baseline wherein professionals are conditioned to view robust sexual interests as potential symptoms of disorder rather than normative developmental features. This problem-focused orientation hinders the ability to validate the healthy, pleasure-oriented, and consensual aspects of sexuality that are central to the human experience (Burnes et al., 2017).

Consequently, forensic interviewing faces a compounded challenge. Experts often enter the field with educational backgrounds that have either ignored or pathologized sexuality, only to operate within a legal system that is historically sex-negative. Lacking a framework for positive sexuality, interviewers are ill-equipped to challenge the myths and stigmas prevalent in the justice system. Instead of normalizing an adolescent's natural curiosity, the interview process risks reinforcing the perception that such sexual interests are inherently dangerous or deviant.

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Deficiencies among Forensic Interviewers in Understanding Sexual Development and Diversity

A fundamental barrier to effective forensic interviewing is the pervasive societal construct of childhood innocence, which frames children and younger adolescents as inherently asexual. Contrary to this idealized view, sexual development is a continuous process that begins in utero and spans the entire life course (Hegde et al., 2022). As defined by the World Health Organization (2025), sexuality is a multidimensional construct shaped by the intersection of biological, psychological, and sociocultural factors. It encompasses not only behaviors but also fantasies, desires, values, and identity formation. When forensic interviewers operate without a grounding in this developmental reality, they risk viewing any sexual expression in youth as an anomaly rather than a normative aspect of human growth (van Anders, 2015).

Adolescence serves as a critical period for this development, characterized by significant hormonal, physical, and psychological shifts. It is during this stage that sexual curiosities crystallize and specific identities—including LGBTQ+ and BDSM/kink orientations—often emerge (Sprott, 2023). From a positive sexuality perspective, the emergence of diverse sexual interests is not inherently pathological; however, because these identities remain highly stigmatized, adolescents often explore them in secrecy. If a forensic interviewer lacks an understanding of this normative diversity, they may misinterpret healthy identity exploration as evidence of grooming, confusion, or victimization (Williams & Sprott, 2022).

This disconnect is perhaps most visible regarding adolescent consumption of pornography. In the digital age, access to sexually explicit material is ubiquitous; a recent large-scale study indicated that 80% of young adults had viewed pornography (Astle et al., 2020). While some legislative bodies and moral frameworks label pornography as a public health crisis, empirical data suggest a more nuanced reality where adolescents utilize these materials for diverse reasons, ranging from simple curiosity to sexual learning (Ley, 2018; Vertongen et al., 2022). Despite evidence that pornography is not inherently harmful to the majority of viewers, many adults—including legal and helping professionals—view it through a lens of moral panic.

The implications for forensic interviewing are significant. When interviewers fail to distinguish between normative sexual curiosity and genuine indicators of abuse, they risk compromising the integrity of the investigation. For example, an interviewer acting on sex-negative assumptions might interpret an adolescent's knowledge of specific sexual acts or their history of viewing pornography as definitive markers of abuse, rather than common behaviors for their age group. This interpretive bias can derail the fact-finding process. By contrast, a positive sexuality approach equips interviewers to understand that an adolescent could be both a victim of abuse and a person with independent, healthy sexual curiosities. Acknowledging this complexity is essential for building the rapport necessary to elicit honest, accurate narratives in difficult cases.

Deficiencies among Forensic Interviewers in Recognizing Gaps in Adolescent Sex Education

The landscape of sex education policy in the United States is characterized by extensive fragmentation and inconsistency. While 41 states mandate some form of sex or HIV education, only 26 require that this information be medically accurate (Guttmacher Institute, 2025). Further,

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many curricula remain heavily skewed toward abstinence-based models or strictly biological mechanics—focusing on reproduction and disease prevention while systematically neglecting critical topics such as sexual diversity, identity development, pleasure, and communication (Hall et al., 2016).

This pedagogical narrowness creates a profound disconnect between the classroom and the lived reality of adolescents. Research indicates that current programs are often "out of touch" with youth experiences, failing to address the complexities of modern relationships (Pound et al., 2016). For instance, students frequently harbor unanswered questions regarding diverse sexual practices, including BDSM and kink—topics that remain taboo in school settings yet appear in the anonymous inquiries of students as young as middle school (Hughes, 2025). Consequently, adolescents are left without a framework to process their own curiosities or to navigate the social dynamics of sexuality in a healthy manner.

In the absence of comprehensive, medically accurate guidance from trusted adults, adolescents inevitably turn to digital ecosystems to fill this informational void. The internet and social media have become primary sources of sexual socialization (Parry, 2017; van Clief & Anemaat, 2020). This digital migration extends to sexual expression as well: "sexting" has become a normative, albeit risky, method for exploring emerging sexual identities (Anastassiou, 2017). While often viewed by adults solely as a liability, for many adolescents the electronic sharing of images is a means for seeking validation and connection in an environment where open discussion is otherwise restricted.

For the forensic interviewer, recognizing these educational deficits is paramount. Interviewers often assume that adolescent interviewees possess a baseline vocabulary and conceptual understanding of sexuality, when in fact, the educational system has likely failed to provide either. A forensic interviewer who is unaware of these gaps may misinterpret an adolescent's reliance on internet-based sexual knowledge or their engagement in sexting as evidence of deviance or distinct knowledge of abuse. Instead, these behaviors should often be understood as adaptive responses to a structural lack of education. Recognizing this context allows the interviewer to better assess the adolescent's intent and understanding, distinguishing between normative (although unsupervised) exploration and actual victimization.

