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FEMALE PERCEPTIONS OF HOLISTIC SAFETY IN KINK-BASED INTERACTIONS: A
QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION

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Abstract

Women's sexuality has begun to be celebrated and explored with regards to how it empowers femininity in North America. This awakening extends beyond topics such as generalized and heteronormative sexuality and into the world of BDSM culture. Despite a culture that has grown to idolize and prescribe to components akin to BDSM, the continued stigmatization and biases about BDSM remain. One common facet that continues to lack exploration, however, is the notion of how and why women can find sexual empowerment, liberation, and safety in kink-based dynamics. My research explores how women perceive and understand holistic safety in kink-based interactions and how holistic safety contributes to a woman's capacity to experience sexual liberation during BDSM practices. The discoveries found in this research will influence the ways in which dialogue and perspectives can positively impact intimate relationships, highlight the importance of gender-based empowerment, and expand harm-reduction approaches within the BDSM community.

Keywords: Sexuality, women, cisgender, BDSM, kink, safety, empowerment, liberation, sex positivity

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Preamble

Introduction

Bondage and kink-based communities are growing in visibility and acceptance throughout North America (Fulmen, 2016; Ortmann & Sprott, 2015). The acronym BDSM (Bondage, Dominance/Discipline, Submission/Sadomasochism, Masochism) is an umbrella term used to identify individuals that engage in erotic fetishes such as inflicting pain, asserting dominance onto another person, or relinquishing control into another person's hands (Bezreh et al., 2012; Ling et al., 2022). Despite the stigma of BDSM being linked to mental disorders, sexual exploitation, or unhealthy attachment styles, research continues to prove kink-based practices promote communication, consent, and compassion for all those involved (Damm et al., 2018; Hébert & Weaver, 2015). Though literature has begun to identify perceived benefits of kink-based interactions, minimal research has explored how women perceive safety, sexual liberation, and protection from danger in such interactions (Galilee-Belfer, 2020; Holt, 2014). My thesis research proposal intends to explore this phenomenon through a qualitative approach.

This thesis is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 begins by exploring the essence of BDSM: the roles and dynamics that exist within the community, and the genres of BDSM that exist. Chapter 2 presents current knowledge within the existing literature about BDSM and highlights the principles that contribute to healthy BDSM engagement. Chapter 3 identifies key theoretical perspectives that serve as foundational pillars in acquiring my research regarding women's perceived sense of safety and how it contributes to sexual empowerment. Chapter 4 is divided into two sections, discussing the research methodology I have chosen and how I acquired

data in an ethical, intentional, and purposeful manner. Chapter 5 discusses limitations and future pathways.

Positionality

Holmes (2020) defines positionality as the relational stance a researcher has regarding their research topic, design, and the perspective participants engaging in the study. It's important for me to articulate how I position myself in the proposed research because this will inevitably influence the way in which research is approached, explored, and interpreted by me (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). Being transparent with my positionality allows the readers to understand how my perspective influenced the exploration of kink-based culture (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). I resonate with Jacobson & Mustafa's (2019) assertion that positionality can be complex, particularly because my identity is multifaceted as are my lived experiences.

My intersectionality has provided me with the opportunity to feel empowered and confident in my sexuality. As a heterosexual, cisgender, Caucasian woman, I have experienced little-to-no barriers in expressing my sex and engaging in various genres of intimacy both in and outside of committed romantic relationships. This overt privilege has inspired me to engage more meaningfully with demographics that may not have the same explicit privilege or the societal acceptance as I do.

I would describe myself to be positioned as an "outsider" when thinking about how my role as a researcher relates to the anticipated participants of my proposed study (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Though I do not identify as an active participant in BDSM, I am intrigued by the way in which individuals relate to the kink-based experiences and how women find a sense of empowerment from it. I believe that being an outsider in my proposed research serves many

benefits. As someone who can offer humility, curiosity, and non-judgement, my allyship can be the vehicle to promote continued advocacy and education amongst therapeutic professionals.

Definition of Terms

Due to the nature of my research, the culture of BDSM utilizes terms that may not be readily comprehended or understood by those who are unfamiliar. This section has been included to ensure that definitions are accessible to better understand the content of this proposal. All definitions I have chosen to implement echo existing literature to promote continuity within the BDSM community.

It is important to note that BDSM (Bondage, Dominance/Discipline, Submission/Sadomasochism, Masochism) will be used interchangeably with kink. Bondage is the act of tying up an individual; discipline is the action of inflicting punishment onto another through the means of utilizing tools (tangible or verbal) in attempt to inflict pain or revoke stimuli; a sadist is sexually aroused by inflicting pain; sadomasochism describes someone who is sexually aroused when they inflict or receive pain; and masochism is an individual who experiences sexual arousal from experiencing pain. Kink is a synonym to encompass BDSM-based activities, therefore these terms will serve the same meaning.

To distinguish BDSM Practitioners from those who do not engage in kink-based interactions, I will refer to the non-practicing individuals as the general population. This is not to say that BDSM practitioners are not included in most of the population. Rather, it is indicative that there is continued stigma towards the BDSM community.

When speaking about acts between individuals in the BDSM community, play mates will refer to individuals that consent to engage with one another in a kink-based manner. Play mates are not limited to couples only, as group play may exist. Power play is a phrase that describes an

agreed upon scenario where power structures exist or roles are identified (i.e., dominant or submissive, teacher or student), whereas power exchange refers to the mutual and consensual act of giving or receiving power to another individual.

In the research findings, the term *Shibari* is referenced. *Shibari* is a bondage-specific genre found within the BDSM culture. It has origins in Japanese culture and is known for its artistic and intricate knots that bind individuals for the purposes of pleasure.

Finally, the phrase *munch* or *munches* is a term used by the kink community to describe a social gathering that takes place in a restaurant, lounge, or public setting for local members of the BDSM community to network, gain knowledge, or find potential playmates.

Chapter 1: Significance of the Topic

Influence of Pornography and Pop Culture

At first glance, BDSM appears to the public as an activity where women are choosing to be abused, mistreated, or tortured without using caution or careful deliberation. A vast amount of pornography, for example, depicts women being forced into or succumbing to sexual, violent, or degrading acts from a counterpart (Camilleri et al., 2021; Wright et al., 2018). Societies acclamation to such content can result in women being perceived as an entity with the sole purpose of sexually pleasing their partner (Wright & Tokunaga, 2016). When this narrative continues to be seen in varying pornographic scenes, genres, and content, this assumption can become normalized and expected of female sexual partners (Dines, 2011; Wright & Tokunaga, 2016). The notion of sexual dominance or aggression has resulted in individuals engaging in aggressive sexual acts without being mindful or self-aware around their partners desires, personal attitudes, or willingness to participate in an enthusiastic manner (Dwulit & Rzymiski, 2019; Hakkim et al., 2022).

The popular 50 Shades of Grey book series further reinforced the narrative of misogynistic agendas where Christian Grey, a successful business executive, persuades and convinces Anna – a young and entry-level journalist – to become his submissive while reaping the benefits of a lavish and promising lifestyle (James, 2012). Despite Anna's resistance to change – a rigorous dieting and exercise schedule, restricted social life from her loved ones, and having to dress and present herself up to the standards of her dominant – Anna obliges in hopes to help heal dominant heal and to create a foundation of long-lasting love. Though the book and movie series were well received by the public, it created ample opportunity to debunk the myths of BDSM, power exchanges, and roles within the kink community.

Roles of BDSM

BDSM encompasses three different roles that practitioners typically identify with: a dominant, submissive, or switch. For those who identify with the term dominant or alternative names such as dom/domme, master/mistress, daddy/mommy, and top, their expressive interests involve teaching their kink-based counterparts to comply, do as instructed, or reap the benefits of receiving pain or discipline as required (Easton & Hardy, 2011). The dominant archetype enjoys fulfilling their playmates needs through nurturance and possessing external control in the dynamic at hand. It is important to note that though external control refers to the explicit power structure in the scene, the dominant figure does not create or push boundaries that the submissive counterpart did not outwardly consent to before the play.

The submissive role, otherwise known as a slave, servant, pet, good girl/boy, princess/prince, or brat assumes the stance of someone that relinquishes their explicit sense of control to the dominant (Easton & Hardy, 2011b). Some submissives identify as being “owned” or “controlled” by their dom, relying on serving or satisfying others to seek sexual fulfillment. If an individual identifies as a switch, they are not inclined to one role or another. They are liberated and free to shift from dominant and submissive in any engagement they desire. Despite the differing roles, it is important to remember that trust, communication, and consent must be present for kink-play to be distinguished from overt assault or violence.

