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Kiwi Kinksters: BDSM in Auckland, New Zealand

Deww L Zhang

University of Auckland

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Abstract

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I've been told every PhD is a journey but I was expecting something a little easier. I want you to go. I want you to stay. I don't know what I want. I don't know what you want. If you're the Dom then you should decide. I don't feel like the sub in total control of everything. I just feel like a wistful young girl with her elbows propped up against the balcony rails, looking up the clock tower with her chin in her cold hands, waiting for the hands to strike midnight and trying not to despair at the prospect of the carriage turning back into a pumpkin.

An ethnographic inquiry into the Auckland kink scene (the term kink encompasses erotic practices that involve some form of Bondage, Discipline, Dominance/Submission and/or Sadism/Masochism, and is interchangeably used throughout this thesis with the acronym BDSM) – the first of its kind in New Zealand – constitutes the bulk of this dissertation.

Alongside direct observations made by the researcher-participant, 21 self-identified BDSM practitioners were interviewed about their life experiences in relation to their BDSM identities, practices and lifestyles. One of the concerns that BDSM practitioners had was being discriminated against if their proclivities were made publicly known.

Thus, the next section of the dissertation uses a public opinion survey to investigate how New Zealand (primarily Auckland) residents perceive BDSM and BDSM practitioners. The results from this survey demonstrate that most respondents tend to agree with 'BDSM-positive' statements (such as 'Kinky people are just like everybody else') and disagree with 'BDSM-negative' statements (such as 'Kink is associated with a variety of serious psychological disorders'), suggesting that they are fairly tolerant/accepting of BDSM.

Finally, given how influential the *Fifty Shades of Grey* franchise has been in shaping the public perception of BDSM over the past 5 years since this publication, the last section of the dissertation focuses on how mainstream media – specifically the *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015) movie – portray BDSM and BDSM practitioners, and how viewers engage with and respond to these media representations. This was achieved by analysing 833 reviews of the movie and asking 10 participants to view and respond to ten open-ended questions about the movie. Despite the trend towards BDSM tolerance and acceptance, fictional narratives like *Fifty Shades* that gain an enormous amount of traction worldwide (which enjoy far more publicity than any non-fictional accounts of first-hand experiences with BDSM) continue to promulgate problematic messages about BDSM practices and practitioners – a problem that becomes evident when such messages are being disseminated among those who have little or no interest in partaking in BDSM, may be less well-informed about what BDSM identities, practices and lifestyles entail, and yet have the ability to make judgements and decisions that will adversely affect BDSM practitioners.

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Chapter One: Why is researching BDSM important?

Introduction

BDSM is an acronym that encompasses a range of consensual erotic, sensual, sexual and/or intimate practices that incorporate some form of Bondage, Discipline, Dominance/submission and/or Sadism/Masochism. It could also include the exploration of sexual fetishes or kinks, though sexual gratification is not necessarily the goal for many BDSM enthusiasts. A typical BDSM session or interaction could involve physical and psychological elements of power and power exchange, control, pain and/or humiliation/degradation (Truscott, 2001; T. S. Weinberg, 2011). 'BDSM' and 'kink' seem to have different nuanced definitions, with BDSM sounding as if it incorporates more 'hardcore', sadomasochistic-oriented activities than kink which may imply erotic, naughty, sexual adventures that couples have in the bedroom. Nevertheless, many BDSM practitioners prefer to refer to themselves as 'kinksters' or 'kinky people' rather than the formalised term 'BDSM practitioner' used more widely in academic, medical and other professional settings, despite the nexus of sexual and sex-related concepts that 'kink' is connected to. Thus, the terms will be used interchangeably throughout this work.

BDSM is a very personal experience for practitioners; 'kinkster' can be one of various central, simultaneously-held identities that some practitioners manage, while for others it may be a casual leisure activity that is a peripheral facet of their lives (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006). Some practitioners may even be vehemently opposed to the idea of self-identifying as a 'kinkster', adopting various neutralisation strategies to negate or minimise the social stigma associated with BDSM even though they may, for example, be interested in spanking (Plante, 2006). Thus, depending on how the subject of BDSM is approached, it could be conceived of as a subculture, lifestyle and/or behaviour (D. J. Williams, 2006).

Nevertheless, because the umbrella term BDSM is inclusive of such a wide range of roles, preferences, and activities, those who are involved in some form of BDSM do not all necessarily have the same interests (Nordling, Sandnabba, Santtila, & Alison, 2006); there is an endless list of what someone could potentially enjoy – perhaps it is the smell of leather or the feel of latex, or inflicting and/or receiving pain, or sensory deprivation – and a kinkster who enjoys one particular activity may not enjoy doing that same activity everyday, or may loathe doing it with a different partner.

The essence of BDSM and why practitioners enjoy it have been debated by academics and practitioners alike, and even the specialised language used within the BDSM subculture does not have an adequate, complete gamut of taxonomies or descriptors that can accurately articulate everyone's experiences (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2007). Therefore, in researching within the nascent BDSM field, a reductionist, utilitarian approach that attempts to categorise/label individuals, tries to explain differences as 'anomalies in the data' and propose a singular, optimal, comprehensive theory is less important and less relevant than a holistic, multifaceted approach. It is paramount that individual differences are acknowledged and an array of perspectives from the "We're in a 24/7 total power exchange relationship" practitioner to the "We're not really 'kinky', but once in a while we like to spice things up in the bedroom I guess..." practitioner must be taken into account.

Towards the end of the 19th century and into the 20th century, BDSM was better known as 'sadoomasochism' or SM – terms that are currently still in use, though less commonly now. It first came to the attention of medical practitioners as sexual aberrations presenting in patients

with ‘unnatural’ desires presenting as two distinct phenomena, sexual sadism and sexual masochism, through Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s seminal diagnostic tome, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (Krafft-Ebing, 1935). Prior to its publication, sadomasochistic sexual acts had been depicted artistically – most famously in two literary works; the Marquis de Sade’s¹ *Justine, ou les malheurs de la vertu* (1791) and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s¹ *Venus in Furs* (1870) – and such acts had not been perceived to be psychopathological (Taylor, 1997). Acts that are now considered to be sexual aberrations, like flagellation, date back to biblical times (Cooper, 1988) and mere centuries ago, flagellation was considered to be a valid form of treatment for men struggling with impotency or erectile dysfunction (Peakman, 2009).

Subsequent research on BDSM throughout much of the 20th century had been performed with clinical populations, showcasing those individuals with the most extreme, atypical, often violent proclivities, fixations and behaviours (Taylor & Ussher, 2001). The ‘BDSM as psychopathology’ paradigm has since endured for over 150 years from Krafft-Ebing through to the fourth revised edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV-TR) and the tenth revision of the *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems* (ICD-10) diagnostic manuals used by psychologists, psychiatrists and therapists today for clinical diagnoses of a myriad of mental health issues². This has arguably had a negative influence on how BDSM is perceived (Guidroz, 2008) whilst simultaneously perpetuating an intolerance for any sexual proclivities that deviate from a norm that is impossible to define. It would be difficult to establish what would

¹These two authors are particularly noteworthy because the term ‘sadism’ is derived from de Sade’s name while the term ‘masochism’ is derived from Sacher-Masoch’s.

²It should be noted that while other categories such as the neuroses and psychoses have been substantially and extensively revised in the DSM and ICD manuals over the past 60 years, the paraphilias have comparatively received little attention in the past 100 years (Reiersøl & Skeid, 2006).

universally be considered ‘normal sexual behaviour’ across different cultures and time periods, as this would involve having to define what ‘normal sex’ is supposed to look like. What we might perceive to be ‘normal’ or ‘ideal’ right now, such as a long-term monogamous relationship with a ‘soulmate’, is actually a recent 20th century phenomenon (Easton & Hardy, 2009). The resulting theorising of BDSM has thus been inherently disconnected from the everyday lived experiences of actual BDSM practitioners because of the lack of supporting empirical evidence drawn from data generated by BDSM in praxis (Kleinplatz & Moser, 2007).

Changing social attitudes can also be reflected in the way we conceptualise what constitutes a mental illness. Where once homosexuality was considered a mental illness, in 1973 the American Psychiatric Association (APA) commenced declassifying homosexuality from the DSM-II onwards, though other sexual-related categories such as sadism, masochism, paedophilia and fetishes were retained (Silverstein, 2009). Recently, revisions have been made in the DSM-V, published in 2013, to differentiate paraphilias from paraphilic disorders, distinguishing less common sexual interests/behaviours from mental disorders (Briken, Bourget, & Dufour, in press). Now, in order to be diagnosed with a paraphilic disorder, a client must be experiencing significant personal distress that does not (solely) result from societal disapproval, and it must either involve another person’s psychological distress, injury or death, or involve individuals that are unwilling or unable to consent (Yakeley & Wood, 2014).

To date, formal academic inquiry into phenomenological experiences of BDSM practitioners has been sparse. Only in the past 20 to 30 years have there been a proliferation of

phenomenology-centric research conducted with non-clinical populations, concerned with the lived and embodied experiences of BDSM practitioners who otherwise live prosaic, uneventful lives (Langdridge & Barker, 2007). The empirical evidence gathered from these everyday BDSM practitioners does not support those earlier theories posited by psychoanalysts (BDSM as psychopathology) and radical feminists (BDSM as abuse/violence) (Cross & Matheson, 2006). These participants have offered counter-narratives that challenge the pathological framework, suggesting that consensual exploration of BDSM activities should not be conflated with sexual assault, violence, rape or abuse (Ritchie & Barker, 2005), and can have a positive influence on practitioners (Pitagora, 2013). It is through these first-hand accounts that alternative meanings and discourses of BDSM beyond academic, clinical, legal and the media's fixation of the construct of 'BDSM as kinky sex' can be explored (Newmahr, 2010b).

It has been noted that legislative bodies, medical institutions, religious organisations, and the media have been complicit agents of social control, proscribing sexual acts deemed to be 'deviant', 'unnatural', 'wrong', 'immoral' or 'abnormal' (Taylor, 1997). Public libraries (at least in the United States) do not tend to provide resources for those interested in non-heteronormative identities, lifestyles and practices (Holley, 2014). Even though BDSM has been increasingly garnering mainstream attention into the 21st century, from advertisements and high fashion with fetishistic imagery (Needham, 2014), to suggestive and actual kinky trysts and overarching themes in popular television series like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *True Blood* (Glynn, Aston, & Johnson, 2012), and the burgeoning popularity of the controversial *Fifty Shades of Grey* franchise (Martin, 2013), the general population has not been sufficiently educated on what actual BDSM practitioners do in praxis. Despite the increased visibility of BDSM-related themes in mainstream media, practitioners continue to

experience significant negative legal, medical and social ramifications³ when their involvement in any sort of sexual activity deemed to be ‘socially unacceptable’ are made known to the public (Klein & Moser, 2006).

This stigma and discrimination that BDSM practitioners face could be attributed to a conceptualisation of different expressions of sexuality being hierarchical in nature. Though we have moved on from the notion that indigenous tribal cultures have inferior customs, traditions, belief/value systems and ways of life compared to contemporary urban societies, our acceptance of sociocultural differences has not translated to an egalitarian view of different sexual practices (Dean, 2009). The BDSM groups around the world have not been accorded the same rights and privileges as the ‘married couple groups’. In many societies worldwide, reproductive sex between a married couple – with the purposes of fostering intimacy within matrimony, upholding monogamous values and procreative intent – continues to occupy a privileged position (Rubin, 1984). Other forms of sex – non-married couples’ sex, casual sex, homosexual sex, transgender sex, unprotected sex (especially in a post-HIV environment), non-genital sex, BDSM and fetishistic sex, paid sex, masturbating while watching pornography and the list goes on – are considered depraved and occupy lower rungs of the sexual hierarchy (Rubin, 1984).

To date, there have not yet been any ethnographic studies undertaken in any BDSM community throughout New Zealand. This three-part project aims to contribute to the current state of international knowledge in the social sciences field about BDSM by adopting a mixed methods approach with a particular New Zealand focus. While it is not an explicit focus or

³ Full details will be explored in the literature review, but these can include workplace discrimination, losing child custody, being accused of abuse or charged with assault.

goal of this work to campaign for sexual citizenship/legitimacy on behalf of BDSM practitioners, all research – especially those concerning marginalised populations – is inherently political, and it is hoped that an increased understanding of the subject matter would encourage an egalitarian rather than a hierarchical approach to evaluating sexual cultures, thereby reducing the stigma associated with BDSM practices and subsequent discrimination experienced by practitioners. As the stigma and misunderstandings surrounding BDSM and BDSM practitioners have sometimes resulted in devastating consequences for individuals – including the loss of employment or child custody, hate crimes, a reluctance to approach law enforcement and medical professionals when non-consensual incidences of assault or rape occur and so on – the importance of mitigating stigma and increasing awareness about the lived realities of BDSM cannot be overstated.

Research Questions

The three studies in the following chapters are each designed to address one of the following three research questions:

1. What are the experiences of BDSM practitioners in New Zealand?
2. How does the public perceive BDSM practitioners in New Zealand?
3. How do the mainstream media influence how BDSM is perceived?

Research Objectives

These three interrelated research questions make an original contribution to the field about phenomenological experiences of BDSM practitioners by providing a New Zealand perspective in an area that is largely dominated by research based in USA, UK and Europe.

Assessed in relation to each other, the three studies adopt a mixed methods approach to the topic and invites responses from both BDSM practitioners and non-practitioners. This project is intended to raise awareness and facilitate public dialogue about BDSM practitioners, practices, relationships and communities as experienced by BDSM practitioners themselves. In so doing, BDSM practitioners are given an avenue to challenge the assumptions, stereotypes, misconceptions and misunderstandings that they believe the public have/could make about BDSM.

The second research question centred around the public response is designed to gauge how tolerant and accepting that people living in New Zealand are of BDSM and BDSM practitioners. It questions the merit of the widely-touted notion of the normalisation of alternative sexualities in ‘21st century secular Western societies’.

Finally, the third research question concerning the media highlights the importance of critically engaging with the messages about BDSM that various mainstream media avenues are perpetuating, as these can influence how the audience perceive BDSM and BDSM practitioners.

Ultimately, it is hoped that this project will reduce the marginalisation, stigmatisation and discrimination of BDSM practitioners, which can have varying levels of negative impact on BDSM-practising individuals – through being targeted for hate crimes; having their businesses picketed/vandalised; losing jobs/careers; losing child custody; being perceived as dangerous, violent and abusive; struggling with shame/guilt; feeling afraid or ambivalent

about approaching legal and medical institutions for BDSM-related non-consensual activities, accidents and injuries, and so on.

Dissertation Structure

A general overview of BDSM has already been provided in the introduction, and the rest of this chapter is devoted to an interdisciplinary review of the literature in order to highlight the insights already attained, as well as those areas where there is a paucity in the literature.

Chapter 2 describes the mixed methods approach adopted in this thesis, and chapters 3, 4 and 5 are devoted to addressing research questions 1, 2 and 3 respectively. The first and second studies involve human participants, the first being an ethnographic study with interviews, and the second an online survey designed to measure attitudes against sadomasochism using an altered version of the ASMS scale (Yost, 2010). The third study presents an analysis of the currently trending, most widely known media representation of BDSM, the *Fifty Shades of Grey* phenomenon. Each chapter is self-contained with its own introduction, methods, results, conclusion and discussion sections.

The final chapter contains an overall conclusion and discussion, followed by the glossary, references and appendices.

Literature Review

Literature search strategy, inclusion and exclusion criteria

A comprehensive journal article search was undertaken on Ovid, PubMed, PsycINFO and Taylor & Francis Online databases using the search terms ‘BDSM’, ‘sadism’, ‘masochism’, ‘sado-masochism’ and ‘bondage’. Additionally, journals that focused on sex and deviance research were scrutinised in greater detail. These journals include Archives of Sexual Behavior, Deviant Behavior, Electronic Journal of Human Sexuality, Journal of Homosexuality, The Journal of Psychology and Human Sexuality, The Journal of Sex Research, Psychology & Sexuality, Sexualities. Periodic searches continued after those databases and journals had been exhausted up until 1 August 2014. Some articles published more recently may not have been included in this review.

The abovementioned search terms were also used in the University of Auckland’s library database. Books without any of the following terms: ‘BDSM’, ‘bondage’, ‘discipline’, ‘sadism’, ‘masochism’ or ‘sado-masochism’ in the index/glossary were excluded. The remaining books were predominantly books about queer theory/gender studies, or the depiction of a range of sexual activities in the field of film, TV and media studies.

Material that was unrelated to the lived experiences of BDSM practitioners and/or how BDSM practitioners’ lives could be affected by non-practitioners’ perceptions of BDSM was excluded. The remaining literature could be broadly categorised into four fields, namely the informative, theoretical, practical studies, and the way BDSM practitioners navigate a largely heteronormative-conforming world. These are explored in their respective subheadings.

Informative

The informative literature has been written with the explicit purpose of educating or guiding readers who have minimal/negligible prior knowledge or experiences with BDSM. They could be stylised and presented as, for example, ‘BDSM 101’, ‘BDSM for Dummies’ or ‘BDSM FAQs’. Beyond the introductory materials that offer general information, there is a body of literature specifically addressed to healthcare service providers such as social workers, counsellors and therapists who are looking to become more culturally competent in terms of increasing their BDSM knowledge in order to better serve their BDSM-practising clients.

Informative: Introduction to BDSM

Those who are encountering BDSM for the first time may find themselves overwhelmed with information. There is a wealth of reading material readily available about different BDSM activities and a range of issues such as consent and safety. Also, the BDSM subculture has its own vernacular that one would need to be equipped with in order to converse, debate with and learn from like-minded practitioners. The glossary at the end of this dissertation includes some of the most widely-used terms most likely to arise in the literature and in participants’ responses.