Applying a Positive Sexuality Approach to Forensic Interviewing of Potential Adolescent Sexual Abuse

Applying a positive sexuality approach does more than merely align forensic practices with contemporary best practices; it directly remediates the systemic deficiencies identified earlier in this article. By addressing the inadequacies of professional training, misunderstandings of adolescent development, and gaps in sex education, a positive sexuality approach significantly increases the integrity, accuracy, and justice of the forensic interview.

To begin, a positive sexuality approach serves as a necessary corrective for the inadequate professional training of interviewers. As previously noted, most practitioners conducting forensic interviews operate from a default position of discomfort or pathologized sex-negativity, creating a barrier of shame that inhibits accurate fact-finding. Adopting a positive sexuality stance allows the

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interviewer to project openness rather than judgment during the critical rapport-building phase, signaling to the adolescent that their thoughts and behaviors will not be met with moral judgment. This reduction of shame is vital for investigative accuracy, particularly in uncovering biases that might otherwise obscure the truth. For example, sex-negative assumptions regarding gender and heterosexuality often lead interviewers to overlook victimization due to implicit bias—such as in cases of female-on-male sexual violence or abuse within LGBTQ+ relationships. A positive sexuality lens removes these blinders, allowing the interviewer to assess power dynamics and consent objectively, rather than relying on stereotypes about who can or cannot be a victim.

Further, this framework corrects the interpretive errors caused by a lack of understanding of normative sexual development. Without this knowledge, interviewers frequently conflate deviant interests with criminal risk. A positive sexuality approach resolves this by operationalizing the critical distinction between internal fantasy and behavioral violation. As Miner (2007) has elucidated, traditional forensic models often view deviant sexual fantasies as precursors to offending that must be eliminated; in contrast, a positive sexuality approach recognizes that while fantasies may be non-normative, they are not inherently problematic. Rather, it is the non-consensual acting out of those fantasies that constitutes harm.

This distinction is vital for accuracy in complex cases. Consider a scenario where an adolescent engages in consensual breath play ("choking"), resulting in bruising—a not uncommon event or outcome (Herbenick, Fu, et al., 2023; Herbenick, Patterson, et al., 2023). An interviewer operating from a traditional forensic stance might interpret the deviant nature of the act itself as evidence of pathology or abuse. However, an interviewer operating from a positive sexuality framework, who understands that kink interests are a growing component of adolescent identity, can look past the deviance of the act to focus squarely on the relevant legal question: Was there consent? By separating the content of the fantasy from the reality of the violation, the interviewer avoids false positives and centers the investigation on actual harm rather than moral judgment.

Finally, a positive sexuality approach is indispensable for navigating gaps in sex education. Because adolescents often rely on the internet for sexual socialization, their understanding of consent is frequently unrefined and context-dependent. Interviewers who ignore this educational void risk misclassifying behaviors as predatory or as distinct evidence of abuse when they are often adaptive attempts at connection. This is particularly relevant in the digital age: in cases involving the distribution of explicit images, a nuanced interview can distinguish between eager, peer-pressured, and coerced media sharing. Rather than applying a blanket punitive label to all sexting, the interviewer can assess the specific intent and understanding of the adolescent. When forensic professionals capture these distinctions accurately, the resulting evidence allows the judicial system to tailor its response more effectively, ensuring that legal outcomes scale appropriately to the offense rather than punishing an adolescent for navigating an educational void.

Conclusion

The field of forensic interviewing stands at a critical juncture. While rigorous protocols and best practices have significantly improved the technical reliability of interviews over the past few decades, the field remains hindered by a pervasive culture of sex-negativity and a systemic lack of professional education regarding human sexuality. As this article has demonstrated,

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forensic interviewers are frequently tasked with navigating complex cases involving adolescent development, digital socialization, and diverse sexual interests, yet they often lack the foundational knowledge required to interpret these factors accurately. Continued reliance on a deficit-based model—one that views non-normative sexual expression as inherently pathological—risks compromising the integrity of investigations and, by extension, the administration of justice.

By integrating a positive sexuality approach, the field can effectively address these long-standing deficiencies. Moving beyond the limited scope of traditional forensic training, a positive sexuality approach equips professionals with the competence to distinguish between healthy, albeit stigmatized, adolescent exploration and genuine indicators of abuse. Whether navigating the nuances of digital consent or evaluating the context of BDSM-related curiosities, this perspective replaces moral panic with empirical understanding. It allows the interviewer to build a deeper rapport based on trust and openness, thereby reducing the shame that so often silences adolescent victims or coerces false confessions from the confused.

Crucially, this paradigm shift does not compromise the rigor of the forensic process; rather, it enhances it. As argued throughout this article, the integration of human sexuality scholarship allows the legal system to operationalize the vital distinction between content and consent. By understanding that deviant fantasy and curiosity are often normative aspects of development, interviewers can stop policing thoughts and start rigorously assessing behavioral violations. This prevents the costly and damaging error of pathologizing normal development, ensuring that legal resources are focused squarely on preventing and responding to actual harm.

Ultimately, the pursuit of justice demands that investigative tools evolve alongside our scientific understanding of the human experience. As this analysis of the U.S. context illustrates, when forensic practices are isolated from a positive sexuality approach, they become vulnerable to the distorting effects of cultural bias and moral panic. This vulnerability, however, is not unique to any single country. Consequently, worldwide, it is no longer sufficient for forensic professionals to be experts solely in legal protocols; they must also become literate in the complexities of human sexuality. By embracing a positive sexuality approach, credentialing bodies, educational institutions, and individual practitioners can ensure that the forensic interview becomes a valid instrument of truth—one that protects the innocent, validates the victim, and upholds the dignity of adolescents across all legal systems.

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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:

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- 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.

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