Genres of Kink

Genres of kink play are abundant and vast in nature. Some of the most well-known genres of BDSM will be described here. Age play is the simulation or acting out of physical age gaps or aspects of self that require developmental care (i.e., nurturance, bathing, nurturing, etc). Age play might present itself in a daddy (or mommy) and little dynamic, where one party tends

to the needs of their playmate as if they were a child. This dynamic may include sexual engagement or remain strictly platonic (Rekink, 2018).

Breath Play is the process of experimenting with restricting oxygen flow through asphyxiation, or restricted breathing (Frederick, 2017). This can be done through the use choking with hands, belts, or masks that provide little air ventilation (Easton & Hardy, 2011). Consensual Non-Consent (CNC) is the formal term for rape play (Easton & Hardy, 2011b). CNC includes safe words and preparation prior to engaging in a BDSM scene and may also include props or weapons such as knives, guns, or power tools used to emulate threats (edge play; Rekink, 2018).

Other common genres can include golden showers (urinating on another person); humiliation (name calling to provoke insecurities, asking for permission to use the washroom, having to succumb to patronizing demands like cleaning, being a foot stool, or kissing one's feet); or suspension play (placing a participant above ground level using swings, hooks, or ropes; Easton & Hardy, 2011; Rekink, 2018). These kink-based interests are individualized and are up to the practitioner to decide how and when they want to engage with others in a BDSM fashion.

The Fight for Justice

Though society is beginning to encourage women to step into their sexual power and feel liberated for their interests, there continues to be a large amount of stigma around women flaunting their needs or excitability towards kink-based practices or sex work. This juxtaposition can confuse the public, especially because women have historically fought to be taken seriously when violated, sexually assaulted, and abused at the hands of a male. In 2014, Canadian CBC Host Jian Ghomeshi was arrested for sexually assaulting multiple women. His defense to the public was that the women were excited about the sexual relations, "asking" to be choked, bit, and asphyxiated while intimate with him (Tucker, 2014). Despite being up against seven counts

of assault, Jian was cleared of all charges in 2016 and maintained his innocence in the court of law. How could this be when those who came forward consistently said “neither was it discussed or suggested, and therefore there was no way that that could be consensual” (Tucker, 2014, p.1)? The goal of my dissertation is to explore the way in which women conceptualize their ability to feel empowered and safe in kink-based interactions.

Summary

Women are entitled to honour and relish in their sexuality, but what happens when claims are unfairly used to justify and continue sexual violence against women? More importantly, what does it mean to be an active and consenting participant in the BDSM culture? Popular culture continues to speak about liberation and safety of all, but when the opportunity arises to lean in and explore the perspectives of women that are BDSM practitioners, little to no research is available. Therein lies the importance of my proposed thesis research question: how does a female BDSM practitioner perceive safety in kink-based interactions?

In asking women how they perceive safety in kink-based relationships, the proposed research will educate the general public on consensual BDSM practices and how it fosters harm-reduction and sexual empowerment for women. Doing so challenges the stigma that women are being sexually exploited, unsupported, or ask for violence when in the kink-community, and instead showcases how female practitioners perceive holistic safety in their sexuality.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction

Despite the attempts to implement Bondage, Dominance, and Sadomasochism (BDSM) in media and pop culture, BDSM continues to be misrepresented in its purpose, functioning, and meaning (Holt, 2014; Meyer & Chen, 2019). BDSM – interchangeably referred to as kink (Bezreh et al., 2012; Faccio et al., 2020) – stands for Bondage and Discipline (physical restraint or an infliction of pain with or without props; Easton & Hardy, 2011b; Williams et al., 2014), dominance and submission, and Sadomasochism (a dominant inflicting physical or emotional pain onto a submissive; Carlström, 2021; Coppens et al., 2018). Although members of the public speculate that BDSM stems from psychopathology or abuse (Damm et al., 2018; Labrecque et al., 2021), the American Psychiatric Association (2022) removed BDSM from being a disorder in 2010 (Meyer & Chen, 2019; Williams et al., 2014).

Research concludes mental health statistics among the BDSM demographic are comparable to the general population (Labrecque et al., 2021; Meyer & Chen, 2019). In fact, BDSM participants highly value core principles such as consent, communication, caring, and caution to promote and secure healthy relations with others (Damm et al., 2018; Hébert & Weaver, 2015). BDSM is has therapeutic benefits linked to an increase in self-awareness, personal expression, and empowerment, as well as spirituality (Carlström, 2021; Faccio et al., 2020). To better understand the positive impact of BDSM, it is important to highlight the ways in which the kink community is proven to contribute to healthy sexuality and expression in North American culture (Bezreh et al., 2012; Meyer & Chen, 2019). This literature review is an exploration of women within the BDSM community and the core principles that contribute to healthy engagement within its community.

The Kink Demographic

Participants of BDSM fall on a spectrum with regards to gender identity, sexual orientations, fetishes, sexual preferences, and intensity of play (Bezreh et al., 2012; Coppens et al., 2018). 10 percent of the general population is known to practice components of BDSM (spanking, choking, scratching, bonding), with up to 64% percent of university students having admitted to fantasizing about at least one facet of BDSM practice (Damm et al., 2018; Hébert & Weaver, 2015). Past research has also highlighted that desires to be bound, submissive, or dominated by another began for many participants between their early childhood and adolescent years (Carlström, 2019; Fabrecque et al., 2021). Members of the Kink and BDSM commonly represent Caucasian and well-educated individuals that possess highly esteemed careers (Coppens et al., 2018; Fabrecque et al., 2021). Common reasons for individuals engaging in BDSM practices include exchanging power dynamics, experiencing physical pain, and expanding one's perspective and state of mind (Holt, 2014; Labrecque et al., 2021; Meyer & Chen, 2019). This alludes to many positive outcomes that are often overlooked in the stigma of BDSM.

Practitioners of BDSM often say their practices and engagement to BDSM are akin to spiritual or religious awakenings (Carlström, 2021; Faccio et al., 2014; Labrecque et al., 2021). Gender-based statistics indicate that there are higher rates of men reported to be involved in the BDSM community (Coppens et al., 2018), while women are more inclined to be aroused by the role of a submissive (Carlström, 2019; Meyer & Chen, 2019). Despite these statistics, 30% of those that engage in BDSM practices fluctuate between the roles of being a dominant or submissive (Labrecque et al., 2021). This is where the common phrase *switch* is utilized.

Practitioners of BDSM do not unanimously agree on whether BDSM is a sexual orientation or identity, or if BDSM is simply a recreational-based practice (Bezreh et al., 2012;

Coppens et al., 2018; Faccio et al., 2020). Regardless of its perceived relationship to self, it is researched that queer people are more likely to identify with the BDSM community on a public level (Damm et al., 2018). This may be related to the “coming out” experiences that come with navigating and disclosing their sexual orientation. Williams et. al (2014) suggest four foundational constructs that are required in healthy BDSM practices: community, consent, communication, and care. These variables are commonly found in other publications that were reviewed for the purpose of this research proposal, so each quadrant will be elaborated on below.

Community

Community is of high importance to those that practice BDSM because it provides a sense of unity, solidarity, and support for those that identify with the culture (Holt, 2014; Rubinsky, 2020; Williams et al., 2014). Many subjects of BDSM research attest that their involvement with the kink culture contributes to a perceived sense of therapeutic benefits (Fabrecque et al., 2021; Graham et al., 2016; Lindemann, 2011). Community support facilitates opportunities such as sharing personal experiences with like-minded individuals, expanding resource and knowledge base, and finding relatability and normalization with others (Damm et al., 2018; Holt, 2014). It has also subjectively proven to increase self-awareness and acceptance, introspection, and personal growth within each BDSM practitioner (Faccio et al., 2020; Hébert & Weaver, 2015). This has resulted in an increased self-esteem and efficacy of those who participated in the research.

The kink community can serve individuals to continue developing their sexual interests, self-explorations, and evolve in the ways that they perceive themselves and their roles in BDSM beyond face-to-face interactions (Damm et al., 2018; Holt, 2014). Many BDSM practitioners utilize technology and specific apps and websites to meet potential playmates and allies

(Rubinsky, 2020). Technology has served individuals to connect through online websites and community groups without the restrictions of distance, transportation, or stigma (Rubinsky, 2020). Through these sexual spheres of engagement, each participant can speak about their preferences, fetishes, and fantasies in a way that eliminates an increased risk of embarrassment, humiliation, or rejection (Meyer & Chen, 2019; Rubinsky, 2020), further solidifying the care distributed in the kink-based dynamics.

Those who identify within or engage in BDSM practices are at risk of negative repercussions or being judged due to the societal stigma surrounding the community of kink (Holt, 2014; Meyer & Chen, 2019). Bezreh et al. (2012) argue that society's tendency to pathologize BDSM creates an unnecessary pressure for those in the kink community to have to formally "come out" for their sexual preferences, while also experiencing a lack of support if legal or police intervention is required. More specifically, a lack of knowledge surrounding kink culture contributes to the oppressive attitudes and misinformation commonly found in legal, mental health, medical, and social work fields (Damm et al., 2018; Meyer & Chen, 2019). As a result, sexual misconduct or violent encounters are often handled internally through BDSM event hosts or supervisors (Holt, 2014). This is a significant finding and speaks to the lack of knowledge and understanding between BDSM and assault.