The literature devoted to introducing BDSM to a naïve reader often acknowledges that there is no singular explanation of BDSM, nor is there an exemplary or typical practitioner (Guidroz, 2008). Texts geared towards introducing curious couples willing to experiment with kink generally function to: explain some BDSM terminologies; introduce different types of BDSM-related activities; familiarise the reader with some basic techniques they may wish

to experiment with (e.g. how to tie your partner to the bedposts without cutting off blood circulation in the wrists and ankles, or how to wield a flogger and which parts of the body it would be safe to use on); highlight some safety and consent concerns inherent within BDSM play; debunk myths and misconceptions about BDSM practices and practitioners; and offer further resources (Miller & Devon, 1995; Taormino, 2012; Wiseman, 1996). Academic texts are less likely to offer this type of pragmatic information and instead would address more theoretical concerns, such as the aetiology of kinky practices and identities (Yost & Hunter, 2012), the context-specificity of concepts such as ‘deviance’ or ‘perversity’ (Peakman, 2009) and the state’s regulation of non-hegemonic erotic practices (Taylor, 1997).

Informative: Guidelines for health service providers

Members of any alternative lifestyle will likely, at some point in their lives, consult a doctor for medical advice or treatment, and they may not necessarily disclose their proclivities. It has been observed that those medical professionals who are aware of alternative sexual practices are more likely to be able to recognise how their own value judgements may impede on providing adequate care for their patients compared to those who have little or no knowledge about alternative sexual practices, and therefore would be in a better position to make more informed decisions about how to diagnose and treat their patients (Ando, Rowen, & Shindel, 2014). However, this does not necessarily mean that all healthcare personnel who receive education/training about alternative sexual practices would not be biased or prejudiced against BDSM practitioners, or that BDSM-practising patients would not be discriminated against. In textbooks concerning human sexuality, BDSM receives comparatively minimal attention compared to other sexual subcultures, especially those that are more visible and have been deemed to be more ‘high risk’ or ‘vulnerable’ such as certain

homosexual practices (e.g. cruising,⁴ penetrative sex without contraception, fisting), or problematic such as sexual offending or paedophilia. Out of three randomly selected human sexuality textbooks obtained from the University of Auckland's main library, the first had less than two pages devoted to BDSM compared to entire chapters on health-oriented topics (women's bodies, men's bodies, STDs, sexual assault/violence, fertility/pregnancy/childbirth and so on) (Levay, Baldwin, & Baldwin, 2012). The second textbook arguably gave an even worse treatment of BDSM – the short and succinct blurb on 'somasochism' was contained within the 'atypical and potentially problematic sexual connections' section, which had a list of the following subheadings: 'the sex worker industry', 'close encounters', 'somasochism', 'sex with animals', 'sex with the dead', and 'casual sex and pansexualism' (Kelly, 1998). The third textbook did note that 'abnormal' and 'atypical' are descriptors used to denote statistically uncommon rather than morally objectionable sexual behaviours, though it was nevertheless medical in its focus, concerned with aetiology, formative childhood experiences and attempting to provide lengthy speculative explanations of aberrant behaviours which had previously been presented to the reader as a statistical anomaly (Hyde & Delamater, 2000). The medical field's obsession with investigating the aetiologies of 'abnormal' and 'atypical' sexual behaviours renders them rooted as medical issues rather than personal preferences – not nearly as many resources are devoted to investigating, monitoring and policing why some people prefer certain colours, numbers or foods compared to why some people prefer certain ways of doing sex.

⁴ Cruising is an activity largely attributed to gay men where they will go to a cruise club, sauna or well-known cruise area to engage in a range of casual sex activities with other men whom they may or may not have met before. Although such venues and practices do exist in the heterosexual sphere, public health concerns have tended to be elevated in queer spaces.

Counsellors and therapists may also encounter BDSM practitioners seeking their services. However, compounded with the issue that textbook information about BDSM is scarce, many of these social workers may not have adequate training or resources to deal with kinky clients (Barker, Iantaffi, & Gupta, 2007). In one study, 74% of therapists had at least some training on sexual minorities but 64% of the total sample had no training that included BDSM (Kelsey, Stiles, Spiller, & Diekhoff, 2013). In that same study, 76% of those polled had treated at least one kinky client, but only 48% of the total sample perceived themselves to have been competent in the area. This is important to rectify because some of the assumptions that people with little to no knowledge about BDSM have could cause irreparable damage and loss of trust in a therapeutic relationship. For example, the assumption that all BDSM practitioners have some form of underlying psychopathology is not empirically supported (Powls & Davies, 2012). There are guides that introduce BDSM to counsellors and therapists (Pitch, 2014) so that they can better understand their clients' needs, desires and practices and tailor their approaches to therapy accordingly, but these rely on professionals being willing to acknowledge that they are lacking knowledge in the area, wanting to educate themselves, and proactively seeking these resources out.

BDSM practitioners are often concerned that they would not receive unbiased care from those unfamiliar with BDSM practices (Kolmes, Stock, & Moser, 2006). Many of those polled in previous research felt that their therapists did not know enough about BDSM for it to be appropriately factored into therapy (Hoff & Sprott, 2009). For example, many of those who choose to disclose their BDSM practices have had to educate their therapists about it, and some have been told to cease their BDSM activities as part of their treatment even if the issue(s) brought to the therapist was unrelated to BDSM (Kolmes et al., 2006). The perception that most therapists would be judgemental may lead some practitioners to choose

not to disclose their BDSM practices, which could hinder the therapeutic relationship (Nichols, 2006). Among clients who choose to disclose their BDSM practices, those who are told that BDSM is destructive tend to forgo therapy rather than forgo BDSM (Weille, 2002). Therapists' negative attitudes, even if they are born out of genuine concern about the wellbeing of their clients, may have the unintended consequence of denying counselling services to BDSM practitioners who need them.

Due to these ongoing difficulties, organisations have started local initiatives, such as the National Coalition of Sexual Freedom's (NCSF) 'Kink Aware Professionals Directory' (NCSF, 2012), which contains a comprehensive list of US-based healthcare, legal, finance, IT and other professional service providing companies staffed by employees who are sensitive to the needs of BDSM-practising clients. In a densely populated urban area with thousands of BDSM practitioners, it may be relatively easy to enlist professional services in the same city from someone you have never met before. However, relying on 'kink-aware professionals' may not be as feasible in a small town or in a rural area, where it may be impossible to find a local professional service provider, or the only local option is someone whom you may have previously interacted with or had a relationship with before.

Thus, the general ethos being promoted in this field is that social workers ought to make themselves more familiar with BDSM; those who are more aware of their own biases and of the popular discourses that reinforce these negative perceptions have been shown to be more sensitive to the needs of and better able to serve their kinky clients (D. J. Williams, 2013). Ultimately, within a therapeutic setting, what ought to be important is how practitioners make sense of their BDSM experiences, not how social workers make sense of BDSM practitioners

(Taylor, 1997). However, it should be stressed that more can be done to educate social workers about alternative sexual practices in a non-pathological framework. Clients should not have to be educating their therapists about their BDSM proclivities. These topics should be included in the educational curricula and case studies should be presented while social workers are being trained rather than relying on therapists to take the initiative to do their own research when a kinky client comes seeking their services.

Theory

More theoretical work has been done in the BDSM field than polling actual BDSM practitioners for their traits, opinions, values and/or attitudes. The available literature suggests that even less research has been conducted using more intensive, immersive approaches such as participant-observation or ethnography. The theoretical elements of the BDSM literature include: (a) the medical and cultural history of BDSM; (b) literature reviews and meta-analyses; (c) how queer theory has been applied to BDSM; (d) the espousal of expanding the notion of sexual citizenship to be more inclusive of alternative sexualities and lifestyles, and; (e) the increasingly popular discourse of BDSM as what has been termed ‘serious leisure’.

Throughout this section, it is important to be aware of the inherent disconnect between theory and praxis. While some may feel that the rising popularity of BDSM has had a detrimental disenchanting/demystifying effect on the subculture, and the campaign against discrimination has fundamentally changed the nature of BDSM and BDSM communities from a private intimate activity to political activism (Preston, 2001), what is posited and being debated in the literature may have minimal impact on or relevance to the lives and experiences of BDSM practitioners. For example, Baumeister’s theory of masochism as an escape from self,

thereby being cathartic and therapeutic, did not have any self-identifying masochist's input and conflates masochism with submission, bondage and humiliation even though these taxonomies have different meanings and serve different functions for BDSM practitioners (Baumeister, 1988). Theories about BDSM practitioners that are not based on any practitioner's actual or recounted experiences may have very little bearing on how BDSM practitioners live their lives, and ought to be considered with caution.

Theory: History

Going beyond the recent conceptualisations of BDSM, flagellation had been practised privately for centuries prior, particularly on men who were impotent or had erectile dysfunction (Peakman, 2009). Brothels that catered to clients wanting flagellation flourished and sadomasochistic motifs have been prevalent in literary works throughout the 18th and 19th centuries (Sisson, 2007a). Throughout the 19th century, the popularity of erotic flagellation burgeoned in England and flagellation literature and pornography spread from England to other countries like France and Germany (Largier, 2007). Up until the first publication and subsequent proliferation of psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* in 1886, sadomasochism had not been widely considered to be sinful or psychopathological (Sisson, 2007a; Taylor, 1997). Before the term 'sadomasochism' was invented, there was evidence of bondage themes in sculptures dating back as far as 25,000 years ago. There are 2,500-year-old Greek vases depicting sadomasochistic acts, and predating *The Story of O* and *Venus in Furs* are literary works that mention, to varying degrees of detail, sadomasochistic acts from Ancient Greek and Roman times through to the Middle Ages (Sisson, 2007b).

Psychopathia Sexualis presented a series of case studies of patients exhibiting symptoms of sexual sadism in one chapter, followed by a separate chapter on sexual masochism (Krafft-Ebing, 1935). Sadism was conceived of as something men, who are ‘naturally aggressive’, inflicted upon women, who are ‘naturally passive’. Sadism among female patients was thought to be very rare and unnatural, because it was conceived of as an inevitably male phenomenon due to the unrestrained and uncontrollable nature of male lust. *Psychopathia Sexualis* did not distinguish between sexual sadism and sadism; as long as the patient had some form of desire to see a woman bleed or defile her body, skin or clothes, those narratives were included. Also included were fantasies or actual acts of murder, rape, paedophilia, cannibalism, mutilation and necrophilia, all within the same chapter under different categories of an underlying affliction of sadism. Krafft-Ebing’s work was indicative of the sociocultural mores at the time, when religious (Judeo-Christian) doctrines were highly influential in guiding the beliefs and behaviours of the European populace.

Conversely, some degree of masochism in women was considered to be ‘natural’, because women submitted to men ‘by design’. Thus it would be difficult to diagnose masochism in women because it was ‘in their nature’ to serve and be subservient towards their husbands or male lovers. The case studies presented in the masochism chapter focused on male patients who were seen to be suffering from an unnatural desire to be dominated by women. Accordingly, sadism was conceived of as a ‘hypermasculine’ trait and masochism ‘hyperfeminine’.

Following from Krafft-Ebing’s work, which had pathologised many sexual acts that did not have a procreative/reproductive purpose, the medicalisation of sadomasochism continues to

the present day. In 1905, Sigmund Freud theorised that sadistic and masochistic desires that manifest in an adult could be influenced by early formative childhood experiences, and traced back to abnormal psychological development during that individual's childhood (Freud, 2000). Freud conceived of sadism and masochism as simultaneously co-existing in a given individual – someone who derives pleasure from causing another pain was theorised as also able to experience pain as pleasure. Shortly thereafter, the combined term 'sadomasochism' was coined within the psychiatric/medical disciplines, and psychoanalysts continued to develop hypotheses and therapies based on Freud's theories of sexuality (Bullough, Dixon, & Dixon, 1994). Though some degree of sadism (in men) might have been deemed to be 'normal' (Ellis, 1920), sexual sadism continued to be seen as violent and masochism as humiliating (Ellis, 1938), and throughout the 20th century, sadomasochism continued to be seen as an ailment to be treated, for example by attempting to replace 'deviant' fantasies with 'normal' ones (Bancroft, 1974).

The disclaimer that consensual BDSM practices should be differentiated from diagnoses of sexual sadism and masochism is a recent, 21st century phenomenon (Bancroft, 2009; Yates, Hucker, & Kingston, 2008). Greater cumulative knowledge of BDSM in the medical discipline has led to a more nuanced approach to interventions that take into account, for example, the ability of someone to give consent and the quality of that consent. In lieu of promulgating the blanket 'all BDSM practices are questionable' stance, healthcare providers are starting to ask questions that are important and relevant for BDSM practitioners, such as are 'consenting' individuals of sound mind? Would they feel threatened if they did not give or rescinded consent? Are they financially and/or emotionally dependent on their partner? and so on (Thomas-Peter & Humphreys, 1997). The focus of the medical discourse has accordingly shifted, and currently centres on mitigating the harm that is perpetrated by sex

offenders, though it remains clinically-focused in its emphasis on assessing aetiologies and evaluating treatment success rates rather than experientially-focused on individual narratives (Laws & O'Donohue, 2008b). Within the medical discipline, there is now more widespread acknowledgement that the notion of deviancy is primarily a political concept of resistance and dissidence against the mainstream between individuals and the society they inhabit, and may have little bearing on actual malaise or behavioural dysfunction (Laws & O'Donohue, 2008a).

The misconceptions, stigma and taboos around BDSM could result in people attempting to conceal their proclivities. And the resulting anxiety, stress, shame and/or guilt that stem from that self-imposed secrecy could build up to a level of significant distress/impairment in everyday life to warrant a psychological diagnosis (Darcangelo, Hollings, & Paladino, 2008; Darcangelo, 2008). The focus of any therapy stemming from this internalised anxiety or guilt should be on helping clients come to terms with their desires, rather than 'curing' clients from their BDSM inclinations (Kleinplatz & Moser, 2007). The diagnostic criteria for the DSM-IV-TR for the sexual disorders or paraphilias has subsequently been revised in the DSM-V in 2013, differentiating sexual variations from mental disorders (Briken et al., in press), and there is now an explicit clause that states that a diagnosis of a paraphilic disorder must include significant personal distress that does not solely result from societal disapproval (Yakeley & Wood, 2014).

As for the cultural history of BDSM, BDSM as we understand it today started as a largely homosexual male phenomenon practised privately before it became more widespread across homosexual female, bi/pansexual and heterosexual populations (Lenius, 2010). Commonly

referred to as the ‘Old Guard’, BDSM in the mid-20th century was a regimented practice that included a range of activities that practitioners had to master over time; newcomers had to undergo years of one-on-one hands-on training under various more experienced mentors who specialised in specific skills such as rope or whip-cracking (Stein, 2001). The current status of BDSM, as will be illustrated by the ethnographic study presented in the second chapter, places less emphasis on strict protocols and is more encouraging of practitioners experimenting (as safely as possible) in uncharted territory with trusted partners.

The post-Great Depression era in the 20th century saw the flourishing of sadomasochistic photography and iconography, with the first bondage films emerging in the 1940s (Sisson, 2007a). By the 1960s, haute couture began appropriating sadomasochistic trends such as leather and latex, mass media began incorporating sadomasochistic-themed fashion, and the role of independent BDSM film producers became less prominent (Sisson, 2007a). BDSM pornography became a distinct category in the 1980s, focusing less on genital intercourse and more on BDSM themes such as bondage, sadomasochistic acts and/or (the illusion of) coercion (Shortes, 1998). The fetish aspect has given BDSM pornography a distinct aesthetic with a focus on titillating paraphernalia – boots, high heels, fishnets, rope, gags, leather, latex, whips, floggers, corsets and so on – rather than mainstream pornography where the actors and actresses are usually naked and not wielding any implements (Gibson & Kirkham, 2012). From the mid-1980s onwards, BDSM themes also became more visible in mainstream/Hollywood films, the earliest examples including *Blue Velvet* (1986), *Fatal Attraction* (1987), *Basic Instinct* (1992) and *Body of Evidence* (1993) (Sherwin, 2008; L. Williams, 2008). However, mainstream narratives have been and continues to be guilty of perpetuating misconceptions and stereotypes about BDSM practitioners such as childhood trauma, psychological dysfunction, inability to maintain long-term relationships and so on,

with dominant-type characters being systematically misrepresented as cruel, violent, psychotic sadists and submissive-type characters as dependent, helpless victims (Sherwin, 2008). BDSM has also tended to be associated with other violent, non-consensual, illegal activities like snuff and child pornography, and has retained its unspoken characteristic of being antithetical to loving, nurturing, sustainable relationships (Allen, 2013).

The history of BDSM has not been as extensively historically documented as it could have been due to its early marginalised status within the LGBTQ⁵ populations (Ridinger, 2002). Historically, BDSM has been a divisive issue in LGBTQ communities (O'Connor & Ryan, 1993). Largely perceived to be anti-feminist, it was excluded from the LGBTQ movement (Hart, 1998) and those who were ostracised were often left feeling that they were somehow 'abnormal' for wanting to explore/experience BDSM (Stamps, 2001). The first explicitly political, publicly accessible BDSM organisations were only formed in the United States in the 1970s (Rubin, 2001). These were the Eugenspiegel Society in 1971 in New York and the Society of Janus in 1974 in San Francisco.

Before the proliferation of personal computing and the internet, BDSM communities were served by magazines or newsletters that were largely underground, where practitioners could contact each other via euphemistically-worded advertisements (Sisson, 2007a). These magazines were sometimes the only link that people had to BDSM organisations, communities and activities (Houlberg, 1991).