Consent

A common component of BDSM includes consensual power exchanges - a dynamic in which participants involved practice assuming and relinquishing control in a consensual manner (Coppens et al., 2018; Labrecque et al., 2021). The primary distinction between BDSM and violence or pathology is the presence of mutual enthusiasm and consent, and the absence of coercion or compulsory action (Faccio et al., 2014; Hébert & Weaver, 2015; Williams et al.,

2014). To ensure consent is always followed, it is the role of the submissive to determine the parameters of play (Fulmen, 2019; Hébert & Weaver, 2015).

Principles found within the BDSM take a liberal approach when exploring boundaries and expression surrounding consent: a principle that non-practicing individuals could benefit from (Damm et al., 2018; Hébert & Weaver, 2015). The overarching goal of BDSM is to transform the narrative of consent to represent unification, mutual commitment, and care (Bezreh et al., 2012; Faccio et al., 2020; Hébert & Weaver, 2015). This mentality is summarized by phrases such as ‘safe, sane and consensual’ and ‘risk-aware consensual kink’ (Meyer & Chen, 2019; Williams et al., 2014). It is in these phrases we can identify the way in which BDSM play is met with a harm-reduction and empowering narrative.

Trust is a common prerequisite for participants of BDSM before engaging in sexual acts (Easton & Hardy, 2011; Labrecque et al., 2021). Trusting and consenting to kink-based activities and dynamics mean that there is faith that all players involved will respect each other’s limits, desires, and prioritize holistic safety (Faccio et al., 2020). Consent can be conceptualised as a three tiered process: the first realm is the traditional “yes versus no” ideology; the second is consenting specifically to scene activity, prop engagement, and safe words (Faccio et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2014); the third tier is deep consent, which typically is a self-reflection and dialogue between the parties involved with the purpose to explore what felt satisfactory and what did not (Meyer & Chen, 2019; Williams et al., 2014). Interpretation and dissection of a scene between and within practitioners can help an individual determine what aspects of play did not feel consensual, refining boundaries and preferences moving forward (Easton & Hardy, 2011; Williams et al., 2014). This is imperative in further solidifying the needs and subjective safety of all.

Communication

Negotiation and creating play concepts are fluid and everchanging (Holt, 2014; Meyer & Chen, 2019). Negotiation can involve information sharing (to expand the other person's mind), experiencing new genres or exploring new kinks (Easton & Hardy, 2011; Meyer & Chen, 2019). Partners considering or choosing to engage in sexual play may also discuss the significance of orgasm, humiliation, or emotional intimacy: all things that may equate to a subjective measure of success (Faccio et al., 2020; Fulmen, 2019). Therein, emotional transparency is vital to ensure all parties are getting full erotic benefit.

Good communication is a primary requirement for a positive BDSM experience (Easton & Hardy, 2011; Rubinsky, 2020; Williams et al., 2014). Communication is a tool that helps individuals co-create meaningful roles, scenes, and power dynamics (Faccio et al., 2020; Fulmen, 2019). Effective communication involves careful negotiation between all parties to distinguish mutual parameters and objectives of play (Easton & Hardy, 2011b; Faccio et al., 2014; Holt, 2014). Variables such as time constraints, current mood and energy levels, experience with BDSM, relationship dynamics, and length of scene can influence what limits may exist (Bezreh et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2014).

A vehicle frequently used to practice communication within the kink community is technology (Fulmen, 2019; Rubinsky, 2020). Cybersex is a term that describes sexual activity taking place through texting and video or telephone calls (Rubinsky, 2020). Communicating through technological platforms removes barriers such as physical or geographic proximity, lack of local representation in community, risk of physical danger, and can release inhibitions or anxieties surrounding self-expression (Fulmen, 2019; Rubinsky, 2020). Technology-based communication also supports an individual's desire to remain anonymous when exploring this facet of themselves (Holt, 2014; Rubinsky, 2020). Though technological modalities may be used

by practitioners to communicate their boundaries, sexual curiosities, and desires, it is best practice to ensure that these topics are also communicated and agreed upon when face to face (Rubinsky, 2020).

With effective communication, unintended emotional and physical harm can be eliminated from BDSM dynamics during play scenes (Rubinsky, 2020; Williams et al., 2014). Communication is mandated to ensure that all parties are aware and committed to the negotiated agreement and terms at hand, while also committing to being present in-action should needs change in the moment (Faccio et al., 2020; Rubinsky, 2020). Communication is also beneficial to invite introspection, expand one's knowledge of BDSM, and to brainstorm new methods, genres, and scenarios of play (Faccio et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2014).

Caring

Care between BDSM practitioners involves trust and intimacy (Williams et al., 2014). Caring engagements with playmates are vital for building and maintaining intimacy between BDSM practitioners (Williams et al., 2014). Online modalities and lines of communication can serve to help practitioners of BDSM to engage with one another before and after play, further reinforcing and maintaining the relationship dynamic (Faccio et al., 2014; Rubinsky, 2020). Caring engagement between BDSM partners can look like cuddling, respectfully removing props, gentle caresses, and check in's or debriefing through phone calls or text messages (Fulmen, 2019).

Moral judgements are fundamental when engaging with other individuals, as is being able to explore and validate the opinions and perspectives of others (Holt, 2014; Williams et al., 2014). Empathy, compassion, respect, and responsiveness help others engaging in BDSM dynamics to feel understood and supported throughout scene interactions (Holt, 2014; Williams

et al., 2014). Should a person's need, desire, or motivation change prior to the party's session, caring attitudes should support and validate the change in plans and avoid coercive tactics (Fulmen, 2019).

With the awareness that individuals come with their own unique experiences, preferences, communication styles, and beliefs, it is important that each practitioner holds others' perspectives to the same regard as their own (Easton & Hardy, 2011; Williams et al., 2014). Despite preferences or attitudes towards other genres of BDSM, caring attitudes involve accepting that all practitioners are entitled to their own self-exploration and involvement in BDSM (Williams et al., 2014). Exploring one's own biases, prejudices, BDSM preferences, and behaviours to promote continued self-discovery and navigating personal blind spots is a form of care (Faccio et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2014). This care is an implicit way of showing playmates that their safety and desires are of the utmost importance.

Caution

To protect and prevent judgement towards BDSM practitioners, there is a high level of anonymity and confidentiality within the kink culture (Damm et al., 2018; Holt, 2014; Meyer & Chen, 2019). As a result, codes of conduct exist within the community to ensure that anonymity and confidentiality is preserved (Holt, 2014). Cautious BDSM practices range from vetting playmates to discerning how to disclose preferences to loved ones and protect oneself from negative repercussions (Rubinsky, 2020; Williams et al., 2014). Caution involves the acknowledgement of risks, harm-reduction practices, and safe methods of sexual exploration and engagement (Holt, 2014; Williams et al., 2014). This involves securing and solidifying the parameters of play, honouring confidentiality, maintaining sexual health, and using preventative

birth control, being transparent, and taking responsibility for one's role in the process (Holt, 2014).

Limitations exist in exploring how sexual misconduct is handled by the members in the BDSM community (Holt, 2014). Danger exists in the BDSM community because they are marginalized, so they are less likely to be supported or believed by law enforcement, resulting in them being left to their own devices. As a result, law enforcement is often unable to decipher how kink play can be distinguished from sexual or physical violence. In attempt to reduce instances of further marginalization, victim-blaming, or legal inaction, Holt (2014) exclaimed those violations and acts of violence are investigated internally.

Steps Towards De-Stigmatization

Misrepresentation of the BDSM community results in continued stigmatization and shame perpetrated by the public (Bezreh et al., 2012; Coppens et al., 2018; Damm et al., 2018). Whether intentional or not, stigma occurs when there is a preconceived notion about an individual, experience or phenomenon (Wiginton et al., 2023). If unidentified or mishandled, the authors exclaim that stigma can incite instances of violence, social isolation, or criticism among individuals, cultures, and communities (Blackburn et al., 2023). According to The National Coalition for Sexual Freedom (NCSF), 37.5% of BDSM practicing individuals have experienced discrimination or violence from a front-line worker or a loved one (Damm et al., 2018; Wright, 2008). Furthermore, a vast majority of psychotherapists have no knowledge or cultural competencies regarding the BDSM community (Damm et al., 2018). In fact, discriminatory comments or treatment was reported to often be perpetrated by medical or mental health professionals (Bezreh et al., 2012; Damm et al., 2018; Meyer & Chen, 2019). What does this mean for professionals supporting BDSM practitioners?

Common feedback from kink practitioners was that they wish to be provided with the opportunity to share how their power roles and dynamics impact them on a holistic level (Meyer & Chen, 2019). As a result, those in BDSM would benefit from working with a therapeutic professional that is aware of the implications oppression and stigma has on their safety as well as its potential to empower and liberate members (Bezreh et al., 2012; Damm et al., 2018). It is recommended that those working in human service and health settings would benefit from continuing education to adhere to the cultural competencies necessary to work with members of the BDSM community, demystifying their own biases along the way (Bezreh et al., 2012; Damm et al., 2018; Faccio et al., 2014).

Implications for the Current Study

There were several gaps found within the existing literature regarding BDSM. From a demographic standpoint, minimal research has explored the fetishes of women from within the BDSM community (Damm et al., 2018). Incidentally, most research subjects focus on the lived experiences of Caucasian individuals, with minimal exploration on people of colour and their experiences of BDSM and perception of power structures and race play (Damm et al., 2018). Perhaps the largest gap of research relating to BDSM is the exploration of how women perceive safety and navigate physical or sexual violence within the BDSM community (Damm et al., 2018).

My research serves to fill the gap that currently exists: how do women perceive holistic safety in BDSM relationships. The narratives of female identified BDSM practitioners deserve to be investigated for many reasons. The first is to expand on the gender-specific perspectives beyond the capacity of male experiences; the second is to channel avenues of sexual

empowerment; and the third is to better understand how women perceive holistic safety in a kink-based culture.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

Introduction

Exploring the dialogue of female BDSM practitioners is vital to expanding the knowledge of BDSM. Published scholarly research lacks articles involving the experiences of women and their holistic needs to feel safe in kink-based dynamics. As a result, it is difficult to capture the ways sexual empowerment exists in a world with masochistic tendencies. I desire to supplement the gaps in the existing literature by implementing research that explores just that: how women perceive safety and sexual empowerment. Psychology-based research requires a foundation that is intentional, evidence-based, and supported by theoretical orientations. This chapter explores the theoretical orientations that underlie the proposed research. Theories such as social constructivism, interactionist, feminist, and motivational interviewing will ensure the women who participate in this study are actively supported, validated, and honored for exactly who they are.

Interactionist Theory

To become informed about women's perceptions of safety and sexual empowerment within BDSM, it was essential that I remained mindful of how the society influences one's understanding of self and how they engage with others. Therefore, I chose to engage with participants in this study from interactionist lens. The theoretical construct that our reality and understanding of life has been produced by external factors, daily interactions, and cultural involvement (Neukrug, 2016). Through interactionism, individuals – and myself as a researcher – were able to develop a concrete understanding through social engagement, dialogue, and interpretation (Neukrug, 2016). Interactionist theory is the way in which we move through the world and associate experiences as “positive” or “negative”. These associations directly

influence our ability to connect and engage with others. Interactionist theory works to re-imagine and set intentions for how an individual would like to show up in dynamics despite societal norms or implicit expectations (Klose, 2018). Knowing this allowed me to work with participants from a place of curiosity in determining how their gender or intersectionality is relevant to this topic.

Feminist Theory

Given my exploration of women involved in the BDSM community, the feminist theory helped me to shine a light on perspectives that often succumb to prejudice opinions due to sexist attitudes and intersectional identities (Wood, 2015). Much of feminist-based theories work to implement change and promote advocacy in realms such as intimate partner violence, women's reproductive rights, cultural identity, as well as sexuality and gender-expression (Karakurt & Silver, 2013; Neukrug, 2016). This orientation served my research in uncovering the strengths of women's sexuality and holistic safety while empowering women to move through the world in an intentional and meaningful way (Neukrug, 2016).

Summary

The process of harnessing voices of women in my research was vital. Exploring the perspectives of women served more than the research I conducted; it also works to motivate women in honouring their beliefs and values while advocating to take up the space they deserve. I chose to integrate theories that validate how environments influence the way we make sense of the world and to what degree our interactions with others shape identity and formulated experiences (interactionist theory). Additionally, it is important to explore what it means to be a woman in the BDSM community and how safety and sexual empowerment relate to societal structures (feminist theory). These orientations created a foundation where women's voices

would be honored, further contributing to the pillars of femineity and sexual freedom. The orientations identified in this chapter not only support the participants that were involved in this study, but also justified the need for the research I conducted.

Chapter 4: Methodology

Introduction

The exploration of therapeutic components found within the BDSM community involves active engagement and consultation with those who identify within the kink culture. Successful research not only involves intentionally choosing a methodology that supports the research question and how to approach findings, but also having mindfulness regarding ethic of care, research positionality, and the power dynamic that exists between researcher and participant (Nye et al., 2023). Because my research explores how women perceive holistic safety in kink-based dynamics, the methodology I selected is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is an intentional exploration of a homogeneous group to better understand a particular experience (Hammond, 2010; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). With the acknowledgement that my lived experiences as a researcher are limited within the BDSM and kink community, it is important to explore and highlight where my perspectives, values, and biases end and where the study begins. The following chapter will explore the ways in which I will engage in IPA throughout my research process.

Paradigm

As mentioned in the previous chapter, interactionist and feminist approaches are embedded throughout my research (Klose, 2018; Wood, 2015). It was important that I engaged in this study as an active learner and with curiosity. I am not the expert of others' lived experiences; therefore, it was important to me to view my participants as the experts. These paradigms empowered me with the ability to view the research participants from a place of curiosity and passion to share their perspectives on a larger scale. My criteria for eligible participants included current residency anywhere in British Columbia, being above the age of 19 years old, identifying

as a cisgender woman, and having engaged in BDSM for a minimum of one year as a submissive. This criterion ensured that I was gathering research from a homogenous group, while also providing variability on my participant's cultural surroundings, population area, and accessible resources. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) allowed the participants to share what they know to be true about their kink-based interactions and assist me in conveying their narrative in the research findings.

Epistemology

Utilizing IPA supported my ability to seek external perspectives for the purpose of developing perspective from women engaging in BDSM practices (Grossoehme, 2014). Such epistemology further solidified my ability to journey into my research without judgement. By understanding that conscious mind influences that way we observe, interpret, and move forward in our own reality and lived experiences, the philosophical assumptions of IPA echo the interactionist paradigm in a way that individuals create their reality through subjective experiences and interactions. My perspective when interacting with this research participants was also influenced by how I was able to comprehend the dialogue of others. It was therefore necessary that I was transparent with my positionality and expressed this in my research findings and limitation sections. This encouraged me to self-reflect and reduce the risk of misinterpreting the data with my own biases. I am mindful that IPA encourages a collaborative effort to create meaning with those being interviewed. It was therefore important that I became acclimated, receptive, and curious about the language, phrases, and other forms of expression provided by the participants in my research.

Research Questions

The following research question was addressed in the study:

How does a female BDSM practitioner perceive safety in kink-based interactions?

Research Design

I collected my data through a privatized interview process. The interview process took place in individualized Zoom video calls between each individual research participant and I. Zoom provided thorough encryptions for each interview: this ensuring no external members were able to enter the meeting or become privy to discussion content.

Data Collection

The first few questions in the interview were designed to gather demographic information. These questions explored each participant's age, sexual orientation, preferred BDSM role title, race, educational level, relationship status, town or city population size, and degree of engagement within the BDSM community. I obtained detailed subjective experiences and personal attitudes by engaging participants in a semi-structured interview process. Having my research rooted in feminist and interactionist modalities, I relied upon the theoretical interview model to develop my interview questions (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2019). I decided to structure my interview in a way that focused on feminist's perceptions, understandings, and requirements for safety in kink-based dynamics. Each participant was asked the same open-ended questions to share their perspective on safety in BDSM dynamics. Follow up questions were asked in the interview process when an answer warranted further clarification or explanation. Participants also received a follow up email offering opportunities to debrief, ask questions, share comments, or express concerns if needed.

Participants and Recruitment

I gathered data from 6 women who are actively engaged or involved within the BDSM community. This number of participants allowed me to hear a variety of perspectives in detail while also finding commonalities between them. The inclusion criteria required to participate in my study included those who identify as a cisgender woman or female, were a minimum of 19 years of age, and who currently reside in British Columbia. Such individuals were required to have active engagement in power-play dynamics in the BDSM community and are to identify as a submissive, bottom, or slave. Purposive sampling was utilized to focus on participants that enjoy masochism specifically.

I recruited participants for this study through the means of personal and virtual community engagement. I shared and distributed a recruitment information through social media platforms (such as Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn) and encouraged friends, family, and colleagues to share this information on their own accounts. This also created the opportunity for snowballing samples if participants wished to share this research opportunity with their own social network such as personal Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, and loved ones.