⁵ LGBTQ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender/Transsexual and Queer and is used here as an all-encompassing acronym that refers to someone who does not identify as heterosexual or biologically (cis-gendered) male or female. The term has evolved over time from LGB to LGBTQIA2-S to become more inclusive of alternative identities including intersex, asexual and 2-spirited individuals, but LGBTQ remains one of the more stable and popular acronyms for its intended designation.

While fetish magazines continue to be in print today, the Digital Age has revolutionised communication and information-sourcing within BDSM communities. This revolution followed the arrival of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s and the subsequent decline of the physical spaces that BDSM traditionally occupied - such as leather clubs, gay cruise clubs and bath houses - due to the culmination of negative media publicity, public panic and hysteria (especially once HIV/AIDS started affecting heterosexuals), medicine's early misconceptions and inability to cure the terminal disease, and the state's draconian intervention measures⁶ to appease the public and mitigate the potential physical, social and economic harms resulting from the spread of HIV/AIDS (Weiss, 2011).

The advent of the internet resulted in the gradual shift from BDSM occupying physical to virtual spaces, and the internet has facilitated online communities where people can do personal research, and meet and communicate with like-minded individuals (Denney & Tewksbury, 2013). Digital sexualities in the 21st century have transformed the way we gain information about various sexualities, enhanced the availability of representations of diverse sexualities as well as the access to people with similar interests worldwide, and facilitated the mobilisation of a cohesive global population to campaign on issues relating to sexual politics (Plummer, 2015). The internet has not only increased the visibility of BDSM worldwide but has also aided in the commercialisation process, with retailers able to sell BDSM-related equipment online and deliver purchases discreetly to peoples' homes. The internet has also made the previously private spaces of professional dominatrices' dungeons more accessible to a much greater range of potential clients (Fernbach, 2002).

⁶ Sites of non-normative sexual practices were scrutinised, these venues were forced to close, and the police targeted what they considered to be 'sexual dissidents'.

With regard to the shift of the pornography industry from buying or renting physical copies of videos from sex shops and video stores to the plethora of free, pay-by-minute and subscription-based online streaming services, contemporary practices of consuming pornography online has led to a growing trend of ‘pure pornography’ in the industry, featuring a far greater volume and intensity of sexual activities in lieu of plot or dialogue (Purcell, 2012). The danger of BDSM pornography when it is consumed in a similar ‘pure’, ‘plot-less’ or ‘dialogue-less’ fashion is what the viewer might learn if they rely solely on their pornography consumption for information. In ‘pure pornography’ that is activity-centric, BDSM is reduced to sexual activities involving a range of paraphernalia without the same degree of consideration that ‘actual’ BDSM practitioners give to issues surrounding consent, safety, privacy, prior experience, trust and various other concerns. Having said this, segments of the pornography industry that cater to BDSM interests online do also include non-sexual related content on their website, such as news, interviews, links to online chatrooms, blogs, forums and communities, and in this way facilitates networking and communication rather than the traditional commercial focus of selling pornography to the audience.

The potential secrecy, isolation, anxiety, guilt and/or shame resulting from practices deemed ‘deviant’ could promote the development of virtual subcultures dedicated to these marginalised practices (Maratea, 2011). The internet has facilitated greater accessibility of information about BDSM for veterans and non-practising individuals alike. Those with shared interests now have digital social spaces that can foster a sense of acceptance, social support and validation for a range of activities that mainstream society has deemed ‘unusual’, ‘abnormal’ or ‘wrong’ (Holt & Bossler, 2014). Finding like-minded others online can

demonstrate to kinksters that their fetishes are not ‘bizarre’, and could be the impetus to translate fantasies into reality (Quinn & Forsyth, 2013). Additionally, the relative anonymity provided by a virtual interface can encourage people to ‘come out’ online first in a supportive and understanding environment (Ortmann & Sprott, 2013), and ask for support or advice whilst feeling safer/less threatened by potential stigma or social/legal consequences (Quinn & Forsyth, 2005). Overall, the internet has had a positive impact on BDSM for existing as well as prospective BDSM practitioners who are thinking about joining BDSM communities.

Theory: Literature reviews and meta-analyses

The literature reviews and meta-analyses of BDSM research have amassed a substantial body of empirical evidence that generally have challenged the notion that BDSM proclivities are symptomatic of psychosocial maladjustment or psychopathology (Connolly, 2006; Powl & Davies, 2012; Richters, de Visser, Rissel, Grulich, & Smith, 2008). BDSM practitioners themselves tend to perceive BDSM as an extension rather than a rejection of normative sexual practices, and have decried the unfounded notion that their interests are a product of childhood trauma (Langdridge & Butt, 2004). In terms of the ‘Big Five’ personality traits, a sample of BDSM practitioners have been found to be less neurotic, more extraverted, more open to new experiences, more conscientious but less agreeable compared to a non-practitioner sample, as well as scoring lower on rejection sensitivity and higher on subjective well-being overall (Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013). Perhaps unsurprisingly, within BDSM practitioners, predominantly dominant-identifying types tend to score significantly higher on desire for control, extraversion, self-esteem and life satisfaction compared to submissive-identifying types, who tend to score higher on emotionality (Hébert & Weaver, 2014).

Consent and communication distinguish BDSM from sexual violence; the former can be psychologically rewarding and increase intimacy between the practitioners involved while the latter is often damaging and traumatic (Pitagora, 2013). BDSM practitioners themselves endeavour to uphold the tenets of their mutually-agreed-upon activities as Safe, Sane and Consensual (SSC), Risk-Aware Consensual Kink (RACK) or the more recently proposed Consent, Communication, Caring and Caution (4Cs) to differentiate it from interpersonal wanton violence and abuse, which are inherently non-consensual behaviours (D. J. Williams, Thomas, Prior, & Christensen, 2014). Adhering to the ethos behind these acronyms means that people are:

- communicating their needs and desires openly and negotiating what they are willing and unwilling to do;
- in a mentally and emotionally stable state where they know the risks involved in participating in BDSM activities and can give informed consent;
- able to rescind their consent at any time without feeling embarrassed, guilty, uncomfortable, or being coerced to continue.

BDSM play can be liberating and affirmative, and practitioners can experiment with different forms of BDSM play with each other, knowing that all parties involved enjoy their shared activities, mitigating the potential anxiety, guilt or worry that could arise from a non-BDSM-practising, potentially judgemental partner (Bader, 1993). For some practitioners, BDSM can be more about dominance and submission or power exchange within a relationship than pain (T. S. Weinberg, 2006). Pain in the context of BDSM however does not have the same negative connotations – it may facilitate an illusion of vulnerability and helplessness but it does not involve suffering or torment. Particularly where BDSM practitioners find a

controlled level of pain administered in a controlled environment to be a liberating and cathartic experience, those who enjoy the sadomasochistic aspects of BDSM can perceive the act of hurting others or enjoying being hurt as being demonstrative of love, caring and affection rather than senseless brutality (Isaksson, 2011).

Early research with BDSM in the 1980s tended to be quantitative in nature, where the scales, dimensions and categories assumed and prescribed by the researchers were valued over participants' subjective, lived experiences (Dymock, 2011). Anonymous questionnaires that were mostly advertised through BDSM magazines were a popular data collection method before the internet (T. S. Weinberg, 1994). The few early qualitative studies involving descriptive accounts obtained through participant observation and interviews conducted with smaller samples tended to be disseminated from the perspective of those who have been BDSM practitioners for a long time (T. S. Weinberg, 1987). Prior to the 1980s, BDSM (more limited to sadomasochism at the time) tended to be regarded as a medical anomaly encountered by psychoanalysts manifesting in individual clients rather than a social phenomenon, and the early psychodynamic literature presented a range of unrelated possible aetiologies for sadomasochistic tendencies and desires based on these small clinical samples (T. S. Weinberg, 1987; T. S. Weinberg, 1994). The focus on quantitative data gathering and analysis is likely reflective of an era in academia where the positivist approach had privileged objective measurable statistics of population samples. This has changed in the 21st century where there has been a greater proliferation, acceptance and appreciation of a constructionist approach which showcases subjective and interpretative experiences of individuals.

Today it is more widely acknowledged that there is no single universal definition or characteristic of a typical BDSM practitioner, but in general, those who participate in BDSM research tend to be well-educated, have white-collar jobs and earn higher income than average (Sandnabba, Santtila, & Nordling, 1999; T. S. Weinberg, 2006). One notable limitation of current research is that participants tend to be overwhelmingly white⁷ and middle-class, and these racial and class biases could be significantly skewing the results that researchers are finding (Sheff & Hammers, 2011). In an environment that is predominantly white, race can become ‘invisible’ (Demaj, 2014), which has implications on both BDSM play involving race as well as how non-white practitioners experience BDSM. Those who do not have an online presence in virtual BDSM networking communities are also underrepresented, as are those who only pursue BDSM activities privately and do not attend the local events that researchers might be recruiting from (Bauer, 2008).

Another limitation, though it may not be possible to measure the effect of this, is that participants might respond differently to non-BDSM-practising researchers. Those who perceive that the researcher(s) could be judgemental or incapable of understanding their proclivities might either (a) respond defensively because they fear being judged, disapproval and/or rejection, or; (b) choose not to respond at all because of this perceived disapproval and/or rejection, which previously had led to a minority of the most extreme, violent, disturbed and desperate people seeking clinical treatment being disproportionately

⁷ The debate of race or ethnicity as a meaningful category or concept is beyond the scope of this literature review. Suffice it to say that, where researchers do think to include race/ethnicity in their sample demographics, the majority of the research on BDSM practitioners – including every single research article cited in this review – is conducted with at least 90-95% of the sample identifying as the ethnic majority group within researchers’ localities.

overrepresented in the literature, thus further skewing non-practitioner perceptions of BDSM (Gosselin & Wilson, 1980).

Theory: Queer theory

BDSM, especially when taking activities such as roleplaying and enacting fantasies into account, has a performative aspect that queer theorists note can be beneficial for practitioners. For some practitioners, the roles they adopt are fixed and integral to their sense of identity, but for others, roles are a more flexible concept (Sullivan, 2003). A practitioner could be a dominant male in one scene and a submissive female in another instance. If someone tries and dislikes a role, they could experiment with different roles and the power differential within that interaction would shift accordingly – this ability to play with power iteratively in a controlled setting is not something people can do within the fixed roles (sex, gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status and so on) that they inhabit in everyday life (Califia, 2000). The performativity inherent in BDSM allows practitioners to create and experiment with roles and identities that differ from or challenge gender norms, and this fluidity allows for fuller self-exploration and can enhance one's self-understanding and self-growth within a safe environment with an understanding partner (Henkin, 2007; Olson, 2011).

However, it is important to note that 'performative' is not necessarily synonymous with 'theatrical' – BDSM practitioners are still very much grounded in reality, and the focus and desired outcome(s) of the activities they engage in with each other remains on learning more about the self through embodying different personas, whereas the latter implies a performance that incorporates elements of the flamboyant and the fantastic that is being put on to cater for an audience or an external 'other' (Hart, 1998). BDSM performativity is

likened to Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity (Bauer, 2007), challenging the notion that BDSM is a stable, fixed and essentialised identity people adopt in an attempt to promote reconceptualising BDSM as 'doing' rather than BDSM as 'being' (Weiss, 2006b).

Theory: Sexual citizenship/rights

At its core, sexual citizenship is a political concept that flourished through a series of social changes in the post-World War II era. In the US in particular, the so-called 'sexual revolution' or 'liberation' came into full swing in the 1960s through to the 1980s. This time period was characterised by the increasing normalisation of certain sexual-related practices such as sex outside of marriage, the use of contraception, the proliferation of commercial pornography, emerging publicly visible displays of alternative sexualities, and so on (Allyn, 2001). This increased visibility and gradual politicisation of alternative sexualities led to people being able to define themselves by their alternative sexual identities – such as 'I am queer' or 'I am kinky' – and using these empowered identities to claim recognition, rights, respect and/or fair/equal treatment from others (Weeks, 1998). It is a way of politicising alternative sexualities and articulating claims made by non-heteronormative-conforming individuals in terms of rights (Sabsay, 2014). However, citizenship is not a simple dichotomous concept of whether a population legally has or does not have rights, or where those rights are or are not recognised. Beyond being enshrined in civil, political and social rights terms, citizenship can also encompass cultural rights, social membership and a sense of belonging (D. Richardson & Monro, 2012). There exists a nebulous middle ground between contestation and assimilation, where individuals can be 'good citizens' or 'bad citizens', 'partial citizens' or 'silenced citizens'. For example, though significant gains have been made for inclusive sexual citizenship within the LGBTQ communities, a common construct within LGBTQ research frames a 'good sexual citizen' as someone who wishes to have access to

heteronormative rights such as marriage and adoption, while a ‘bad sexual citizen’ may be a member of a demonised population that frequently engages in paid or unpaid non-reproductive casual sexual encounters. In this way, hegemonic forms of heterosexuality are maintained, reproduced and privileged over alternative sexualities (D. Richardson & Monro, 2012).

Ideal, fully-inclusive sexual citizenship entails the ability to adopt any sexual identity or engage in a range of sexual practices that might be considered unorthodox in a given society without the fear of being negatively judged, discriminated against or persecuted by others. However, the frequent bouts of moral panic about different sexual identities and practices – often driven by public health concerns such as reducing the transmission of HIV/AIDS and other sexually-transmitted diseases – discourage open dialogue about sexual freedom. Framing certain activities solely using a health/harm paradigm delegitimises particular practitioners in an already marginalised population (McNamara, 2013). The pathologisation of BDSM has had significant negative impact on practitioners, leading to social, legal and medical ramifications for those whose proclivities become made publicly known, as well as hampering efforts to include practitioners as legitimate sexual citizens (Langdrige, 2006b).

In contemporary society, the campaign for sexual citizenship involves contesting the right to perform sexual acts that do not fall within the heteronormative paradigm, which implicitly endorses our current institutionalised sexual norms and practices – such as a monogamous long-term relationship between a man and a woman, or having sex for the purpose of procreation rather than recreation – as a ‘natural’, ‘normal’ and ‘moral’ nexus which all other forms of sexual differences (now considered ‘deviancy’) are compared against, thereby

systematically invalidating non-normative sexual practices (D. Richardson, 2000). Pleasure in a society that is driven by production and consumption must necessarily be (re)productive, or it will be considered disruptive to that society and labelled as transgressive and subversive (MacKendrick, 1999). The focus of BDSM on erotic pleasure thus falls into that transgressive, subversive category, and while its transgressive and subversive nature may be appealing for some BDSM community members, it further impedes on the claim for sexual citizenship (Langdridge & Butt, 2005).

In light of this, it would appear to be more prudent to attempt to legitimise the BDSM identity rather than legitimise BDSM activities. In claiming rights through identity politics, one's state of *being* ('it's who I am') becomes a stable, immutable, perhaps even innate trait as opposed to a state of *doing* ('it's what I do' – implying there is a choice where one can choose to do or not do). But the notion of sexual identity is also fraught with difficulties for BDSM practitioners. BDSM practitioners can inhabit an 'invisible closet', where choosing to 'come out' may be difficult because that might involve hinting at or outright disclosing private details of their sexual activities. Instead they can choose to blend in with the mainstream and need not worry about the same discrimination that, for example, a same-sex couple in a public space might face (J. Weinberg, 2014). Partly due to the perceived social stigma and the threat of being subjected to discriminatory practices, but also because the secrecy and controversy surrounding BDSM activities can be part of why it is attractive to some practitioners, at least 70% of the participants polled in one study remained selectively closeted (Wright, 2006). The relative invisibility of BDSM has meant that there has not been a pressing need for anti-discrimination laws to be put in place (Wilkinson, 2011).

Addressing sexual citizenship is not a straightforward matter when people are selectively self-identifying as BDSM practitioners (Chatterjee, 2012). There are those who think of themselves as having a ‘kinkster’ identity and there are those who ‘do kinky things’ (this separation between identity and practice had also been applicable in an LGBTQ context). Then there are those who ‘do kinky things’, who adopt various strategies to be able to claim that they are ‘normal’ and ‘not interested in *real* kinky things’ because of the negative implications associated with kink (Plante, 2006). Importantly, it must be noted that different BDSM communities and practitioners have different aims – some want to be able to engage in BDSM activities in private without fear of persecution, others want complete societal acceptance, still others enjoy the transgressive nature of BDSM and want to preserve some of its ‘edginess’ or ‘anti-establishment’ vibes – and furthermore, sometimes the same person might want different things depending on their circumstances (Langdridge, 2006b).

Thus, it is apparent that despite the well-intended campaign for sexual citizenship to reduce discrimination through decreasing social stigma and increasing social acceptance, the fragmented, disparate nature of BDSM practitioners and the communities they inhabit may make it difficult to find a solution that caters to everyone.

Theory: Leisure theory

Unlike the tendency for proponents of all-inclusive sexual citizenship to conceptualise BDSM as an identity, the idea of BDSM as deviance or BDSM as leisure tends to approach BDSM as an activity that people engage in to various degrees of frequency and intensity. Within leisure studies, the concepts of ‘deviant leisure’ and ‘serious leisure’ are most relevant to BDSM, and there is a growing movement within the discipline to have BDSM

conceptualised and classified as serious leisure. While the differing conceptualisations of deviance itself acknowledge that deviances can change across time and geographical spaces, some views of deviance have tended to objectively measure, label and quantify deviant acts while others recognise it as a label for subjective experiences (Roberson & Azaola, 2015). Proponents of deviant leisure theory tend to be more aligned with the notion of deviance as being subjective, and deviant leisure would include the kinds of leisure activities that have the shared underlying characteristic of violating a given society's norms, be it through criminal or non-criminal activities (D. J. Williams & Walker, 2006). So, perhaps unhelpfully, given the context of New Zealand in the early 21st century, the concept of deviant leisure would not distinguish between foot fetishism, BASE jumping and motor vehicle theft.