Ethical Considerations

Arising from dialogue that I have had with my thesis supervisors; some ethical concerns were considered before conducting my qualitative research. The ethical code of conduct sourced from the Canadian Psychological Association (2017) highlights avoiding inflicting harm on the participants engaging in the study (II.2, II.14, CPA, 2017). Like the Tri-Council Policy statement (2018), it is necessary to prevent implicit or explicit harm to others. As such I utilized knowledge, literature, and collaborative efforts with professionals and supervisors when developing, reauthoring and finalizing all aspects of the data gathering process. This strategy

reinforced the ethical obligation that I maintained close and frequent contact with professionals who have expertise with the ethics board of research (II.16, CPA, 2017). I was fortunate to have had two thesis supervisors with extensive experience with ethics boards, so maintaining bi-weekly contact with them helped me to refine and make adaptations to research methods as needed.

Remaining diligent and receptive to the feedback of my supervisors, colleagues, and peers helped me to reduce the way in which power imbalances had the potential to transpire throughout the qualitative interview process. I am mindful that my own biases, assumptions, and beliefs reside within me, therefore I wanted to ensure that I could refrain from sharing my own perceptions in a verbal or non-verbal manner. Not being able to do so would have resulted in the potential for participants to feel coerced, shamed, or compelled to minimize their experiences or personal truth (Grossoehme, 2014). Finally, I was aware that anxiety, trauma responses, or reluctance to contribute to the interview could occur at any point (Grossoehme, 2014). Thus, it was important that I engaged in a trauma informed and culturally sensitive manner to ensure that all participants felt validated, empowered, and supported in articulating boundaries or feedback if they desired (Collins, 2018).

Data Analysis

As mentioned above, interviews were recorded through a video call platform with the participant's written and informed consent. Each participant had the option to enable camera settings if comfortable. Following the interview process, I reviewed the audio-recorded footage, transcribed the interviews, and categorized the themes from the research in Microsoft Word. To ensure that confidentiality and anonymity was maintained, no identifying information was placed in the computer files, programs, or thesis, nor were participant identities disclosed to external

parties or colleagues that assisted with my research findings. To ensure identities were protected, all data was transcribed and referenced in notes through numerals (i.e., Jane Doe will be transcribed and reported as 1, John Smith will be 2). My decision to utilize thematic analysis and qualitative data analysis was motivated by my desire to organize data, reoccurring themes, and significant findings in a clear and distinctive manner (Chowdhury, 2015; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Once the common themes were established, the categories were supplemented with corresponding quotations, descriptions, and subjective experiences.

Reliability and Validity

Data was enhanced and accurately maintained by providing each participant with the transcribed document of the reported interview. With this information, the participant was invited to confirm that the dialogue remains consistent and accurate to their subjective experience. If a participant wanted to exclude or correct any dialogue on the transcript, they were entitled to adjust their phrasing and have their alterations be confirmed by myself prior to the research being submitted for my defense. Beyond doing this to check for personal biases or misinterpretation, I wanted to honour and create space for my participants to collaborate in the meaning-making process (Collins, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). If more clarification or information was required, I would have conducted a follow-up interview with the participant with their consent. Once all the data was accurately depicted and transcribed, I ensured that all data was inputted without my own misinterpretations. This involved objectively organizing data, utilizing self-reflective practices such as reflective journaling, and debriefing with my thesis supervisor for confirmation.

Limitations

With the awareness that I am not an active member or participant in the BDSM or kink community, I recognize my limitations in understanding the language, culture, or experiences of this demographic (Collins, 2018). This study solely relied on the understandings and perceptions of my participants. The participants I interviewed within the BDSM, and kink culture were defined as my “expert insiders” in my research. Of course, participant data was limited as my study was unable to conduct random sample sizing. Similarly, snowballing sampling was likely to reflect a sample size that was unanimous in perspectives, worldviews, biases, and experiences due to being within the same friend group or social network.

Researchers, supervisors, and colleagues of mine have reiterated the importance of being diligent and consistent in my philosophical and biased understandings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Active efforts were required to ensure that I was bracketing my own unconscious biases, assumptions, and personal philosophies from that of the methodology (Collins, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). It was therefore essential that I clearly articulated a disclaimer of my own limitations and opinions as a researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a novice researcher, I am willing to admit that I did (and still) have many lessons to learn along the way, and I am looking forward to having this journey enlighten me as much as it can.

Chapter 4A: Research Findings

Introduction

As noted in the chapters before, this study explored perceptions of holistic safety found within kink-based dynamics as experienced by female submissives. Each woman was asked the same set of 23 questions, where they were able to provide their own perspective in a semi-structured fashion. The six interviews revealed similar themes related to how women perceive physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual, and environmental safety when engaging in kink-based practices. The findings will be explored in the qualitative data below.

Participant Demographics

The participants ranged between the ages of 27 and 35 years old, all of which self-identified somewhere on the LGBTQIA2S+ spectrum. All the participants classified their racial ethnicity as Caucasian, with two also acknowledging their Hispanic and indigenous roots. These women all attested to having post-secondary education, and all but one participant identified being in a committed relationship that had supportive partners related to their BDSM involvement. All the participants reside in the same community with a population size of roughly 170,000 people.

When asked about their scope of community-based involvement with BDSM, the participants shared having active engagement in kink-specific Facebook groups, regular engagement in social media platforms, and exploring kink-based literature or educational content. 50% of the women interviewed assumed the roles of group administrator in kink-based group forums or educators to those in the kink community. Every woman who participated in the study was unanimous in sharing that the extent of their kink-based practices remained within the parameters of their chosen romantic or sexual partners.

Physical Perceptions of Safety

The general perception of safety began with ensuring BDSM partner(s) had knowledge with regards to RACK (Risk Aware Consensual Kink; Williams et al., 2014). Much like Galati's (2017) assertion, the women conveyed that physical safety meant trusting their kink-based counterparts to have a deep knowledge and understanding around the proper use of props and specific techniques such as Shibari. Partner(s) who possess the ability to effectively self-regulate and have control over their emotions were also noted to be an indicator of physical comfortability for them. The participants also shared the sentiment of securing the safety of sexual health. Items such as first aid equipment, proper hand washing techniques, and disinfecting used sex toys were a priority. Contraceptive barriers such as condoms were also expressed as necessary to eliminate risk of sexually transmitted infections when engaging with a new partner.

One aspect of physical safety that was unanimous among the research participants was the need for verbal and written consent indicating what parameters of kink were agreed upon: a sentiment that Rubinsky (2020) highlights as a vital precaution among BDSM members. One participant shared that she and her romantic partner ensure they have their written consent documented if someone suspects intimate partner violence or if a fatality were to occur by accident. To ensure that consent is honoured, maintained, and able to be withdrawn, the participants also articulated the need for verbal and non-verbal ways to communicate while in a BDSM scene. Some women shared that their non-verbal signals can be loosening the grip on their partner's wrist or changing their demeanor through eye contact or body posturing.

Emotional Perceptions of Safety

The participants were unified in their perception of emotional safety. The core understanding and ideologies of emotional security was deemed as the ability to communicate their needs, desires, and reflections to a partner (or partners) who were receptive, non-judgemental, and trusting. A large facet of emotional safety was perceived to be the ways in which their kink-based partners empowered and held space for the submissives to share their ideas without feeling dismissed, minimized, or shamed. One participant exclaimed that negotiating what genres of kink she was interested in felt like second nature; noting that incompatibility in kinks did not ever equate to feelings of disgust or disrespect. Rather, it feels as though you are simply hearing someone share what their preference of food is.

Another woman shared her gratitude for the BDSM community, largely for the ongoing check-ins and ability to move in and out of the kink-based power dynamic. She stated, “In the scene is where I’m submissive. But then afterwards, I mean, we can have regular full conversations outside of the scene completely and be like ‘yeah, I really enjoyed this’, ‘yeah, I want to try this again’, ‘oh maybe next time we can do this’. I think that’s the biggest thing for emotional [safety] is just having that trust and open communication”.

Trust and communication were also perceived to be necessary when engaging in aftercare following scene work. All the women described after care as a means of grounding, self-regulating, and tending to the needs of themselves and their scene partner(s). Activities that were said to be engaged in during after care were bathing, bundling in blankets, applying heat or ice, cuddling, debriefing, and emotional release.

One participant expressed how emotional processing is often a component of her after care, as there can be scenes that invoke senses of sadness, shame, or guilt. Many of the participants described this notion as a submissive or dominant ‘drop’, where the scene ends, and

the individual becomes aware of how the kink-based engagement has impacted them and potentially harmed their partner(s). All the participants shared the importance of reassuring, validating, and holding space for themselves and their partners to process these feelings and to feel nurtured while doing so, stating it is a form of catharsis and an essential part of ongoing wellness. “I would really love more people to know that [emotional release is] very normal and healthy”, a participant said, “not to feel bad about the fact that themselves or their partner is having all of this shit come out”.