Serious leisure involves the long-term pursuit of an activity that has a career-like progression; it may require a significant monetary investment from the outset and incurs additional costs over time, it involves the cumulative acquisition of specific skills and relevant knowledge, and it provides durable benefits/rewards (D. J. Williams & Walker, 2006). This is contrasted with casual leisure which is a short-term pleasurable activity that may yield an immediate, intrinsic reward. As a serious leisure, BDSM experiences are able to connect people and their experiences to their bodies (D. J. Williams, 2009). BDSM practitioners can boost their self-confidence by learning skills that enrich both their own as well as their partners' lives and experiences, while at the same time enhancing the depth and quality of the relationships with their partners (Franklin-Reible, 2006). Serious leisure could be a better descriptor of BDSM, though it may be unlikely to gain significantly more traction given its current marginalised status. However, to describe BDSM as a form of leisure may be a misnomer and would also risk alienating some practitioners' experiences. Professional dominatrices may loathe to describe their livelihoods as 'leisure'. Even though serious leisure activities involve a

significant time and monetary commitment and requires some level of proficiency, the term 'leisure' implies that the 'leisure activities' are more of a hobby or something people do 'just for fun'. This belies the intensity of BDSM activities, the decades that some practitioners will devote to BDSM, and its importance in their lives.

Praxis

The wave of post-1980s research being conducted with BDSM-practising participants worldwide has uncovered novel insights into the contemporary BDSM subculture (Bennett, 2013). There is both a wealth of quantitative data amassed from questionnaires as well as qualitative from interviews and focus groups. Participant-observation/ethnographic research in this field is less common, though prominent writers like Pat Califia have contributed to the literature via personal accounts of their experiences (Califia, 2000).

There have been some studies conducted on the internet looking at, for example, narratives (Langdridge & Butt, 2004), personal advertisements (Denney & Tewksbury, 2013), online avatars in games (Bardzell & Bardzell, 2006), online interviews (Faccio, Casini, & Cipolletta, 2014) and online money slavery⁸ (Durkin, 2007). Some online surveys show that BDSM practitioners tend to have antisocial personality tendencies and may not be as psychologically well-adjusted as other research have suggested (Lodi-Smith, Shepard, & Wagner, 2014). However, it is difficult to discern whether the results from these studies are derived from actual BDSM practitioners' experiences or if they include elements of sexual fantasies. People may claim to be BDSM practitioners online but in reality have not yet explored

⁸ Money slavery is a practice where masochistic/submissive men (money slaves) pay to be humiliated, degraded and blackmailed by dominant women (money mistresses).

BDSM with their partner(s), have never researched or physically performed any BDSM activities, or gone to any BDSM events. In this following section reviewing research on BDSM in praxis, studies that are purely online that cannot or do not discern participants' fantasies from reality have been excluded. Studies with participants with other potentially sexually 'deviant' interests such as polyamory⁹ (Bettinger, 2005; Klesse, 2014), zoophilia/bestiality¹⁰ (Maratea, 2011; Sandnabba, Santtila, Nordling, Beetz, & Alison, 2002) and bug-chasing¹¹ (Gauthier & Forsyth, 1999) have also been excluded, as these activities have their own communities of aficionados and do not fall under the definitional umbrella of BDSM.

Praxis: Quantitative methodologies

Questionnaires have polled statistical information about BDSM practitioners in different communities. In terms of demographics, while there is no evidence to suggest that BDSM is confined to any particular social class (Gosselin & Wilson, 1980), participants in previous

⁹ Polyamory is an alternative to the more common notion of monogamy, and refers to a relationship arrangement between more than two people. For example, it could involve 3 cohabiting people who love each other equally, or a couple in a primary relationship with an additional person involved with one or both members of the couple in a secondary relationship. The networks become increasingly more complex with more people involved.

¹⁰ Zoophilia tends to refer to the romantic love of or attraction towards non-human animals while bestiality tends to refer to the desire to have sexual contact with and/or being sexually aroused by non-human animals (Beetz, 2004). A minority of BDSM practitioners consider it to be part of BDSM but the majority are not interested in zoophilia/bestiality and views animals as unable to give consent, thereby excluding zoophilia/bestiality as a valid kink.

¹¹ Bug-chasing is a less well-known homosexual male phenomenon where HIV-negative men seek to contract HIV from HIV-positive men through unprotected sex (Dean, 2009). According to Gauthier and Forsyth (1999), many men feel that safer sex practices have negatively impacted on intimacy. For some men it could be because AIDS is seen as an inevitable part of being gay, and becoming HIV-positive sooner can be a liberating experience. Medical advances have also meant that contracting AIDS now does not equate to a 'death sentence', but paradoxically some men feel that being HIV-positive would give them a different outlook on life.

studies tend to be predominantly white, well-educated and have higher monthly incomes compared to the rest of the population (Moser & Levitt, 1987; Santtila, Sandnabba, & Nordling, 2001). The results obtained from this section of society could thus be indicative, but not necessarily representative, of everyone's experiences.

Overall, male BDSM practitioners tend to become aware of their interests by their late teens, and those introduced to BDSM by pornography or by a partner are in the minority; the majority feel that they have had these 'natural interests' from childhood (Breslow, Evans, & Langley, 1986). Sandnabba et al. (1999) found that the median age of first awareness tends to be around 18~20, but for the majority of participants, the first actual BDSM experience may not occur until the 21~25 age range. Most participants had positive emotional reactions to their first experience, with the caveat that those who had negative emotional reactions tended to have had low sexual satisfaction as well.

In one study, 88.4% of participants had engaged in "vanilla sex"¹² (non-kinky) before experimenting with BDSM; it would appear that the development of BDSM starts after participants have experienced vanilla sex and established their sexual orientations (Sandnabba, Santtila, Alison, & Nordling, 2002). There is a cumulative trend with which people tend to experiment with BDSM, starting with less intense experiences and gradually progressing to more intense experiences. For instance, it is much more common for people to

¹² 'Vanilla' is not often explicitly defined in the literature and, as we will see later on in the interviews, it is a concept that is difficult for BDSM practitioners themselves to define. Vanilla sex is generally understood to be sexual intercourse that does not involve any sort of BDSM paraphernalia like blindfolds or handcuffs, and does not involve roles or roleplaying. Where things become blurred is when people query if spanking or 'rough sex' (e.g. being aggressive, pinning your partner down, etc.) would constitute BDSM or whether vanilla sex now encompasses these activities.

try spanking first, and if they find it enjoyable they might try flogging in a later session; few people would try whipping first before trying spanking, which could suggest a BDSM journey or BDSM career showcasing participants' levels of flexibility, adventurousness and willingness to experiment with new kinks (Santtila, Sandnabba, Alison, & Nordling, 2002).

Regarding the psychopathological stereotypes associated with BDSM practitioners, the results have been mixed. BDSM was not found to be associated with impaired social functioning or extensive substance abuse, but BDSM practitioners do seem to have difficulties maintaining permanent relationships (Sandnabba et al., 1999). Furthermore, in one of the earliest studies conducted with BDSM practitioners, the relationship between receiving corporal punishment in childhood and having masochistic fantasies/tendencies has been found to be weak (Gosselin & Wilson, 1980). One study with a relatively small sample size found that 13 out of 164 males (7.9%) and 5 out of 22 females (22.7%) self-reported childhood sexual abuse¹³, which is more than two times higher than the national average in Finland of 1-3% for males and 6-8% for females (Nordling, Sandnabba, & Santtila, 2000). These statistics may paint a troubling picture of BDSM practitioners as maladaptive and destructive, but as we will see in the following qualitative research section, the way people experience BDSM has generally been positive and self-enhancing.

Praxis: Qualitative methodologies

Interviews and focus groups are able to provide rich, detailed accounts of participants' experiences that quantitative methods are not designed to capture. For example, it is more readily apparent through interviews with practitioners that there is no singular definition of

¹³ How abuse is defined in the study may be different from the nationwide survey.

BDSM, and how people are first introduced to BDSM is heavily influenced by the time period in history they live in and the sexual discourses and attitudes of that time (Chaline, 2010). Participants who might feel limited to checkboxes and rating scales in surveys are also able to articulate themselves more fully to researchers through qualitative methods, and in doing so they would be able to challenge the assumptions and misconceptions about BDSM (Ritchie & Barker, 2005), many of which would no doubt influence the way survey questions are written and designed.

Additionally, qualitative work around participants' lived experiences of BDSM is important because practitioners could find anything in a scene to be arousing – being verbally commanded, physically restrained, psychologically dominated, fetishising clothing material, physical contact between certain fabrics and one's genitals – so without asking the people actually involved in the scene how they interpret their experiences and what they find enjoyable, any number of possible interpretations could be ascribed to an observed behaviour (Kamel, 1980).

During the 1980s, the types of sexual 'deviance' explored in academic settings were largely limited to prostitution and homosexuality (Lowery & Wetli, 1982). Those who were interested in researching BDSM would have found that it was easier to research gay BDSM practitioners, as heterosexuals were largely unwilling to participate (T. S. Weinberg & Falk, 1980). While there is empirical evidence to support the therapeutic, healing and beneficial effects of being open about one's sexuality (disclosing one's sexual orientation, though not identical to disclosing BDSM interests, is generally correlated with less loneliness and guilt, and greater comfort, wholeness, psychological adjustment, self-esteem, authenticity, being

accepted and greater access to supportive communities (Bezreh, Weinberg, & Edgar, 2012)), other research has cautioned that people need to consider the consequences before ‘coming out’. The desire to conceal one’s BDSM proclivities persists to present day largely due to wanting to protect oneself and one’s associates from perceived and actual experiential stigma (Stiles & Clark, 2011).

One of the seminal qualitative studies done in the field have derived the four prerequisites of BDSM to be consensuality, unequal balance of power, sexual arousal and definitional compatibility (Taylor & Ussher, 2001). BDSM practitioners seem to value role definition (e.g. top, bottom, Dominant, submissive, sadist, masochist, etc.) over gender definition – role compatibility supersedes gender identification – and some participants might be labelled as bisexual but only in a BDSM context (Simula, 2012). That is, a distinction is made between ‘vanilla’ and ‘BDSM’ activities, and where an individual might identify as heterosexual, s/he may still be willing to do some BDSM activities with a same-sex partner. This could be because, for example, a man being ‘forced’ to have oral sex with another man may want to do so because of the psychological rather than physical circumstances – he may be more interested in the coercive, helpless, perhaps humiliating or degrading elements of the activity rather than the physical, contextless act of having oral sex with another man. Participants seem to be more willing to play with gender and sexuality, age (e.g. daddy/babygirl dynamics or adult baby play), and to a certain extent class (using stereotypes like the working-class who tend to be more real or ‘down to earth’, or more macho, ‘hyper-masculine’ or violent), but race is a delicate, touchy subject that many (predominantly white) BDSM practitioners frequently find too uncomfortable to play with (Bauer, 2008). This becomes especially pronounced when controversial, ‘politically incorrect’ topics arise, such as roleplaying an African-American slave, or whether people find Nazi uniforms sexy.

The numerous reasons people could become involved with BDSM include: exploring alternatives to ‘normal genital sexuality’ (non-kinky sex could be perceived to be boring); transgressing gay and lesbian stereotypes of ‘sexuality’ (e.g. displacing the focus from anal sex); the notion that BDSM is a safer way to have sex due to how people are expected to conduct themselves at public BDSM events; the expectation of enhanced responsibility and communication; exploring sensuality, bodily possibilities and choice (Beckmann, 2001). BDSM exists in a time and space that is sequestered from everyday life, and the intense physical, psychological and emotional experiences that practitioners undergo during a session is not an easily achievable state in other facets of practitioners’ lives (Simula, 2013). Of course, people could enjoy BDSM because it is sexually arousing and rewarding in and of itself, but it can be a tool for personal growth and healing as well (Bauer, 2008).

Through qualitative research, participants have also been able to offer alternative interpretations and counternarratives to pain. Pain is usually conceived of as an aversive stimulus, so trying to use physiological and neurological explanations to describe how pain could be pleasurable would not be able to explain why not everyone partakes in pain-focused BDSM activities, nor would it take into account the individualised meanings that practitioners ascribe to pain (Langdrige, 2007). Challenging the traditional widely held belief that all pain is necessarily bad, pain has been articulated as a means of spiritual growth and transformation, transcendence and accomplishment (Horton, 2013).

Writers who have published works about their own BDSM journeys tend to espouse the notion that BDSM is an intensely personal, spiritual, cathartic experience (Bean, 2001; Vesta,

2001). Through interviews, the general structure of participants' experiences can be outlined from the initial phase with the build-up of excitement and anticipation through the creation of multiple identities to play with, the transformation of emotional and physical negative feelings to enjoyable and arousing sensations by enacting fantasies, to the end of a scene, which could have been a spiritual, cathartic experience, where participants were left with an enhanced sense of wellbeing and happiness (Turley, King, & Butt, 2011). For practitioners themselves, there is a greater Jungian focus on coming to terms with the self and who the self is rather than on wanting to be 'cured' from their BDSM proclivities (Hopcke, 2001). Particularly for those who have suffered abuse or trauma in the past, BDSM experiences are disinhibiting and can be healing and empowering (Portillo, 2001). Through BDSM, practitioners can achieve emotional, psychological and spiritual states of catharsis, ecstasy and transcendence without the conventional focus on orgasm through genital stimulation (Beckmann, 2007). Describing BDSM as therapeutic risks suggesting that BDSM practitioners are somehow in need of therapy, but personal narratives have tended to frame BDSM as a healthy outlet for reclaiming control and of exploring sexualities and bodies in a safe environment, rather than a maladaptive coping mechanism for dealing with unresolved psychological trauma.

In addition to what researchers have elicited from participants, published personal accounts of BDSM experiences are important because what people personally feel as pleasurable and emancipating could be interpreted by medical professionals as manifestations of perversity, and some individuals are reduced to pathological subjects seeking out brutality from abusers because they may be perceived to have low self-esteem and self-worth and are unable to enjoy sex without needing to be hurt (Mains, 2001).

When taken together, these abovementioned studies conducted in practice have greatly enriched the current state of knowledge of BDSM with the attitudes, beliefs, opinions and experiences of actual BDSM-practising participants, sometimes supplementing and at other times contradicting the hypotheses and theories that have been imposed upon them by the theoretical literature. There may be no single definition of BDSM or a universal narrative that describes a typical BDSM practitioner, however the various quantitative and qualitative studies have illustrated some of the multiple values and experiences that BDSM practitioners could have throughout the course of their lives.

Navigating the vanilla world

Despite the slowly-changing assumption that BDSM practitioners have some form of underlying psychopathology, one study that used the Implicit Relational Assessment Procedure (IRAP) was able to show that BDSM-practising participants displayed positive attitudes towards both mainstream and kinky sexual terms, whereas the non-practitioner control participants implicitly had positive attitudes towards mainstream sexual terms and negative attitudes towards kinky sexual terms (Stockwell, Walker, & Eshleman, 2010). The terms used in this IRAP test were ‘healthy’ and ‘sick’, so although the criminal/medical discourses have lost traction over the years, non-practitioners continue to implicitly associate BDSM with the medically-oriented terms ‘sick’ more so than ‘healthy’.

Beyond contending with negative societal attitudes, BDSM practitioners have also faced legal discrimination and lost court cases because of the biases and misconceptions that non-

practising lawyers and judges have articulated, such as when child custody disputes are influenced by the belief that a preference for sadomasochistic acts in the bedroom would ‘spill over’ and manifest as violence against children and abusive parenting (Klein & Moser, 2006). Many of these beliefs have stemmed from mainstream media representations of BDSM and BDSM practitioners that are largely created and perpetuated by non-practitioners. While the following section focuses on how BDSM practitioners are treated in a vanilla environment, it is important to note that how BDSM is portrayed to the public affects not only non-practitioners’ perceptions of BDSM, but the messages espoused by the media could be internalised by practitioners as well.

Navigating the vanilla world: Law and discrimination

The notion that consensual sexual practices in private arenas fall outside the scope of law enforcement in contemporary ‘sexually liberal’ societies is one that has been continually challenged by legislative bodies around the world (Johnson & Dalton, 2012). The police often make moral-based judgements to enforce local laws based on their interpretations of what the laws entail. For instance, having to decide what various terminologies adopted in local laws mean such as ‘indecent exposure’ or ‘sexual assault’, what is a ‘public place’ and what kinds of behaviours are ‘reasonable’, ‘deliberate’, ‘obscene’, ‘offensive’, ‘respectable’ and so on (Johnson, 2012). The police also have to decide how best to perform their duties to serve their local communities – for example, how to enforce the law and maintain peace if locals complain about public spaces like parks being appropriated as spaces for casual sex encounters (Johnson, 2012). Regulatory measures taken on the grounds of perceived vulnerability and potential harm to society have been used as a means of social control, whereby the limits of sexual exploration become demarcated by legally-enforceable

boundaries, and sexual activities become relegated to dichotomised categories of ‘risky’ and ‘responsible’ (Cowan, 2012). These binary ways of conceptualising sex – for example, as necessarily public or private, heterosexual or queer, risky or safe – has led to certain activities, in particular those deemed to be public, risky and queer, being disproportionately monitored, condemned and regulated (Walby & Smith, 2012). Couched in psychological abnormality, sexual perversity and immorality, it may not be possible to outlaw a BDSM-derived identity, but legislative bodies are still able to respond to non-normative sexual behaviours in coercive and punitive ways (Weait, 2007).