After care, debriefing, and the negotiating process fall onto the metaphorical back of the ability to communicate within the kink-based dynamics effectively and safely. Doing so provided the participants with the increased ability to relate to and deepen their relationship with their dominants. This was shared and described when exploring psychological perceptions of safety with the research participants.

Psychological Perceptions of Safety

The perceptions of psychological safety were widely discussed and explored by each participant. Largely described to be rooted in introspection, self-awareness, and mindfulness, the women shared that psychological safety is largely dependent on one’s own ability to discern, validate, and articulate their needs in kink-based dynamics. According to the participants, psychological safety begins well before the scene even begins.

Participants shared that submissives can explore their psychological safety by first getting curious about the role they are consenting to play and how they wish to be treated. One woman shared that exploring what your kinks and fantasies are prior to engaging with dominants will ensure that you are choosing a role based on your needs versus someone else’s expectations or demands. Such introspection involves an awareness and understanding of one’s position in the

power dynamic, including how it influences the scene work and what perceived sense of power the submissive possesses. Once this is determined, the women shared a mutual belief that further exploration should be done on how a potential scene or dynamic may influence one's psyche, past traumas, or state of being.

One participant cautioned that novice submissives run the risk of exposing themselves to re-traumatization if they have not explored their intentions or psychological wellness prior to scene activity. "Knowing if, when, and what is the right time to reintegrate a past negative experience into a current one [is vital]", the participant warned. She elaborated by sharing that some individuals are misinformed that trauma can always be rectified without the assistance of therapeutic professionals. It is therefore important for dominants and submissives to self-reflect on their past wounds and discern what precautions must be taken prior to scene re-enactment. Prior to incorporating past experiences into current scene work, self-healing may first require regular consultation and processing with a therapeutic professional.

Other participants shared their psychological concerns from an attachment perspective. They articulated that psychological safety occurs when individuals have the awareness and capacity to understand boundaries in kink-based dynamics. More specifically, one woman shared the importance of self-monitoring for patterns of codependency (relying on the other person for validation or to have needs met), manipulation (guilting dominants to spend more time communicating with them outside of scene work) or engaging in transference (expecting the dominant to emulate roles and responsibilities of a partner, parent, or friend). Participants shared that self-monitoring involves mindfulness of the boundaries between self and other, having physical attunement to their bodies, and the ability to understand where kink-based relationships end, and personal relationships begin.

Finally, the participants emphasized the need for trauma informed partners to feel psychologically secure. A priority for the women in the study was to engage with individuals that were emotionally mature, comforting, and supportive in all areas of kink-based interactions. One participant shared feeling especially safe when their partner respects and values them as an individual outside of the scene. She shared, “I don’t care what anybody says, you can’t have someone be mean to you without being nice to you after. Even if you don’t emotionally feel like you need that - you need that.”

Perceptions of Spiritual Safety

Described by participants as the ability to nurture and replenish the spirit of self and others, it was a consensus that spiritual safety involves compassionate and empathic understanding from their respective partners. This included the acknowledgement of what the women’s needs were and the capacity to foster them both in and out of scene work. For this reason, many of the women stated that they believe spiritual and emotional safety are inextricably intertwined.

Accepting and honouring the essence of each other’s spirit was said to be the ability to honor the voice, body, and mind. Some women even attested this to being able to trust one’s intuitive process to identify what it is they desire in scene work (what is the intention) and how this can be met through the notion of sexuality. One participant compared the intimacy found within BDSM to the Buddhist ideologies of tantric connection; commonly understood as the process of integrating spirituality with sexual pleasure. “Sex is universal and eternal - it’s what it means to be human”, the participant shared. “Tantra is often about the deep connection to our own - into our partners - nervous systems, and belief in [intimacy]. You know that there’s a higher vibrational power. So, you [understand the need] for those expulsions of energy and

emotion and the belief of all this big connection that you're making with yourself and your partner.”

All the participants shared that they were able to share their vulnerabilities regarding fantasies, fetishes, and deep-seeded desires in ways that felt like a new degree of acceptance and validation. Those who shared with partners that their desires stemmed from a past negative experience or trauma noted that spiritual safety was helpful in finding ways to self-regulate and reauthor the ways in which they internalized these shame-based or powerless experiences. I have coined this phenomenon as Soulful Reconciliation and will elaborate on it later in my findings.

Soulful Reconciliation

The participants in this study shared how cathartic engaging in power-play can be. One participant even went as far to share that kink-based dynamics come with therapeutic qualities, sharing “there [are] plenty of people who are doing their own therapy through kink without necessarily even realizing that’s what they’re doing”. The product of experiencing spiritual safety resulted in a phenomenon I am coining as soulful reconciliation. Soulful reconciliation can be described as the healing properties found within spiritual safety in BDSM practices.

As emotional and spiritual safety develops in kink-based dynamics through mutual nurturance, compassion, and a willingness to explore each other's past experiences, participants shared they were able to rectify past sexual or shame-based experiences through re-enactment. Re-enactment may involve integrating a facet of a past shame-induced experience, such as being caught masturbating. One participant shared a story describing a dominant who inquired about their submissive formative experience with self-gratification. The submissive informed the dominant that one of the first times they masturbated they were caught by a parent who ridiculed them for the sexual act, and consequently has never been able to achieve orgasm. The dominant and

submissive decided to explore re-authoring this past experience into one that felt more supportive and freer from shame. The participant shared that the scene included positive praises from the dominant during the act of self-gratification, whispering in the submissive's ear phrases such as "you're doing so good", "I'm so proud of you", "you know I love what you're doing". The scene ended resulting in the submissive achieving an orgasm and reclaiming power over their body.

Another participant who favours kink genres such consensual-non-consent and asphyxiation mentioned that scene re-enactments from her past has helped her to heal from childhood abuse. "It's a way to basically have therapy for yourself because it's like, now I'm in the situation I was in before - but now I'm in control. And [I know how] it's going to turn out for me this time". Other participants shared how age play can facilitate soulful reconciliation, noting it can provide the individual to experience a sense of nurturance, attachment, and care they always desired as a child but never had. Regardless of the context, power dynamics, or props utilized in the scene, it is evident that when safety is found within the kink-based relationship, the fragmented parts of self can be rebuilt and alas reunified.

Perceptions of Environmental Safety

Environmental safety was described by the participants to encompass three predominant areas: participant and witness location precautions, preventative safety measures, and environmental mindfulness. One participant shared her mindfulness around not engaging in kink play in local areas in fear of compromising her professional reputation in her city. "Oftentimes I'm not even in the town that I'm from, because everybody talks, and no one keeps things on the down low... And as much as I don't care, I would prefer that people hear that [I engage in BDSM] from me".

With respect to witness precautions, every participant highlighted the importance of consent when engaging in kink-play in public settings. “You shouldn't be having people catch you because that's not consensual. That's not safe in the environment for all those other people.” The participants suggested that environmental play can be done without running the risk of exposing others to indecency, noting the utilization of kink-friendly parties as the best place to practice exhibitionism.

Preventative safety measures were best described by another participant as “prepping a scene like a surgery”. This involved body and prop cleanliness to eliminate the risk of bacterial, skin, or yeast infections. This involves sterilizing the necessary sex toys and practicing thorough personal hygiene such as hand washing and bathing.

It was also deemed necessary to ensure all props and equipment were safe to use and in good condition. This involves the process of checking that ropes are not frayed, knives are not sharp enough to puncture skin, harnesses and swings are able to withstand the weight of individuals using them, and that mats and towels are available for falls or clean up. The women reiterated the importance of having a first aid kit and tools to cut rope and attend to injuries should the need arise.

Finally, the ability to set the “mood” or ambience for a scene was deemed just as important as the ability to end or regain control in a scene. While one participant shared that she and her long-term partner can't always get “in the mood” when chores have yet to be tended to, another woman highlighted the importance of locating weapons in the event she needed to defend herself with a new play partner. This individual stated she feels more safe engaging in scenes with new partners in her own home. “Let's say something were to go wrong. At least I know every nook and cranny in this house where something is helpful to me.”

Conclusion

The research conducted in this study supplements existing literature by offering the perceptions of what safety means to female submissives engaging in kink-based dynamics. The information gathered from the six participants indicate that safety is most experienced when there is active communication surrounding wants and needs, mutual nurturance before and after scene work, and everyone involved engages with integrity and active self-reflection. It was noted that the overall risk of danger was perceived to be reduced in kink-based dynamics due to the level of communication, mutual support, and ongoing consent experienced in and out of scene work. In fact, participants shared that increased trust and vulnerability in kink-based dynamics directly correlated to their ability to explore and engage in more high-risk or intensive play.