The most well-known legal persecution of BDSM practitioners is *R vs. Brown*, also known as Operation Spanner, where police obtained a sadomasochistic video whilst conducting an unrelated investigation, believed it was depicting torture and murder, and subsequently launched a homicide investigation which led to 16 homosexual sadomasochistic men being arrested, charged and convicted with ‘assault occasioning actual bodily harm’ in Manchester, UK in 1993 (British and Irish Legal Information Institute, 2000). This is in spite of the fact that all of the participants had consented to the activities depicted in the video. In this case, consent to assault was not considered a valid defence as it would have been in other lawful activities such as sports (e.g. boxing, martial arts), because any injuries sustained during sports was considered to be incidental, whereas sadomasochism was regarded as having the sole purpose of ‘indulgence of cruelty’ (Pa, 2001). The successful conviction in the Spanner case was seen as a legal precedent for legislative institutions to encroach upon the freedom of people to pursue personal sexual expression and gratification (Bibbings & Alldridge, 1993).

However, consent is a more nuanced defence when it comes to defendants who better conform to heteronormative ideals (wherein the right to sexual privacy is more likely to be recognised and respected). For example, in *R vs. Wilson* (1996) a husband branded his wife on the buttocks with his initials with a knife. That conviction was overturned because consensual activities between spouses taking place privately was deemed not to be a matter for criminal investigation (Green, 2001). In *R vs. JA* (2011), a man who inserted a dildo into his partner's anus while she had briefly lost consciousness from erotic asphyxiation was convicted of assault on the grounds that she would have been unable to rescind consent while she was unconscious if she wanted the activity to cease immediately (Olson, 2012). In cases where the jury has to collectively decide whether to convict a defendant for sexual offences, diverse and rapidly changing attitudes about sex and sexualities can make it difficult for jurors to reach a consensus as to what would be considered deviant, perverse, unnatural, abnormal, obscene, and so on (Attwood & Walters, 2013).

Similar to the 'ideal' versus 'real' rape situations presented in courtrooms, where an unknown male assailant who sexually accosts a young woman is more likely to be convicted of rape than a male acquaintance of an inebriated young woman, the outcome of a verdict can heavily depend on the sexual stereotyping and social norms of a given society (Munro, 2008). Given that BDSM practitioners stress values such as open communication, negotiation and informed consent, BDSM ought to be perceived as involving consensual erotic acts with a possibility of violence – violence that does not make victims out of willing sexual explorers – rather than consensual violence with a possibility of erotic acts. Since the 1990s, the issue of consent has increasingly become considered in court cases involving BDSM (Ridinger, 2006).

Other than assault, BDSM proclivities could also lead to job discrimination and biased child custody rulings. In *Pay vs. UK* (2009), a probation officer, whose work involved treating sex offenders, was dismissed because it was perceived that his BDSM involvement could undermine his work and compromise his reputation despite the fact that he was a highly-skilled public servant (Chatterjee, 2012). Even within LGBTQ communities, non-heterosexual individuals who identify with BDSM have to contend with stigma, and identifying as being involved with BDSM could cost job opportunities (Rofes, 2001). When it comes to child custody disputes, divorce could lead to partners trying to discredit each other using BDSM interests as a means of compromising parental fitness even when the child is not aware of those BDSM interests and there is no evidence to suggest child abuse (Klein & Moser, 2006). However, since revisions have been made from the DSM-IV-TR to the DSM-V in 2013 to separate paraphilias from paraphilic disorders, at least one court case has ruled in favour of a BDSM-practising mother being awarded custody of 3 of her 4 children (Wright, 2010), so changes in the psychiatric field have had tangible impacts beyond the therapists' office and into the courtroom as well.

While law enforcement may not be actively pursuing and investigating BDSM-related cases, the police may be more likely to arrest and prosecute if a case is brought to their attention, or if BDSM activities have accidentally resulted in more serious consequences than the involved participants had intended. One such incident is the most infamous criminal case involving BDSM in New Zealand: the death of cricket umpire Peter Plumley-Walker in 1989. He had lost consciousness after an 18-year-old dominatrix tied him up and left him unsupervised for 20 minutes. Believing that she had murdered him, she disposed of his body over the edge of Huka Falls near Taupo with the assistance of her boyfriend. The dominatrix and her boyfriend were imprisoned for 2 years before the third trial acquitted them of manslaughter

(Hunt, 2016; New Zealand Herald, 2009). As one might expect, the media scandal resulting from his death placed a disproportionate emphasis on the private, intimate details of his marriage, relationships and sexual proclivities compared to other homicide investigations, where these aspects of the deceased's life are more likely to be deemed irrelevant or not noteworthy enough for tabloid publications.

The potential for legal ramifications as well as the accompanying stigma, negative media publicity and hostility from the public could lead to practitioners becoming less willing to report transgressions they have experienced themselves or have witnessed within the BDSM community (Bennett, 2013). People are more vulnerable if they are engaging in activities that they think are illegal or frowned upon, with the belief that they do not have the support from local law enforcement or friends and family if they are assaulted, blackmailed, or suffer any other form of physical/emotional harm (Tewksbury, 2000). Historically when police targeted homosexual male encounters in public spaces like public bathrooms or parks, they would search men loitering in these places for evidence such as condoms and lubrication. Such an approach may have had unintended consequences such as men choosing to risk having unprotected sex in fear of getting arrested (Dalton, 2012). Similarly, the criminalisation of BDSM practices could make it less safe overall for practitioners who, fearing prosecution, might be more reluctant to join BDSM organisations, build rapport with and ask advice from more experienced BDSM practitioners, attend workshops and events, access literature about safety, and so on (White, 2006).

Other forms of discrimination could target the BDSM community as a whole rather than individuals. For example, due to public pressure from the local community in Maryland, USA

in 2003, a hotel manager was forced to cancel the contract with a BDSM organisation planning to hold its annual conference which would have hosted over 2000 attendees there (Weiss, 2008). Contesting BDSM-related activities in public spaces also serves to make it more difficult for practitioners to run workshops and events and disseminate safety information to a wider audience.

More broadly, a recent example of overreaching legislative measures furtively encroaching the boundaries of non-normative sex that could (at least indirectly) affect BDSM practitioners – based on ‘moral grounds’ and under the guise of protecting vulnerable and innocent children – is the UK’s law against ‘extreme pornography’ (Crown Prosecution Service, 2009). This law makes it illegal to possess pornographic images which ‘depict acts which threaten a person's life; acts which result in or are likely to result in serious injury to a person's anus, breasts or genitals; bestiality; or necrophilia’ (para 2) on the grounds of:

- protecting pornography actors from violence and degradation *even if they consent to take part*¹⁴
- to protect society (the law specifically emphasises children) from exposure to these depictions in arenas that are difficult to police like the internet where censorship, publication and distribution laws cannot be enforced, and;
- in protecting society from ‘extreme pornography’, it would discourage interest in ‘violent or aberrant sexual activity’ (presumably because these depictions would encourage sexual violence) (CPS, 2009).

While the law does stress that it is not in the state’s interest to persecute individuals unless ‘aggravating factors’ are present, if a case is brought to the court the onus is on the

¹⁴ Emphasis added by the author

Prosecution to prove that the pornographic images depicted are ‘grossly offensive’, ‘disgusting’, or ‘obscene’ (CPS, 2009). Though the legal document does provide definitions of terms like ‘life-threatening act’ and ‘serious injury’, it does not outline what people should consider to be ‘disgusting’ or ‘offensive’ (CPS, 2009). These emotionally loaded terms can be highly subjective dependent on the attitudes of police, jurors, lawyers and judges, which could lead to differential treatment of defendants depending on who is working on their case.

There is a similar law in New Zealand which is covered by the Films, Videos, and Publications Classification Act 1993, which has continuously been subjected to amendments up to as recently as 2016. In Part 8 Section 123(1) it is explicitly prohibited by law for any individuals and organisations to create, make a copy of, possess, import, supply, distribute, or expect to receive payment/gain by displaying/exhibiting publications that are considered ‘objectionable’. Importantly, Section 123(3) (and other locations where relevant) states that having ‘no knowledge or no reasonable cause to believe that the publication to which the charge relates was objectionable’ cannot be used as a defence. Further, Section 131(2A) states that someone could be charged with possession of an electronic copy of a objectionable publication ‘even though that person’s actual or potential physical custody or control of the publication is not, or does not include, that person intentionally or knowingly using a computer or other electronic device to save the publication (or a copy of it)’.

‘Objectionable’ is defined in Part 1 Section 3(1) of the Act as material that ‘describes, depicts, expresses, or otherwise deals with matters such as sex, horror, crime, cruelty, or violence in such a manner that the availability of the publication is likely to be injurious to the public good’. While it is not defined what ‘public good’ means, Section 3(2) continues to

define ‘objectionable’ as content that depicts the sexual exploitation of minors, the use of violence or coercion to force an unwilling party into performing sex, necrophilia, bestiality, the use of bodily wastes to degrade/dehumanise people in sexual or non-sexual contexts, torture or extreme violence/cruelty. Furthermore in Section 3(3) particular weight is given to material that, in conjunction with the abovementioned acts, contains the depiction of sexual satisfaction being derived from inflicting or suffering cruelty/pain, promoting criminal acts/terrorism, and any violations to the Human Rights Act 1993. Of course, the Classification Act makes certain provisions for documentaries, short films and anything else considered to be of ‘high artistic merit’.

An overwhelming number of these clauses relate to activities that fall loosely under the umbrella of sexual deviancy. Even though this Classification Act is largely concerned with censorship and distributors giving appropriate age ratings for films, video games, music and other forms of media¹⁵ – and arguably it is not common practice for inspectors to conduct widespread searches and seizures of ‘objectionable publications’ – it has very troubling implications for anyone who happens to be caught having a recording depicting sadomasochistic acts. That sadomasochism, degradation/dehumanisation, sexual assault, necrophilia, bestiality, child pornography, acts of terrorism, torture/cruelty, human rights violations are all lumped together into one category termed ‘objectionable’ and used as a gauge for rating publications is indicative of a political/judicial system that is out of touch with the material is readily available on the internet, rating- and censorship-free.

¹⁵ In Section 3B(4) there is a clause about objectionable publications having a detrimental impact on the emotional and intellectual development of younger audiences, so New Zealand law also uses the notion of protecting children as a means through which it can impose sanctions on what kinds of publications are ‘safe for consumption’.

In 1989 it was suggested that the amount of sexual violence that has been depicted in pornography has actually been decreasing since 1977, and there has been no clear evidence to show that watching violent rape on the screen would cause viewers to become violent rapists themselves (L. Williams, 1989). However, this was before the proliferation of free, easily-accessible online pornography on various mobile internet-capable devices, and in a more recent review, there does appear to be an association between frequent pornography consumption and sexually aggressive behaviours (Malamuth, Addison, & Koss, 2000).

Moreover, the potential emotional and/or bodily harm that could be inflicted on pornography actors and actresses who have to simulate whatever might be deemed to be ‘extreme pornography’ on camera is a valid concern, especially if actors are ‘consenting’ to activities because they may not get paid otherwise. Towards the end of 2015, a well-known pornography actor James Deen was accused by several pornography actresses of sexual assault (Ronan, 2015). Multiple women came forward with allegations after his then-girlfriend Stoya accused him of rape (Visser, 2015). The reason for their reluctance to speak out sooner was because they believed that the public assumed that sex workers cannot be assaulted (Ronan, 2015). But is it the state’s job to define what is ‘extreme pornography’, and in so doing police and regulate all pornography? Or would this safety risk perhaps be better addressed if the law directly addressed the vulnerabilities involved in pornography work, for example by targeting exploitation or malpractices in the pornography industry?

With regard to protecting children, various surveys have indicated that the overwhelming majority of youth tend to be exposed to online pornography during adolescence (12~14 years of age). While there are other issues to consider around adolescents consuming pornography

such as body image, sexual health and unrealistic relationship expectations, the concern that younger children are being exposed to online pornography, especially of the violent or obscene sort, may be overstated. (Owens, Behun, Manning, & Reid, 2012; Sabina, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2008; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2005). Additionally, the relationship between young adults' sexual risk-taking tendencies and age of first exposure to pornography has been found to be weak (Sinković, Štulhofer, & Boži, 2013). Nevertheless, operating under the presumption that all households will want to protect their children from inadvertently stumbling upon violent pornographic imagery online, internet service providers in the UK will implement filters that are opt-out rather than opt-in (Shubber, 2013). The implementation of these filters extend beyond pornography, and internet "users will also be required to opt in for any content tagged as violent, extremist, terrorist, anorexia and eating disorders, suicide, alcohol, smoking, Web forums, esoteric material and Web-blocking circumvention tools." (Neal, 2013, para 2). While trying to control the internet may be a futile endeavour, if anyone is prosecuted for viewing and/or distributing 'extreme pornography', the law would set a precedent and in effect dictate what would be considered 'normal' or 'not extreme' pornography that is fit for public consumption (Wilkinson, 2009). With problematic laws like these coming to pass, it is becoming increasingly important to ask *why* the state should intervene in affairs that should be managed by the privately-operated pornography industry (for workplace safety concerns) and by parents (for children concerns), and to what degree the state should be allowed to intervene in these matters.

Navigating the vanilla world: Media representations

Mainstream media can greatly influence the ways in which BDSM and BDSM practitioners are perceived (Fritscher, 2001; Ryer, 2014). The media frenzy that frequently surrounds

many sex-related court cases, especially those where high-profile individuals are indicted such as a scandal in the UK involving a politician and multiple young women dressed in Nazi uniforms, continues to be very detrimental to peoples' reputations (Champion, 2010). These sensationalist BDSM-related stories, especially when BDSM activities have resulted in injury or death, fuel the public's perception that BDSM is about violence, which in turn demonises the BDSM community and implicitly justifies the discrimination against BDSM practitioners (Pa, 2001).

In the fictional realm, BDSM has increasingly been represented on film since the 1980s, but what is portrayed is usually an exaggerated caricature of different types of BDSM roles, and these films have not accurately reflected the experiences of actual BDSM practitioners (Sherwin, 2008). For example, the 2002 film *Secretary* was a quirky romantic comedy where the distant and aloof male protagonist meets the female protagonist with a troubled past, and they become a couple who eventually get married and live happily ever after. Her masochism, which had stemmed from previous trauma, is a vehicle through which the film can portray an otherwise conventional romance with a sadistic but caring and concerned male partner (Noonan, 2010). BDSM documentaries in which interviewers ask questions about childhood/upbringing and/or previous failed relationships highlight the peculiar, abnormal nature of BDSM practitioners whereas these questions would not arise in a documentary where the interviewees are in heteronormative-conforming relationships (Wilkinson, 2009). By explaining away BDSM as something that people with unordinary backgrounds engage in, these mechanisms served to reinforce heteronormative ideals instead of challenging them.

The proliferation of BDSM imagery in mainstream culture, through films, books, television series, magazines and advertisements, emphasises its ‘deviant’ or ‘naughty’ status. Because it is the kinky, risqué, controversial nature of the imagery that makes it peculiar and different from heteronormativity, this has not led to increased levels of tolerance or acceptance in society (Wilkinson, 2009). However, some BDSM narratives are privileged over others in the media, normalising some activities as ‘kinky fun’ whilst rejecting other activities as ‘real perversions’ (Barker, Gupta, & Iantaffi, 2007). For example, despite the immensely popular *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy reading more like a traditional romance novel than erotica (Nilson, 2013), (alpha male character falls in love with passive female protagonist and triggers her sexual awakening, she tames and domesticates him but he remains the dominant figure in the relationship, concluding with a happily ever after ending), its growing popularity has rebranded some elements of BDSM (‘mild’ BDSM such as the use of handcuffs and blindfolds in the bedroom) from being dangerous, weird and abnormal to something fun, fashionable and exciting whilst other elements (‘extreme’ BDSM such as whipping, needle play, blood play) remain marginalised (Martin, 2013). The fictional nature of the narrative enhances the element of fantasy which keeps the removed audience a safe distance away from any actual, real experience of BDSM (Al-Mahadin, 2013). Furthermore, in *Fifty Shades of Grey* BDSM is portrayed in a specific context, where Anastasia Steele’s only experiences with pain, punishment and humiliation is derived from Christian Grey’s sadism and dominance; she has no conceptualisation or understanding of BDSM outside of the dysfunctional and manipulative relationship that she has with Christian (Stevens, 2014). Ultimately, the *Fifty Shades*’ protagonists get married and have children, and any transgressive potential the trilogy might have had to challenge sexual, erotic and relationship norms and practices is squandered away in favour of a heteronormative-conforming fairy tale ending that is typical of the romance novel genre (Downing, 2013).

Traditionally there have been more resources, materials and workshops devoted to pre-existing BDSM practitioners on issues such as safe play rather than introducing non-practitioners to BDSM (Barker, 2007). Narratives like *Fifty Shades of Grey* is changing that. BDSM is now more accessible to non-practitioners compared to the previously isolated individual who is curious or interested in BDSM, and retailers are capitalising on the franchise to boost milder forms of BDSM as playful, kinky and erotic (Martin, 2013).

Overall, while the media could have a normalising effect on some forms of ‘light BDSM’, putting a positive spin on the types of explicitly sexual activities featured in works like *Fifty Shades of Grey* that are now considered kinky rather than perverse, ‘heavy BDSM’ practices – activities that draw blood, leave permanent scars and/or are moderately humiliating and degrading – are more likely to remain taboo and continue to be stigmatised.

Summary

In summary, existing literature concerning the lived experiences of BDSM practitioners and how their lives may be affected by the values, attitudes and judgements of non-practitioners can be broadly subdivided into four categories. Firstly, there is informative literature designed to educate everyday people with minimal previous knowledge about/experience with BDSM, as well as healthcare service providers looking to be more culturally competent when dealing with BDSM-practising clients, facilitating better therapeutic relationships to improve the quality of care provided. Next, we covered the theory-based studies, which has looked at (a) the medical and cultural history of BDSM, (b) literature reviews and meta-analyses, (c) queer theory specifically focused on the performativity of BDSM, (d) sexual citizenship/rights, and (e) leisure theory conceptualising BDSM as serious leisure.