Due to the nature of some scene work and genres of kink, it was encouraged by some participants to do some personal inquiry as to why they wish to engage in BDSM power dynamics. If submissives wish to re-enact an experience from their past, therapeutic support was suggested to reinforce psychological safety and to reduce traumatic re-experiencing. Participants also shared that fostering psychological safety comes from the ability to be self-aware of one's own needs and intentions, mindfulness around body sensations, and engaging in regular self-reflection to ensure boundaries are being honored and respected between self and others. Having these foundational skills can help determine what the priorities and needs are to engage in BDSM in a healthy, meaningful, and non-threatening manner.

All the women featured in this study shared that safe kink-based dynamics created a significant increase in their self-esteem, self-confidence, and ability to be more open and communicative in other areas of their life. Not only did the BDSM community help them to accept themselves for who they are, it also empowered them to rid themselves of shame and dress themselves with pride. The participants shared interest in continued research reflecting the

intersectionality of polyamory and BDSM, dominant perspectives of safety, as well as how early childhood experiences correlate to an individual's desire to engage in BDSM practices.

Chapter 5

Limitations to the study

Though this study was vital in exploring female perceptions of holistic safety in kink-based dynamics, it is not without its limitations. All six participants I interviewed are cisgender women living in the same demographic region. The city where the women reside is known to be a more open-minded and liberal region of British Columbia. The participant's predominantly Caucasian and cisgender backgrounds is suspected to lead to their privileges of education, careers, visibility, and safety in community (Blackburn et al., 2023). As a researcher I am curious how perceptions of safety would differ if this study was replicated with BIPOC, transgender, or gender-fluid folks. Researching more conservative, religious, or remote communities is also likely to broaden the findings, too.

Secondly, the format of semi-structured interviews created a higher temptation and probability that the research could be derived from my biased or assumptive position (Collier & Mahoney, 1996; Creswell & Poth, 2018)). I am aware that the information I acquired would have been less extensive if the study was not entitled to follow-up questions. It may have even resulted in questions not being answered in a way I saw as relevant or specific. In this way, it was important to be mindful of my own subjectivity while comparing the data I acquired from each interview.

The final limitation that is worth acknowledging is the study's utilization of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Arguably, IPA's structure is another subjective-based way to observe and analyze general patterns that appeared from the varying interviews, therefore increasing the risk of bias. It also creates the limitation of only having a small sample size to extract from,

therefore limiting the research from exploring more variables found within the general population.

Recommendations for Therapeutic Professionals

One observation noted from this study was that every participant expressed having intrigue in kink-based dynamics beginning in their prepubescent or adolescent years. Despite being underage at the time, these participants shared engaging in mature sites and adult-only forum groups to better explore their sexuality. Therein lies the gap for teenagers to explore relevant resources and information regarding their BDSM interests. When youth are unable to engage in safe, non-judgemental, and information conversations around the foundational components of BDSM, they run the risk of being misinformed and vulnerable in an adult-only space.

It is not my recommendation to introduce youth to engagement in BDSM culture if they express interest in doing so. Instead, therapeutic professionals can facilitate dialogue with kink-inclined individuals of all ages to explore self-awareness and boundary work related to sexual expression. This includes empowering clients to explore their own perceptions of holistic safety and establishing ways in which these identified needs can be met in and outside of interpersonal relationships. Engaging in dialogue about kink-based practices or inclinations with a client is best done from a place of curiosity. Therein lies the potential to explore the subjective experiences of the client from a strength-based and self-empowerment framework.

It is worth noting that therapeutic professionals vary in areas of interest and the clients of which they serve. Many professionals may lack foundational education and understanding related to the BDSM community. Engaging with the clients from a place of assumptive thinking can have negative effects on the individual and has the potential to further instill shame into the

clients served. This becomes a professional impediment if practitioners engage with kink-based individuals from a place of judgment, negative bias, or view the individual as someone living with a sexual pathology. It is recommended that therapeutic professionals learn about the nuances of BDSM practices if they wish to serve kink-friendly populations. If professionals do not wish to work with this demographic, I would encourage practitioners to promote client beneficence by referring such clients elsewhere.

Future Research

The research conducted in this study has created organic pathways for continued research regarding differing perceptions of safety found in BDSM culture. The participant demographic represented here is strictly cisgender and submissive women. It does not encompass experiences or perceptions related to BIPOC, gender-queer, or transgender populations. Walker & Kuperberg (2022) noted the same sentiment, with their study encapsulating Caucasian and educated persons only. It is my hope that my research can serve as a proof of concept which can be later be compared and contrasted with the perspectives of visible minorities, queer identified and persons of colour.

My research also fails to highlight the perspectives of male submissives or those who identify as dominants. Considering this study's limitations, it would be interesting to replicate this study and reflect the views of demographics that differ from. Marginalized populations may have perceptions that were not otherwise captured in this study, such as instances of sexual violence and higher rates of revictimization among the BDSM community (Blackburn et al., 2023). These differing perspectives would undoubtedly be valuable for continued education around harm-reduction strategies and considerations for advocacy that therapeutic professionals can utilize when working with kink-positive clients (van der Toorn et al., 2020).

The high rate of participants who experienced early childhood trauma is another potential area for exploration as is how trauma directly correlates to someone's sexual inclinations or expression with regards to the BDSM community. Based on the perspectives offered by the participants, it could be valuable to explore how - if at all - BDSM has empowered survivors of abuse to reclaim their power and re-author their traumatic experiences through kink-based interactions.

Discussion

As suspected, the perception of women's holistic safety in BDSM relationships is nuanced and multifaceted. The research findings indicate that women equate safety with strong communication styles, mutual nurturance and emotional support, and a shared understanding of safety and expectation both in an out of scene work. Female submissives desire their dominant partners to be compassionate, non-judgemental, and emotionally intelligent. Behaviours such as frequent monitoring for discomfort during scene work, active participation in debriefs and after care, and continued education regarding sexual health and safety techniques were perceived to contribute to harm reduction and trauma informed practices.

Safe and trusting kink-based dynamics resulted in the participants experienced a phenomenon I have described as Soulful Reconciliation. SR is an experience in which memories involving shame or emotional suffering can be rectified through scene re-enactment. When SR occurred on a personal level, one participant shared a reclaimed sense of power over their past victimization, while another recalled how internalized shame was successfully removed from self-gratification. Both experiences could not have been achieved without the safe and trusting bond with their dominant. This is an unsuspecting finding from the study that would benefit from being further researched.

The findings coincide with existing literature (Carlström, 2021; Damm et al., 2018; Faccio et al., 2020), indicating that kink-based practices create an increased sense of empowerment, capacity for cathartic emotional release, and a sense of belonging within community. The data found in this study is reflective largely of Caucasian, cisgender, and middle-class women located in a liberal region of British Columbia. As a result, the data is unable to discern how perceptions of safety may differ for BIPOC, LGBTQIA2S+, or low-income peoples in remote or conservative regions. The research was also gathered and interpreted through the subjective lens of the researcher, which is susceptible to being influenced by personal biases.

To reflect on a personal level, I was honoured to interview women who possessed such self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and mindfulness around their sexuality and holistic needs. Each woman engaged in the research process with authenticity and inhibition to share vulnerable parts of themselves. Despite my research position and lack of association to the BDSM community, I was welcomed with metaphorical open arms by each participant. The privilege of connecting with these women exceeded my expectations. I entered each interview never knowing what to expect and left with an increased sense empowerment and hope for women.

BDSM communities express, share, and engage in ways that many vanilla-sex couples don't. They are honest about their deepest sexual inclinations and lean into dialogue that others likely are too afraid to due to shame or fear of judgement. Moreover, kink-based individuals communicate such needs and desires prior to engaging in physical intimacy. Though I speculate that internalized shame, fear, and insecurities contribute to being sexually inhibited, I suspect all of us vanilla folk could benefit from implementing a few strategies from the BDSM playbook.

Though this research feels like a continued step in the right direction, I am also mindful that many people do not have the luxury to give voice to their sexuality without fear of active danger, violence, or rejection. I am aware of my own privilege: how lucky I am to present in a way that meets societal norms, to engage in hobbies that are widely celebrated and encouraged, and to love someone who fits the globally praised narrative of heteronormativity. This study reflects the voices of women who largely share that same privilege, and my heart breaks for those who only wish they could experience that, too.

I don't want my research to stop here. I want to continue shining a light on BDSM practices, only next time give voice those in the trans and BIPOC communities. It is time for academic professionals to create equal representation in the literature; to stand in solidarity and to show allyship. If there is tangible data supporting current injustices and the voices of minorities, we can pave the way for actionable change.

Conclusion

This study captures the perspective of six cisgender women that see value in their kink-based engagements and relish in their sexuality. When female submissives are given the opportunity to engage with a dominant in a safe and mutually respected dynamic, the opportunities to increase self-confidence, reauthor past experiences, and connect on a soulful level are endless. The perceptions of holistic safety in kink-based dynamics are vast, yet common themes such as communication, consent, and mutual nurturance have identified themselves as the contributing pillars to safety. The unspoken finding, however, is whether these findings are comparable to those in marginalized communities.

How do trans, BIPOC, or gender-fluid individuals perceive safety in BDSM? Do they stand in solidarity with the proclamations of their largely white and liberal cisters? Or do their

voices are opinions remain silenced in the wake of largely cisgender and Westernized research?

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Appendix A: Participant Letter of Information and Eligibility Criteria

Hi there!

You are being sent this Letter of Information (LOI) because you expressed interest in participating in my research study. My name is Caitlin Brockman, and I am in the final stages of acquiring my master's in counselling through Athabasca University. I chose to do a thesis-based exit because I am passionate about amplifying women's voices and perspectives. I am dedicating my research to exploring the narratives of women and how they conceptualize a sense of safety in kink-based power dynamics, and I want to offer you with time and space to articulate exactly what that means in your experience.

This letter will provide you with all the information relating to the research process and the inclusion criteria. Take your time reading through this; getting your informed consent is vital to me and in ensuring we are on the same page moving forward!

How do I know if I'm eligible?

- If you identify as a cisgender woman...
- If you are 18 years old or older...
- If you currently reside in British Columbia...
- If you have engaged in power-play dynamics in the BDSM community for at least 1 year...
- If you identify as a submissive, bottom, little, pet, slave...

You are a fit for my research!

What are you trying to achieve with your research?

The goal of my research is to capture the essence of what it means for women to feel and experience holistic safety in their BDSM engagements. If you decide to be a research participant, I want to know what safety in BDSM means to you. Not only from a physical standpoint, but emotionally, spiritually, mentally, and intellectually. Before your interview with me, I will also ask you to fill out a quick Survey Monkey to get an idea of your identity, social engagements, and environment.

Will I have to share personal details about myself?

Preserving your identity is of the utmost importance to me. Any information you offer to me (such as name, email, phone number, or otherwise) will be seen by me and no one else. Once the research has concluded, I will have no reason to keep any records of your contact information and will be sure to delete it from all computer applications or data software.

How do you want to interview me?

I am happy to interview you in any way you feel most comfortable. I am open to interviews conducted in-person, over the phone, or through video-calls.

Where and how will you store and collect information I give you?

I intend to collect information from our interviews with audio or video recording. To preserve your identity, we can work together to make sure your face is not recorded (if on video chat) and

that we avoid the use of identifying information in our dialogue. Once the data is recorded, I will transcribe the interview into a word document for you to review and confirm (this is when we begin utilizing an alias name to protect your real identity). The organization of information and data will be done on a software platform called NVIVO – this will make sure all your details are passcode encrypted and inaccessible to anyone except for me!

What happens to the study once it's done?

The findings of the research study will be presented to my thesis supervisor and a curated committee to ensure all steps were made to ensure that my research was as thorough and concise as possible. If I pass my dissertation exam, I would love to submit my research to various academic journals to ensure BDSM continues to be seen for its sexually liberating qualities. If you have interest in knowing what happens to this study following your participation, let's talk! I would love to keep you up to date on how far your voice could go in the academic world!

Are there risks to participating in this study?

This study is designed to highlight the ways in which you perceive safety – this means almost all the content we cover will be dedicated to learning how you feel cared for, empowered, and supported in your BDSM relationships. I am mindful, however, that sometimes speaking about our feelings of safety can remind us of moments we may have felt unsafe before. Please note that I am committed to debriefing the interview with you and am happy to support you in searching for resources should you require any.

Can I back out of the study?

The beautiful thing about consent is that it can be revoked at any time. I do not want you to feel pressured to participate in an interview if you do not want to, nor do I want you to feel as though you must complete an interview just because we may have already started. Let's talk if you want to withdraw your consent, and we will make sure your voice is heard. Your printed transcription will be free to revise or change if you feel it is not accurately capturing your feelings, too. Let's work together to make sure you always feel good about your participation!

Thank you so much for your interest in participation and taking the time to read up on this research endeavor. If you have any more questions, comments, or concerns about the research process, please feel free to reach out to me via email (cbrockman1@learn.athabascau.ca) or by cell phone (250-327-7159).

I look forward to connecting with you soon,

Warmly,

Caitlin Redford

Appendix B: Participant Consent Form

Thank you for your continued interest and dedication in being a research participant in *FEMALE PERCEPTIONS OF HOLISTIC SAFETY IN KINK-BASED INTERACTIONS: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION*. As the participant letter of information states, I, Caitlin Brockman, am conducting this research study to partially fulfill my requirements to obtain a degree in Master of Counselling through Athabasca University. I have chosen to conduct research on the ways in which women perceive holistic safety in kink-based interactions. For this study, kink-based interactions are defined as any act found in BDSM-related dynamics such as dominance, discipline, submissive, sadism, or masochism fulfilled in a mutually consenting dynamic. This includes, but is not limited to, restraints, humiliation, edge play, consensual non-consent, age-play, role-play, or power exchanges. The purpose of my research is to highlight the ways in which women in the BDSM and kink community conceptualize safety in their power exchange dynamics and how this contributes to overall satisfaction and an increase in sexual liberation.

Please read through the following statements before signing that you give your consent:

- I understand that the interview will require approximately 1 hour of my time and will be recorded for data accuracy.
- I am aware that it is my right to opt out of the research interview at any time without any consequences.
- I am aware that after I have had a debrief meeting following my interview, I am not able to retract my anonymous interview from the study.
- I am aware that I will receive a transcribed version of my interview with the researcher to confirm what I said was conveyed accurately and reflects my lived experiences and beliefs.
- I understand that the finalized product will not divulge my identity or have any information that may reveal who I am through character descriptions.
- I understand that all identifying data about me (including notes, video, or audio recordings) will be disposed of once the research dissertation has been completed.
- I understand that the research paper may be published in academic literature following the dissertation process.
- I agree that the researcher of this assignment will follow up with me one week after my interview in case I require debriefing.
- I am aware that I can reach out to the researcher sooner if I have any questions, comments, or concerns.

Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. How old are you?
2. How would you define your sexual orientation?
3. What do you like to be referred to or as when you are participating in BDSM?
4. What is your racial ethnicity?
5. What is your education level?
6. What is your relationship status?
7. How large of a population do you think your city or town is (numerically)?
8. What is your degree of engagement in the BDSM community?
9. Paint a picture for me on how you found yourself getting involved in the BDSM community... How did that unfold?
10. What genres of kink do you find yourself most drawn to? Tell me about it.
11. How do (or did) you find yourself navigating the BDSM community when looking to initiate a relationship with a playmate?
12. At what point in your involvement with the BDSM community do you consider safety? What does that look like?
13. How do you perceive physical safety in a kink-based relationship?
14. How do you perceive emotional safety in a kink-based relationship?
15. How do you perceive psychological safety in a kink-based relationship?
16. How do you perceive spiritual safety in a kink-based relationship?
17. How do you perceive environmental safety in a kink-based relationship?
18. What benefits have you experienced in your sexuality because of the safety found within the context of BDSM?

19. Do you believe all individuals in the BDSM community value and require a sense of safety to the same degree? Elaborate on your answer.
20. In what ways (that you are aware of) are women able to navigate a lack of safety in kink-based relationships? How do you do this for yourself?
21. Is there anything else you would like to share that you believe would benefit this study?
22. If another research study were to be conducted about BDSM soon, what do you think would be worth exploring next?

Appendix D: Research Ethics Approval



CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL APPROVAL

The Athabasca University Research Ethics Board (REB) has reviewed and approved the research project noted below. The REB is constituted and operates in accordance with the current version of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2) and Athabasca University Policy and Procedures.

Ethics File No.: 25281

Principal Investigator:

Ms. Caitlin Brockman, Graduate Student
Faculty of Health Disciplines\Graduate Centre for Applied Psychology

Supervisor/Project Team:

Dr. Paul Jerry (Supervisor)

Project Title:

FEMALE PERCEPTIONS OF HOLISTIC SAFETY IN KINK-BASED INTERACTIONS: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION

Effective Date: June 14, 2023

Expiry Date: June 13, 2024

Restrictions:

Any modification/amendment to the approved research must be submitted to the AUREB for approval prior to proceeding.

Any adverse event or incidental findings must be reported to the AUREB as soon as possible, for review.

Ethical approval is valid *for a period of one year*. An annual request for renewal must be submitted and approved by the above expiry date if a project is ongoing beyond one year.

An Ethics Final Report must be submitted when the research is complete (*i.e. all participant contact and data collection is concluded, no follow-up with participants is anticipated and findings have been made available/provided to participants (if applicable)*) or the research is terminated.

Approved by:

Date: June 14, 2023

Barbara Wilson-Keates, Chair
Faculty of Health Disciplines, Departmental Ethics Review Committee

Athabasca University Research Ethics Board
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