Of greater interest to the following chapters is the literature on BDSM in practice, involving quantitative and qualitative research with actual BDSM practitioners from non-clinical populations, as well as the case studies which looked at kinky people living in a non-kinky world, facing legal, job and social discriminatory practices that have been exacerbated by the misrepresentations and misconceptions perpetuated by the mainstream media's inaccurate portrayals of BDSM. As was evident in the literature review, the currently available research on BDSM practitioners' lived experiences is sparse. The research questions addressed in the following three chapters are relevant to the final two points in particular. The ethnographic project in chapter 2 will contribute to the current state of knowledge about BDSM in praxis, the quantitative study in chapter 3 will assess BDSM non-practitioners' attitudes about BDSM, and the content analysis in chapter 4 will illustrate the discourses around BDSM that the mainstream media is perpetuating.

Chapter Two: Methodology

This thesis uses a mixed methods approach to address its three interrelated research questions, which combines qualitative and quantitative research paradigms to yield results of differing breadth and depth (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Because one of the concerns that BDSM practitioners voiced in the first study was how they were perceived by the ‘outside world’ or the non-practitioners, this informed the formulation of the subsequent studies. The second study involved assessing the attitudes that members of the public have about BDSM and its practitioners (study 2/chapter 4), and the third queried whether peoples’ opinions are formed or informed by what they read, see and hear in popular fictional narratives like *Fifty Shades of Grey* (study 3/chapter 5). Using different research methods to measure this variable loosely termed ‘public response’ allows for data triangulation where we can compare the results from the second and third study against the responses to the first study. The use of mixed methods approaches, coupled with the notion of triangulating data from different sources using different methods, has been gaining traction since its inception in 1959 (Campbell & Fiske, 1959), and continues to be a popular, robust, comprehensive approach to addressing research questions (Morse, 1991; Thurmond, 2001).

The central question in this thesis revolves around the everyday lives and experiences of local BDSM practitioners. Thus, an ethnographic approach was deemed to be one of the most suitable research methods to use. Ethnography, sometimes used interchangeably with the term ‘participant-observation research’, is a method traditionally used in anthropology and sociology where researchers would immerse themselves fully into the culture and community being studied for an extended period of time, collecting data through taking field notes about observations and first-hand experiences, and analysing interviews conducted with local

members of that community (Creswell, 2014). Ethnography can be further subdivided into categories such as ‘classic ethnography’, which involves objectively looking at and recording the everyday, pre-existing conditions of a phenomenon, and ‘critical ethnography’, which is driven by a social justice agenda and focuses on raising awareness to address particular discriminatory practices, disparities, inequalities and/or injustices present in the phenomenon being researched (Dutta, 2014). Prior to the 20th century, the bulk of the available ethnographic research featured sole anthropologists providing detailed accounts of remote tribes, villages and communities that had vastly different cultures compared to North America and Europe; only in the past century has the ethnographic method been appropriated for researching contemporary urban cultures and subcultures (Rubin, 2002).

Ethnography is a relevant approach for marginalised, vulnerable populations as these individuals may be difficult to access or reluctant to approach researchers (Liamputtong, 2007). Thus, it is particularly suited for BDSM research, because BDSM practitioners whose proclivities become exposed could be subject to various forms of discrimination and disadvantages, and they may feel participating in academic research would risk their anonymity. For example, 37.5% of the respondents in one USA-based survey had reported either being discriminated against or experienced some form of harassment/violence targeted at themselves or at their BDSM-related businesses (Wright, 2008). BDSM practitioners wary of this may not be as willing to speak to an ‘outsider’ researcher about their experiences, and those who are willing may not respond in the same way as they would to an ‘insider’ researcher (though these ‘outsider’ and ‘insider’ terms are contested¹⁶). Becoming an

¹⁶ Complications to consider include: who determines whether the researcher is an insider or outsider? Are these categories even static? Is it a straightforward progression from outsider to insider as the researcher integrates him/herself into the community? What happens at the end of the research period? In reality does the researcher not have to constantly balance both the

‘insider’ also has the additional benefit of giving the researcher access to a shared language, shared experiences and shared knowledge about the inner workings of the culture and community, which can then be drawn upon when interviewing participants who may already be personally acquainted with the researcher (Liamputtong, 2007).

In anthropological terms, research undertaken by a community member is termed ‘emic’ while a non-member would be ‘etic’ (Naaeke et al., 2012). And when approaching research questions from an emic perspective, there are additional special considerations. As may be apparent in this chapter, a fully immersed researcher may struggle with managing the simultaneously co-existing practitioner and researcher identities. Disclosing one’s researcher identity, which is ethically necessary so as to not mislead or deceive community members, could cause people to react differently when they know they are being observed, so their behaviours would no longer be typical (Babbie, 2011). In my case, this was especially noticeable during my first encounter with the community until my community member identity became more salient than the researcher one. Additionally, because the ethnographer would have been immersed in the culture for several months or years, over time s/he may no longer be aware of the community’s implicit beliefs and values; without implementing appropriate research designs and strategies, the data collected that might be deemed important to an ‘outsider’ researcher may not necessarily be as noteworthy to an ‘insider’ researcher (Morse & Richards, 2002).

insider and outsider states of mind in order to interact with participants on an everyday level whilst maintaining enough of a critical distance in order to evaluate and critique their observations? (Naaeke, Kurylo, Grabowski, Linton, & Radford, 2012)

While the pre-existing rapport between researcher and participant could undoubtedly make the interview process less daunting for both parties, and the researcher could arguably have more contextual information with which to derive interpretations of what participants are trying to convey, the emotional involvement with participants can affect the researcher's judgement and the study could be difficult if not impossible to replicate (van Lieshout, 1995). The primary goal of ethnographic research is thus not to generate data that are objective, universal and generalisable, but to showcase the experiences that have been meaningful for a local culture/community in a particular part of the world at a given time in history.

Ethnographic work is sparse in BDSM. This could be because potential ethnographers have to consider the pros and cons of community immersion and decide whether the additional insights they could gain from becoming an 'insider' is worth the risks involved. BDSM involvement could have a significant impact on the prospective ethnographer's current romantic/marital relationships, and given the potential legal and social ramifications of BDSM proclivities being made publicly known in the current sociocultural climate, researchers may also have concerns about jeopardising their professional reputations (Lindemann, 2012).

Given the paucity of published ethnographic research in BDSM communities, the following section explores only the works of five prominent US-based researchers over the past 50 years – Gayle Rubin, Margot Weiss, Robert Stoller, Danielle Lindemann and Staci Newmahr.

Gayle Rubin is a cultural anthropologist, feminist and sex-positive activist, and she is one of the founders of the first lesbian BDSM organisation in the US, Samois, in 1978. Rubin's

work involved working within and documenting the gay leather scene¹⁷ in San Francisco from the late 1970s, showcasing how the AIDS epidemic impacted on the community and the locale it occupied, and how the leather subculture has changed pre-AIDS until present day (Rubin, 1997). The perception of the activities that some leathermen were interested in, such as BDSM and fisting, as being dangerous, risky and unhealthy led to unfounded proclamations such as the number of men dying from AIDS being disproportionately higher among gay leathermen (Rubin, 1997). This contributed to the demonisation of the leather community in the 1980s, when the world was first coming to terms with AIDS and there was still very limited information available (Rubin, 1997). Today, the locale that had been profoundly impacted upon by the AIDS epidemic with the (sometimes forced) closure of many establishments that catered for leathermen, is the site of one of the largest public events in California which San Francisco's Leather Pride Week culminates in – an annual BDSM event known as the Folsom Street Fair (Rubin, 1997).

Weiss conducted her ethnographic work in the San Francisco Bay Area between 2000 and 2003, where the demographic was predominantly white, middle-class, heterosexual people in long-term relationships. Like many non-practitioners, she noted that her initial foray into, and first impressions of, BDSM are completely unlike how BDSM is portrayed on television, and by extension it is nothing like how non-practitioners imagine it would be. BDSM could be erotic and intimate but BDSM spaces were not arenas for group sex or casual sex – in fact

¹⁷ The gay leather subculture is characterised by wearing or doing various sexual activities involving leather accoutrements such as black leather jackets, chaps and harnesses. Black leather has multiple associations like motorcycles and freedom, 'wild cowboy' or 'bad boy', and symbolises multiple ideals and attitudes including macho or hypermasculinity (as opposed to effeminate), sexual and physical power, fetishism, and rebellion/anti-society (which is also linked to the punk/anarchy movement). The leather subculture has its own spaces like motorcycle clubs and leather bars, and is linked to BDSM through the fetish aspect as well as the leathermen's interest in sadomasochism (Rubin, 1997).

there was very little about her participants that she would have considered 'casual'. Most of the people she met were decidedly 'normal' – white, middle-class, heterosexual people in long-term relationships with stable living arrangements and careers (Weiss, 2011). Weiss used her exploration of the Bay Area BDSM community to critique broader socioeconomic and political trends in contemporary neoliberal society, such as the commercial aspect of BDSM equipment and how that relates to capitalism, and the impact of the rise of Silicon Valley on San Francisco and its outer suburbs (Weiss, 2011). This in turn she argues, has greater implications for how power and money interacts with and are negotiated within the intersectional dimensions of class, race and gender in contemporary United States (or at least the US's west coast).

Robert Stoller was a psychiatrist who posited psychoanalytic theories about the development of gender identity, the manifestations of masculinity and femininity, and notably in 1975 he challenged the notion of perversion. BDSM was one of various sexual subcultures that he studied from the 1970s through to 1990. Stoller's work was situated in West Hollywood in the 1980s. As part of his efforts to promote psychoanalysis as a legitimate and valid research tool, he made contact with several people in the BDSM industry (primarily dungeon owners and workers) and presented several of his interviews. Despite his psychoanalytic background, he cautioned the reader to be wary of any singular theory that purports to encompass sadomasochistic behaviours holistically because people have flexible, everchanging preferences and there is no singular, homogenous, universal type of 'sadomasochistic' behaviour (Stoller, 1991). He noted some limitations of the interviews – though the same could be said for any study that is not longitudinal in nature – namely, (a) the researcher would obtain different narratives from different people depending on whom the researcher decides to conduct interviews with and what topics are being covered in that interview, and

(b) the interviewer captures a narrative about an interviewee at a specific instance in a specific frame of mind under specific circumstances – what ends up being reported is only what has been captured at that moment and cannot account for the fact that ultimately, circumstances change, moods change and people change (Stoller, 1991). He illustrated this by interviewing the same person at two different points in time; she left him with a very different first impression than in the subsequent interview. Overall, he found that sadomasochists were not mentally ill, had ‘normal’ jobs, and enjoyed ‘normal’ activities. Having unorthodox preferences when it comes to BDSM did not have implications for other aspects of their lives – but those that did seek therapy were likely to be confronted by a clinician’s inherent biases and prejudices, which could impact on their therapeutic relationship (Stoller, 1991).

Lindemann conducted her research with professional dominatrices in New York City and San Francisco, and her findings refute some misconceptions about dominatrices perpetrated by inaccurate mainstream media representations (Lindemann, 2012). Even though she had decided not to participate in any BDSM activities due to its potential to compromise her professional reputation, the extended period of time she had spent with dominatrices and their workplaces has been no less insightful. BDSM was framed as a positive experience; a means of psychological escape where people could adopt roles, explore different aspects of their personalities, and engage in a range of activities that they would normally not be able to do within the constraints of their everyday lives (Lindemann, 2012). Professional dominatrices tended to see themselves as therapists who were able to provide an outlet for clients who were otherwise unable to fulfil their desires within their current romantic relationships, though this discourse of providing BDSM-related services as therapy could inadvertently imply that clients are pathological or abnormal (Lindemann, 2011). The researcher was able

to witness first-hand the safety measures that were in place. The use of safewords¹⁸ was respected, regular attendance of community workshops was a normative practice, there was internal monitoring which occasionally resulted in the ejection of people who violated others' boundaries, and there was intracommunity policing through calling out unsafe play (Lindemann, 2013).

Newmahr's work in 2011 involved joining a local (American) BDSM community and becoming an actively participating member for several years. She noted down extensive field notes from munches and BDSM events, recounted her personal experiences when talking to and doing BDSM activities with other practitioners, but also critically engaged with her observations and situated her community within the wider social context of contemporary US society in the 21st century. She found that members of the BDSM club tended to experience a sense of difference, outsidership or stigma in their everyday lives, so the BDSM club became a home for them where everyone would be accepted with (not in spite of) their differences (Newmahr, 2011). She reflected extensively on her observations and experiences, and noted that if she did not have any first-hand knowledge about BDSM, the subsequent interviews she might have conducted could have included a different, potentially less relevant range of questions (Newmahr, 2008). For example, there are marked differences between what is portrayed in the mainstream media, what event attendees do in public BDSM play parties, and what people do privately at home (Newmahr, 2010b) – it may not be as relevant to ask

¹⁸ A safeword is a designated word agreed upon by all involved parties prior to a play session whereby the usage of that word would mean that the session has to stop immediately. Some sessions involve the illusion of coercion so 'please stop' or 'please don't' would be part of the enacted fantasy and would not indicate to the other party that the session needs to stop. Commonly, public establishments would use a traffic light system, whereby the word 'yellow' would mean 'slow down' or 'you're hitting a bit too hard' or 'I don't like where this is going' depending on what is happening in the session. The word 'red' would be the actual safeword whereby all activities must immediately cease.

about how people furnish their dungeons at home if many participants repurpose a bedroom and keep their gear locked in a suitcase. Despite the widespread acknowledgement within the community that for some BDSM practitioners, BDSM and sex are not necessarily intertwined, BDSM continues to be conceptualised as either being about sex, or a type of precursor/foreplay to sex (Newmahr, 2010b). Thus, solely focusing on sex-related questions would risk only capturing a limited portion of participants' experiences. Moreover, within the community BDSM is not understood as a form of pretence or performance; even at a public event, BDSM practitioners 'play' for themselves and not for the potential audience, and practitioners can and do inflict pain on each other, even though pain is a personal experience and not necessarily interpreted within the strict medicalised framework (Newmahr, 2010a). Presupposing BDSM as a performative activity may make interviewees defensive about why they do what they do in public.

An online survey was used for the second study for numerous reasons. Primarily, the benefits of using an already developed and tested scale meant that local data could be directly compared to other countries where the scale was administered, or across New Zealand if the scale was to be administered across other regions. Moreover, there was greater potential for a wider reach of respondents scattered around Auckland and the rest of New Zealand. Finally, regardless of what research method is used, sampling biases where people who have a stronger opinion about the topic are more likely to participate cannot be mitigated, and using qualitative methods, which would have been more in line with studies 1 and 3, would have introduced more issues than it yields benefits (such as: people who feel more strongly about BDSM would have been more likely to give their opinions; where would a representative sample be sourced from?; how would these peoples' responses compare to others in New Zealand and the rest of the world?). Ultimately, a survey cannot answer the hows, whys, and

what-ifs of a phenomenon, nor does this particular study purport to derive a ‘true average score’ from a representative sample and make any assertions about the national response to BDSM. What it can do is give a general indication of public sentiment. If responses to the survey suggest that participants generally hold negative views about BDSM and its practitioners, then there may be some merit to the fears and concerns that BDSM practitioners may have about an unsympathetic, potentially hostile ‘vanilla’ environment. If however the response appears to be positive, then that would appear to be incongruent with how BDSM practitioners believe they would be regarded and treated by non-practitioners, and we could posit some theories as to why there is this inconsistency.

The third study investigates how the audience is engaging with and responding to the *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015) movie. To address this, we return to using qualitative methods by doing a content analysis and generating themes from some reviews of the movie. Fiction is one avenue by which people can interact with and approach from a safe distance sensitive issues such as death, faith, immigration, class and indeed, topics surrounding sexualities, and it can enhance the readers/viewers’ capacity to be empathetic and sympathetic by giving them an opportunity to understand people who have had very different life experiences (Harrison, 2015; Mar & Oatley, 2008). It is arguably less jarring to think of two fictional characters exploring and experimenting with different erotic experiences than it is to be confronted with the possibility that the neighbours are running a dominatrix business and might have converted their garage into a dungeon. Regardless of how positively or negatively the film was received, the *Fifty Shades* phenomenon could be used as a vehicle for initiating dialogue about BDSM without having to discuss anything personal/intimate or using nuanced jargon. Perhaps *Fifty Shades* and other instances of BDSM occurring in the media could have

impacted public opinion of the subject matter, but it also could have influenced how BDSM practitioners think about themselves and how they might be perceived by others.

Using the results from these three studies combined, this thesis aims to paint a rich, nuanced and holistic picture of the state of BDSM in Auckland, New Zealand.

Chapter Three: The Local Kink Scene

Study One: Ethnography; Interviews¹⁹

Research Question:

What are the experiences of BDSM practitioners in New Zealand?



Figure 1. Pictorial depiction of some keywords that were explored during the ethnographic interviews. Base image was obtained from Getty Images.²⁰

¹⁹ Portions of this study were presented at the Persons and Sexualities 7 conference in October 2014 and is currently in the process of being published in a book.

²⁰ Image was acquired under royalty-free licence for personal use.

Prologue: Personal Journey: A Reflexive Account of the Researcher

The following narrative describes my background, my initial encounters with BDSM and eventual entry into the local kink scene, which was facilitated by a friend of a friend.

Ethnographic research is a reflexive process, and my background will have had a significant impact on my personal experiences with BDSM and how I conducted the study. Pseudonyms are used to preserve the privacy of the people mentioned.

In 2002, two months before I turned 12, I migrated to New Zealand from Singapore, and 14 February 2002 became a reference point in my life where I either recall experiences as being “before I left there” or “after I came here”. I began casually researching BDSM as early as 2006, but it was only in 2013 after I commenced thinking about my PhD that I started doing more in-depth, intensive research on the topic, became acquainted with BDSM practitioners and started engaging in BDSM activities with other practitioners as part of the ethnographic process. I identify as queer (insofar as I would rather let someone’s personality limit the kind of relationship we could have as opposed to their sex/gender/orientation) and primarily submissive, but up until I began my doctoral project, I had not engaged with BDSM practitioners or practices.

In mid-2013 during the formative stages of my PhD I spoke to a colleague, and when he learnt about my topic, he informed me that he was acquainted with someone who was involved with the local BDSM scene. Specifically, she (henceforth referred to as Anne) was ‘very into rope’. He set up a meeting for the three of us at one of the university’s cafés, and we spoke informally about my research interests. I learnt at the meeting that Anne was involved with the Auckland Rope SIG, a special interest group that runs monthly rope

workshops, and I later discovered that she has had years of experience with ropework. She gave me some basic information about the local BDSM scene, told me to create a profile at a social networking site for kinksters, www.fetlife.com, and I was advised to speak with the owners of a venue that runs regular BDSM events before going there to experience my first play party.

Though at this stage I was still unsure of whether to do ethnographic research or remain removed from the scene and recruit interviewees through advertisements, I did intend to attend at least one play party, for observational purposes if nothing else. If I felt too overwhelmed and/or uncomfortable at a play party to do any participant-observation research, I could make a decision early on in the research process to pursue alternative methodologies. I started a journal online and began posting entries. The journal contains a more detailed account of my experiences (of BDSM as well as doing a PhD), a sample entry of which is copied verbatim into the epilogue section of this chapter.

Following Anne's advice, I created an account on FetLife and made my research intentions clear on my profile. FetLife can best be described as similar to a 'kinky' version of Facebook. It does not have as many features and relies on donations from the FetLife community, but it is a social networking site for kinksters, where members can add each other as 'friends', share photos, videos, writings (which include erotica, reflexive journal entries, information about safe play, etc.), event/workshop information and communicate with each other by writing on each other's virtual 'walls', instant messaging via 'Kinky Chat' or private messaging.

I then visited two BDSM event venues in Auckland on separate occasions, introduced myself and explained my position as being both personally interested in BDSM and as a researcher interested in the local scene. Though at this stage I was still considering the merits of doing participant-observation research, I wanted to make my position clear to venue owners so that they would not feel misled, lied to or manipulated down the road when I had made up my mind. Unlike larger cities, a local space dedicated solely for BDSM activities would be financially unsustainable due to the small size of the local kinky event-going population. So although the BDSM population would define itself as distinct from other alternative sexualities and subcultures, these event venues are shared locations with other non-heteronormative-conforming groups e.g. queer spaces, swingers' clubs, sex clubs, etc. The venue owners' responses were positive and I agreed to (1) explicitly state my research intentions every time I met someone new at the venues and (2) not do anything to compromise the other attendees' privacy and confidentiality. I obtained verbal consent to come along to their events and experience it first-hand prior to attending my first event.

Anne was present at my first event and she introduced me to some of her friends. I was very upfront with everyone I spoke to at length, explaining that I was both interested in kink but that I was also considering doing research in the area, because I did not want to be in a situation of having established rapport with someone only to later reveal that I am doing research, which may make them feel deceived or betrayed.

Feeling more confident and comfortable at my second event, I had two short sessions with Anne and John, whom I had previously met at my first event. The session allowed me to better understand through my own body and my own interpretation of events, the various sensations and experiences that participants in previous research have been trying to describe

(Simula, 2012). I had an intense flogging session with John which was witnessed by the majority of the attendees at that second event. In retrospect, I came to understand this event as akin to my proper initiation into the scene, where I started to gain my insider status. After the session, other event attendees came up to talk to me – some congratulated me, others gave compliments, and still others had simply warmed to my presence on the scene and introduced themselves to me. I still recall a conversation numerous events later, where an event attendee said to me that he thought I was just another researcher who had come to ‘observe the freak show’, but to see that I was ‘actually into it’ and ‘actually one of us’ was very refreshing and comforting. Before fully coming to terms with the fact that I was going to become an ethnographer, I realised I would no longer be commentating on what the outside world must think of as a ‘freak show’, or acting on behalf of the community – I was now part of the community, armed with first-hand experiences and friendships forged with fellow kinksters – doing research *with* participants rather than *on* them.

During the course of my ethnographic research, I had attended two other, newer regular events run at different venues. However, upon realising that the same regulars tended to ‘make the rounds’ attending different events, I focused on the original venues/events. Each venue has a different floor plan but they provide a similar range of equipment such as St. Andrew’s crosses, spanking benches or ceiling suspension points for anyone to use. Event organisers and attendees are overall safety-, cleanliness- and hygiene-conscious: venues have first-aid kits, disinfectant wipes are provided to wipe down equipment with, and there are additional rules for any sort of activity involving bodily fluids. Venues also have more secluded spaces with mattresses and provide condoms even though most forms of penetrative sexual intercourse are not common occurrences at events.

At the time of the commencement of my first interview, I had been to one informal social event at a bar/restaurant (these are called ‘munches’ and explained in greater detail in the glossary) approximately two months after attending my first public play party. There are different monthly munches targeted at different individuals: I had attended a general munch open for anyone to attend, but there are also separate munches for, for example, kinksters under 35, or (self-identified) queer kinksters. At the munch, I had recognised some of the attendees but there were also unfamiliar faces. It is more typical for those curious/interested in BDSM to attend munches first and ask questions before attending play parties, but as my ethnographic research was targeting BDSM practitioners and their lived experiences, I was looking to interview people who had already come to terms with their kink and were already attending play parties. Thus, I did not recruit participants from munches.

In a way, this PhD has been a proverbial Trojan horse where I have been given an opportunity to explore both the kink scene as well as embark on my personal kink journey whilst doing research. I do not face the same level of stigma or potential repercussions if I were ‘outed’ as I can claim that I have ‘gone native’ and am doing academic research in this field if I choose to use it as a ‘defence’ – it is not something I am likely to ever do, but it is nevertheless a privilege not shared by the overwhelming majority of people in the scene.

All the while, I have been juggling multiple identities. There is a kinkster who talks to other people in the scene, trying to find her way on this kink journey. At the back of her mind there is always a researcher in the play parties exploring what the venues have to offer to players, asking questions, talking to strangers and those who have become friends alike. Then there is a PhD candidate in the vanilla world attempting to write a dissertation, revealing different

levels of information to different people in her life, putting on different masks for different audiences.

Through this it became clear to me that there is no singular closet that you are either still inside or have come out of. For every person in your life there is a separate closet, and you can be completely inside, have the doors open just enough so that a sliver of light can shine through, have a foot out the door, be straddling the doorframe undecided and hesitant, or be completely out in the open.

Introduction

My current study shares many similarities with Newmahr (2011)'s journey and approach to her local SM scene. These include: (1) the focus on the pansexual rather than the gay and lesbian communities (though, notably, in Auckland there are too few people who self-identify as homosexual and kinky to be able to sustain homosexual-centric events; event organisers try to cater to everyone); (2) the immediate disclosure of the researcher identity to everyone encountered and the reactions garnered – most people reacted positively or neutrally but few did remain cautious; (3) the level of acceptance at the individual and overall community levels was immediately and significantly augmented after partaking in a public play session – there is a marked transition from being seen as an inquisitive outsider to a fully-fledged insider; (4) over time, the participant identity became more salient than the researcher identity for both the researcher as well as the BDSM community ('she's a researcher who happens to be interested in kink' gradually became 'she's a kinkster who happens to be doing a PhD in kink'), and; (5) interviews with participants commenced after approximately 6 months once a sufficient bond/level of rapport had been built.

The ethnographic approach to research values the researcher's active involvement with the community of interest, and a willingness to engage with community members. It recognises that there are certain elements of human experience that can neither be accurately speculated about by an uninvolved theorist, nor be adequately conveyed in its full richness through one-off interactions e.g. by administering surveys or conducting interviews. An extended involvement with the community of interest also yields a greater understanding of the context of the study and the environment that participants inhabit – for example, the Caeden community which Newmahr (2011) was extensively involved with is different in nature from the Auckland community because it has a greater availability of venues, frequency of both large- and small-scale events, and membership numbers. There are a vast number of BDSM clubs, political organisations and public resources that are available in the United States which are not available in New Zealand. Additionally, the socially and politically activist nature (or lack thereof) of American communities that are interconnected in a trans-regional tapestry from the East Coast to the West Coast is very different from the relatively isolated nature of New Zealand and its small, fragmented local communities. The assumption of a uniform, 'this is what Western societies are like in the 21st century' cannot be sustained given how social structures, systems and institutions operate differently at a local level. Ethnography is necessarily a local, spatially- and temporally-specific method of research because these different backdrops situate participants in different contexts, which shape their experiences as individuals operating within the societal circumstances that they exist in. The Auckland scene will yield novel insights about BDSM by virtue of participants having to navigate different social worlds compared to the research that has been done in other countries.

While I had undertaken an ethnographic inquiry into the local Auckland BDSM scene, my interest is confined to the phenomenological experiences of my interview participants and therein is the focus of this study. Critiques and commentaries about broader socioeconomic, political and dominant hegemonic discursive trends operating in contemporary New Zealand society, and how these trends might have influenced local BDSM experiences, were of little interest to my interviewees (even though they may have unknowingly reproduced and reinforced some of these trends during the interviews) and lies beyond the scope of this study. Additionally, though I have gained numerous personal insights into the Auckland BDSM scene as a result of my direct involvement, this study is guided by what participants have disclosed in their interviews rather than what I have personally experienced. I have documented many of my personal experiences in my journal, and the way my experiences could have influenced the interviews has been acknowledged in the previous *Personal Journey* section, but this study is not autoethnographic in nature and is designed to showcase participants' narratives much more extensively than my own.

Methods

I interviewed 21 participants, 20 of whom had attended at least one BDSM event in Auckland (one participant is based in Dunedin) recruited primarily through talking to those who attended local BDSM events. Prior to recruitment, venue owners were made aware of my dual status as kinkster and researcher, and had consented to my presence at their events. The local scene is a small community with a core group of between 200 and 300 regulars who go to many of the same events. As such, I did not need to go to every single event. A small minority of the participants had learnt about the interviews through a short recruitment blurb on my FetLife profile, messaged me online to inquire and schedule a time and location, and

met me face-to-face for the first time at the interview, but the majority had met and talked to me at an event prior to the interview.

The interview schedule can be found in Appendix A. As the interviews were semi-structured, participants were free to focus on the topics that were important to them and the schedule was loosely arranged into several topic headings. Some participants also spoke at length about the topics not covered in the interview schedule. The interview with the Dunedin-based participant was conducted online using Google Documents, and the rest of the interviews were conducted face-to-face. Interviews lasted from between 45 minutes to 2 hours and 15 minutes, with the average interview lasting for approximately 1 hour 30 minutes. At the end of the interview, participants were asked to fill out a short questionnaire that asked for demographic details and assessed participants' perceptions of degree of 'sexual deviancy' on a 7-point Likert scale for various erotic (sex- and BDSM-related) items. There were significant issues with many participants unsure of how to define nebulous concepts in the 'sexual deviancy' portion of the questionnaire – participants deemed several items to be too broad/subjective to comment on²¹ – so only the demographic information has been used.

Participants were interviewed between January and April 2014. They were each compensated for their time with a \$20 voucher. No participants requested that the interview be truncated prematurely nor that interview data be withdrawn. I transcribed the audio recordings of the interviews verbatim in order to maximise accuracy as well as to ensure participants'

²¹ For example, 'humiliation' could involve anything from calling someone a whore, to making them strip and engage in sexual activities in a public space, to forcing them to ingest bodily fluids/waste, so it was difficult for participants to say how deviant they perceived 'humiliation' as a broad category to be. Similarly, 'costumes' or 'roleplaying' could entail anything from teacher/student, doctor/nurse or doctor/patient, parent/child, soldier/prisoner of war, dressing up as animals, pretending to be dead – participants deemed some of these scenarios to be significantly more deviant than others.

anonymity, confidentiality and privacy. One interview transcript with Margaret is attached in Appendix B as a sample copy, with all names and identifying information changed or redacted; the remainder can be provided upon request.

Analysis

The CADQAS package, NVivo 10, was used to manage and facilitate the coding and subsequent analysis of the 652 pages of transcripts.

Interviews were exploratory in nature and largely driven by participants being willing to share their experiences and wanting to develop their own narratives. Though there were some questions that the interviewer had prepared in advance in case participants preferred a more structured style of interviewing, topics were not confined to any pre-conceived empirically-driven theories beyond the presumption that BDSM in New Zealand would be different in some way from other countries, and participants were encouraged to speak about the subjects that mattered to them. There was also an explicit interpretative phenomenological focus (J. A. Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009), allowing participants to reflect upon, make meaning of and convey their personal attitudes, values and lived experiences of their BDSM journeys.

In the inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) presented below, all names have been converted to pseudonyms and any identifiable information has been redacted or edited. Any BDSM-specific terminology that is not explained in the footnotes can be located in the glossary (pages 267-269).

FIELD NOTES (sample)



spanking bench

Typical evening:

8pm hardly anyone there yet - chat with staff, drink etc.

9pm crowd thickens - still chat/mingle. Small talk without much to talk about - people don't

10pm know each other that well/don't know much about personal lives.

11pm more noticeable play happening - many need advice, someone onlookers, less small talk to try with, tools etc.

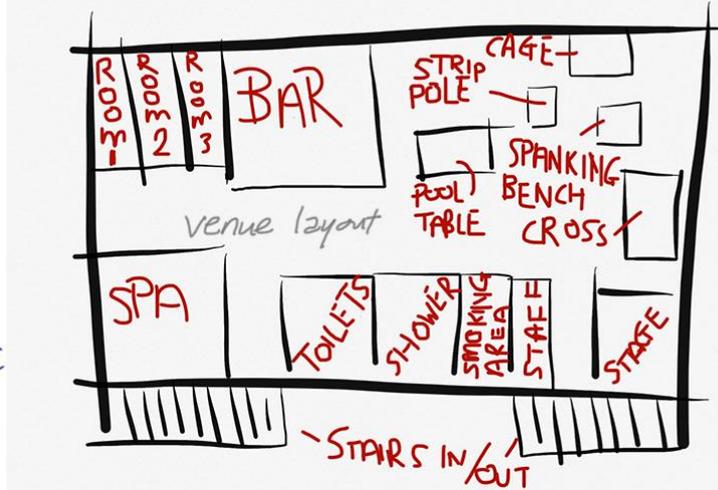
12am "peak play period" several corners taken 'interesting noises' from spa/rooms.

1am wind down/aftercare people start leaving

2am etc. Event finishes @ 3 ~ 4am.



St Andrews Cross



kink-related convo

vanilla convo

I made this new toy - play happening - many need advice, someone onlookers, less small talk to try with, tools etc.

Gossip - is that XYZ's new sub? What happened to ABC?

I'm thinking about hosting a private play party/event/workshop - expressions of interest, tips etc.

'In character' teasing - sometimes leading to play, often taking the piss

typical kiwi bloke conversations - how's your shed/retaining wall/etc. building project, I got this new motorcycle, have you tried the new Intel CPU etc.

Gardening advice

NOTHING about personal life - family, kids, job, neighbourhood etc. Rarely about spouse. off limits?

Current affairs - housing, immigration, etc.

Figure 2. An amalgamation of some of the field notes taken by the researcher during the beginning stages of the ethnographic project. This sample includes some sketches and some observations that the researcher had made about what transpired at a given event. The researcher also kept a journal, a sample of which is showcased within the epilogue of this chapter.

Participant Profiles

Due to the relatively small number of people in the Auckland scene, giving each participant individual profiles would risk identifying them to readers who are members of and/or are familiar with the Auckland scene. As such, only overall information is presented in the 'participants at a glance' figure.

It should be noted that unlike previous studies which suggest that BDSM tends to attract greater numbers of people from the well-educated, middle- and upper-class, higher income bracket strata of society (e.g. Santtila, Sandnabba, & Nordling, 2001; Weiss, 2011), my interviewees included a mixture of people with different education levels and occupations.

At the time of interviewing the 21 participants, 3 resided outside of Auckland, and 2 out of those 3 would infrequently commute to Auckland to attend events. In terms of representation of minority groups, two participants belonged to ethnic minority groups and one participant has a visible physical disability. In terms of how participants are spread demographically, ethnic minorities have been slightly underrepresented in this study, but overall this sample is fairly representative of the Auckland scene.

Participants at a glance:

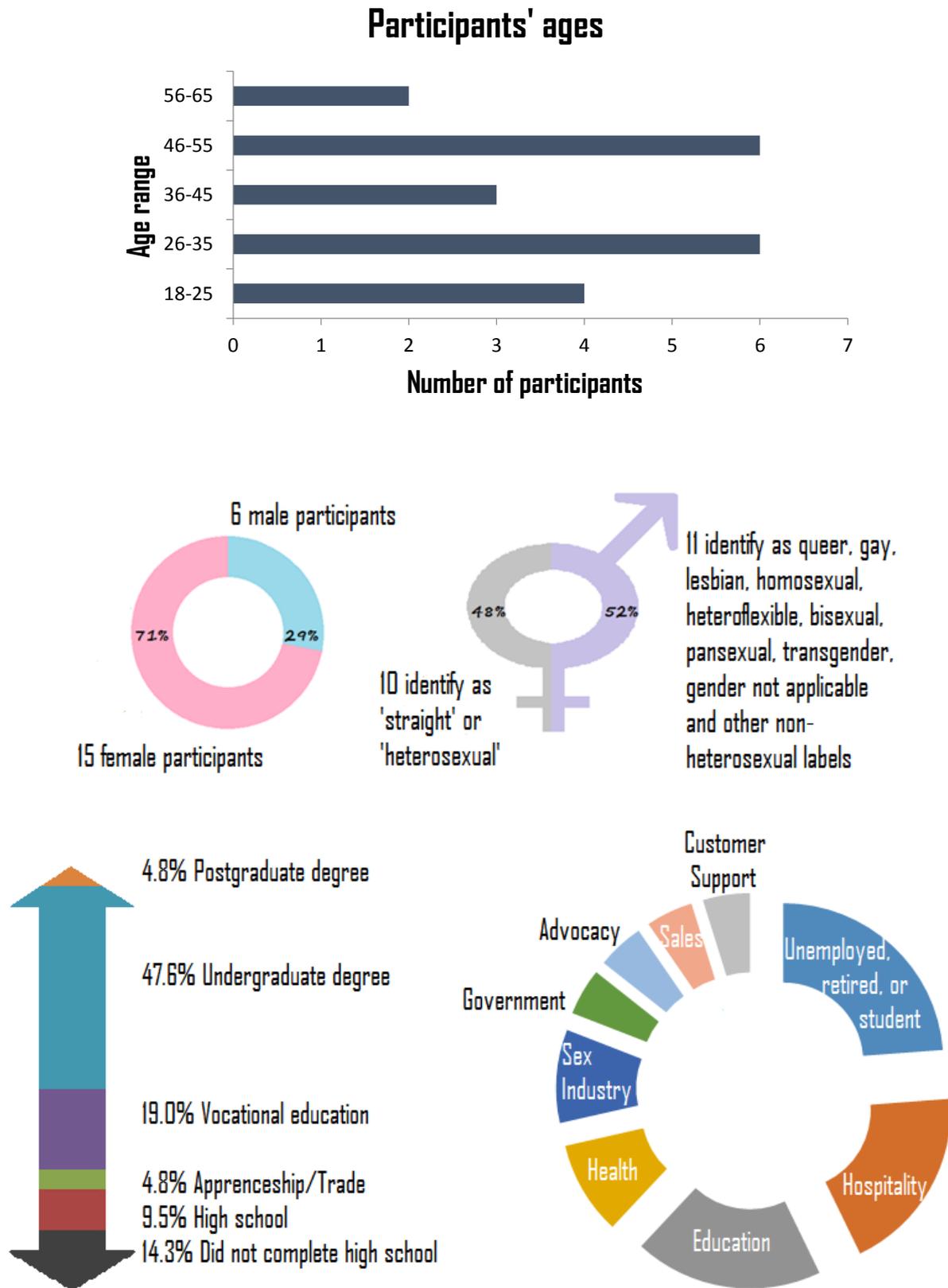


Figure 3. Participant demographic overview. Designed and created by the author.

Results

Participants talked about 9 major aspects of their kink experiences. These 9 themes can be organised under the overarching categories of ‘kink in praxis’ and ‘kink in public’. Some themes within the ‘kink in practice’ category are interrelated, or participants articulate those themes as overlapping in some way – for example, whether participants perceive public play parties to be safe would intersect the ‘events’ and ‘safety’ themes – but each theme remains distinct with its own unique properties.

‘Kink in practice’ incorporates the following themes:

- Kink and the kinky community
- Events and playing in public
- Safety, and when things go wrong
- Communication and relationships
- Kink identities and origins
- The invisible ‘others’: Disability and ethnicity in kink

‘Kink in public’ incorporates the following themes:

- Mainstreaming kink
- Media representations of kink
- Vanilla assumptions about kink and kinksters

Each theme will be explored in greater depth under its own sub-heading. Each sub-heading starts with one or several quotes from participants that are captured and reproduced verbatim.

Kink and the kinky community

Sarah: My friend said to me once that it's kind of like an addiction. Once you get it under your skin you just- can't forget about it. And it's very true. The more you play, the harder it is to forget about it and just- become a vanilla again.

George: Basically the scene or the community covers *everything* that isn't covered by, social norms. And... the... social expectations of how a person is supposed to live day-to-day from teenage through to old age.

Roslyn: I don't think kink or BDSM to *me* is not what it is to other people. To other people it seems to me it's like their religion, or... their... whole meaning of their life. And to me, it's like, it's *not* that. And I don't really think it is maybe- maybe for you it is, maybe for you it's not, you know, what's gonna happen when you find out it isn't the be-all and end-all of everything? You're still gonna have a shitload of problems. As we all do.

The excerpts above are just some of the ways in which participants have voiced how they conceptualise kink and the kinky community. Other than being an addiction or a religion, kink has also been described as an escape from the banalities of everyday life (in Roslyn's case, only a temporary escape, but I have certainly met other practitioners for whom their everyday lives seem to be the temporary respite from kink), a spiritual, therapeutic or cathartic experience, a performance (at least at public events), a hobby, and so on. One of the most commonly recurring concepts used in conjunction with kink is 'journey' – participants continuously referred to their time spent doing kink as their 'kink journey' and they shared various details of their journey at varying lengths, including: how they first found out about kink, the kinds of toys and activities they experimented with, the roles they have adopted, the people they have met and played with over the months or years, the phases of community involvement they have cycled through, and how they have attained personal growth over time.

Kink is often described by participants as a very personal journey – it is seen as a long-term iterative, explorative process through which kinksters gain cumulative experience in different scenarios with different partners. They experiment with different fetishes and fantasies and may gradually acquire a range of skillsets to do with mastering certain activities e.g. psychological domination, predicament bondage, learning how to throw/crack a whip and so on. Over time people may find that their identities shift – while exploring different roles throughout their kink journey, someone might transition from being a top to a bottom or vice versa, or find that either role is enjoyable – or they may lose interest in something they used to enjoy, only to find rejuvenated interest in that same activity with a different partner a few years later. There is a fluidity inherent in kink regardless of how many years one has been a kinkster that makes the nature of an interaction dependent on time, place, the equipment immediately available, the individual’s frame of mind, the partner, and a myriad of other factors outside that individual’s control. This flexibility almost ensures that no two play sessions are ever the same.

Despite this, when people meet for the first time at a kink event, they tend to introduce themselves with labels that seem to signify stable identities and traits. Though it is common to hear people sheepishly admit that they are still exploring, do not yet know what they identify as or what kinds of kinks they enjoy, snippets of conversations like “Oh no, I’m definitely a Dom” or “I love canes – I’m a real pain slut” are equally if not more commonplace. This is in part because if one wishes to find someone new to negotiate a play session or scene with, beyond traditional requirements like personality compatibility or ‘chemistry’, that potential play partner has to identify in a complementary role – a top looks

for a bottom, a Dom looks for a sub, a Daddy looks for a babygirl/boy, and so on. “I’m a sub 75% of the time but I guess I could dominate the right person if the circumstances are right and I’m really turned on and I really put my mind to it” complicates the process of finding instant role compatibility even if such a statement might be more accurate²².

This overly-simplified self-identification process is not without its complications. The BDSM subculture has its own language and norms, but its taxonomies are not concretely, universally defined. What one person means by ‘dominant’ and ‘submissive’ may be slightly different from someone else. As illustrated below, Anya had perceived dominance in terms of physicality – being physically overpowered, pinned down, having rough sex and so on – based on a past experience, and she had assumed that all the dominant-identifying men she would meet would be equally physically dominant. However, James was more psychologically domineering, in terms of setting up and planning a complex scene, being in control of the situation and giving directives/orders. Exerting one’s dominance in a scene by, for example, ordering a submissive to do something that makes him/her feel self-conscious, embarrassed and/or humiliated is very different from being flung onto a bed and having rough sex.

Anya: The guy who actually- who I met through a dating site, uhm... who introduced me to FetLife, he... he was quite kinky. Although he doesn’t- he’s not in the scene. Uhm, and he’s- he’s quite- he’s quite physically dominant? Uhm... but he doesn’t really do any of the, kind of, you know, the mind games, and, you know, none of that kind of “Oh,” you know, “make me a cup of tea, slave” and that kind of shit. Do you know what I mean? It’s just, that’s kind of- It’s just sex with him, it’s just, kind of, the- a way that he has sex, you know?

²² This is not to say that you would never hear someone explain their identity this way, only that it is far less common than a simple blanket statement, “I’m a Dom” or “I’m a sub”. Certainly as relationships evolve between people, they are more likely to disclose the nuanced ways in which they make sense of their identities and preferences.

Interviewer: Right.

Anya: He does it in a very physically domineering way and I- I really love that. So when I- I met James, I thought, “Yes, he is Dom, that’s how he’s gonna be, he’s gonna throw me down” and stuff, and kind of, when he *wasn’t*, that made me probably more like, “Fucking come on! What’re you doing?!” [laughter] But when I spoke to him about it, he said, for him, being dominant was about being in control, and kind of, calling the shots and stuff. Whereas I- he said to me, “I- I ne- I got the feeling that you didn’t like me completely calling the shots and me completely being in control.” And I thought, “well, *no*, but, if it’s a ques- [laughter] if it’s a question of “Am I enjoying this?” Or, you know, “Is that, you know, is that hitting the spot?” kind of thing. Uhm, does ‘submissive’ mean I just, kind of, lie there and go, you know, and just take it? Or... you know, do I go... “no, flip me over and do- do this,” or you know, [laughter] “A little to the left, a little to the right”

Interviewer: [laughter]

Anya: You know, to *me*, that felt- not saying anything felt weird. But I think maybe, maybe our- maybe our definitions of what ‘submissive’ and what ‘Dominant’ were were very different.

Interviewer: Mmm.

Anya: And that’s why we couldn’t, kind of, gel.

Beyond role compatibility, role *definition* compatibility plays a crucial role in a successful scene that is enjoyed by all parties. Thus, while the clichéd contracts featured in stories like *Venus in Furs* may not be overly common, there is often some form of negotiation that takes place before a scene detailing what people would like to do, what their limits are, whether those limits can be pushed, pre-existing medical conditions, safewords to stop a scene immediately, and so on. This is not necessarily a formal process – people can and do formulate scenes and discuss their expectations over a drink, or moments immediately before a session – but having a detailed conversation beforehand does minimise the kinds of misunderstandings experienced by Anya and James.

When Newmahr's (2011) participants speak of finding and entering the BDSM community as 'coming home', there is a notion that the BDSM community is a place separate from 'the real world' or 'the world out there', where kinksters no longer feel as if they are abnormal, depraved perverts who are alone in their desires. Testament to the personal nature of kink, the BDSM community perpetuates the ideals of inclusivity, tolerance and acceptance of all individuals and their inclinations, using techniques such as the mantra "your kink is not my kink" (henceforth referred to as YKINMK). YKINMK is often invoked as a reminder or means of chastising those who make negative comments about kinks they might personally find strange or repulsive (usually the less common types, such as anything involving drawing blood or bodily fluids/waste). However, as demonstrated by the quotation below, YKINMK is not without its complications.

Sarah: I would never try anything along the lines of scat? Or urination. Or any of that. Or vomit- I don't even know how that's a fetish. I don't even *know* how peeing on someone or shitting on someone or vomiting on someone is a fetish. I really don't understand. And I know it's the whole 'your kink is not my kink' but, really? *Really?*

It seems that YKINMK either might hold true only for those activities and fetishes that are 'easier to understand' (by virtue of some unexplained variable such as popularity or direct relatedness to genital stimulation, perhaps), or it is simply a politically correct term that holds no inherent significance – a throwaway comment designed to alleviate the fears and anxieties of someone with a rare and unusual fetish. Regardless, as a result of the lack of validity behind the phrase, one of the critiques that many participants voiced about the local BDSM scene was that it was very judgemental – to a fault.

Interviewer: Mmm, did you have a particular reason for not getting involved with the community so much? Or did you just... didn't have time or?

Helen: It was a decision I made way back when, uhm... and then, Nate and I went to a couple of munches.

Interviewer: Mmhmm.

Helen: Also Joanne and I went to a munch, and Nate and... Nate was involved with my- OK, with a lady who was married to a man who was *my* client – the husband was my client – as... I'd put him almost as transgender, but he was a crossdresser, OK. So we all turned up to this particular munch, crossdresser husband, wife, who was Nate's lover, and me as a Mistress, and the lady who ran the munch... threw her toys out of the cot, because she didn't like crossdressers, nor did she want anybody- And I must admit, he was very feminine. You could've, kind of, you'd have to second-look to actually- he'd done- been doing this for like 20 years, so he was *really together*. And he really used to look *good*. And you would kinda have to kinda look- nobody else really no- and she just went *off her trolley*. So uhm... yeah. That- that's when a big hiccup occurred. I... came home, realised the error of *my* ways, in as much as "Mmm... maybe I should not have taken them," but there was nothing in the munch *rules* that said 'don't bring crossdressers'. In actual fact it said it was extremely encompassing of *every* fetish, whatever whatever. So I came back and I was naughty, and I got on the internet and made a blurb in her... particular- group, and said, "I was very disappointed with the way she had handled-" 'cause she asked us to leave. So that's when I made the choice, "Agh, been there, done that, no more of this shit-face crap," uhm, and he was devastated, Nate was [seething gesture], heh, you know, the wife didn't give a shit, but anyway. Uhm, and- and I just thought, "Nah! I'm not going to put anybody through that anymore."

Interviewer: Mmhmm.

Helen: And uhm... yeah, so that- that's when I- and that was *years* ago, so I decided "No. That's it. No more."

One participant, Roslyn, said she felt *more* comfortable talking to her non-kinky friends about her job (doing sex work, which was decriminalised in New Zealand in 2003 but remains stigmatised, and is something that Roslyn is fiercely private about) than she did with kinky people, believing that kinksters would treat her with derision. Roslyn was not the only sex worker I interviewed, but she did have the strongest perceptions of negativity and bias within the community.

Roslyn: And uhm... most- pretty much all of my friends are vanilla. They know what I'm like and they know what I do and I actually feel more comfortable talking to them

about it than I actually do with kinky people. They just think it's kind of- interesting and funny. But they don't judge me.

Notions of the BDSM scene as an all-inclusive, welcoming and accepting 'home' with tenets like YKINMK are clearly incongruent with Helen's and Roslyn's experiences, both of whom have either felt alienated or been ostracised from the community at some point in their lives. These negative attitudes that are mostly aimed towards the more controversial, 'extreme' or 'edgy' kinks parallels the media in its inclination to portray 'acceptable', 'lite' forms of kink – naughty erotic activities that 'spice up the bedroom', rope bondage, or leather and foot fetishists for example – while the more 'unacceptable', 'hardcore' forms of kink – such as single-tail whipping, racial and incest roleplaying, or hook suspensions – remain largely sequestered from public view and relegated to spectacles that can only be witnessed in dark corners of dimly-lit dungeons or exotic documentaries. Through this, it appears that the popular kinds of narratives that are disseminated through the public sphere – the tabloid scandals, *Secretary* and the *Fifty Shades of Grey* franchise – have some degree of influence over the way kinksters and non-kinksters make sense of BDSM and the BDSM subculture as a whole. The proliferation of 'lite' kink in public consciousness is an implicit endorsement that seeks to legitimise some palatable forms of kink as they become increasingly adopted practices in (heteronormative, implicitly privileged) couples' bedrooms, whilst decrying other activities and proclivities as bizarre, perverse, abnormal, violent – thus solidifying their status as marginalised and deviant. In response to growing public tolerance of these 'lite' kinky activities, BDSM practitioners have also in turn delineated boundaries along its 'safe, sane and consensual' lines to vilify and marginalise the more 'extreme' practices that are, in particular, borderline unsafe (such as erotic asphyxiation, or anything involving drawing blood), thus further ostracising the minority of BDSM practitioners with more 'extreme' predilections (N. Richardson, Smith, & Werndly, 2013). It is unlikely that BDSM

practitioners are actively choosing certain individuals within the community and casting them out, nor is the community doing this with the intention of legitimising BDSM spaces and practices in the public eye – rather, this demarcation of what is ‘extreme’ and what is ‘kinky fun’ within the community is reflective of changing attitudes *outside* of the community regarding what types of BDSM activities are simply ‘putting the excitement back into our (stable, committed, long-term) relationship’ and what types are ‘sick and twisted’.

So how open and welcoming is this newfound ‘home’ for local kinksters? Participants also placed greater emphasis on the idea that kink is a fun activity that ought not to be taken too seriously. Even though some interviewees were able to give a very detailed exegesis in their interviews of more specialist kinks – such as how to treat different materials of rope (is hemp better than synthetic, how long do you have to soak it for when you first buy it, what to do if someone gets blood on it, etc.), parts of the body that are unsafe to hit with a flogger/whip and how to treat these types of paraphernalia after a session with medicalised language like ‘femoral artery’ and ‘blood-borne pathogens’, and how to do electricity play safely – people who take kink ‘too seriously’ are often mocked with titles like ‘Mr. Uber Dom’ and ‘twu²³ sub’. Evidently, participants are distinguishing between taking the *technical* aspects of kink seriously (which is celebrated and encouraged) from taking *roles* seriously. This is in part because of the distinction that people are making between ‘extreme’ and ‘lite’ kink explained in the previous paragraph, but also could be because the ‘Mr. Uber Doms’ are generally perceived to be young (and therefore inexperienced), arrogant, domineering and overbearing men who are looking to prey on sexually available vulnerable young women, while the ‘twu subs’ are perceived to be emotionally unstable doormats who would take any opportunity to relinquish responsibility over every aspect of their lives and are critical of other (more

²³ A cutesy, childish way of saying ‘true’.

emotionally and mentally resilient) ‘fake’ submissives. Ironically, by emphasising that how one chooses to interpret one’s preferred role(s) is as personal as one’s kink journey and there is no ‘one true way’ of doing the full range of available top and bottom roles, those who denounce ‘Uber Doms’ and ‘twu subs’ are invalidating these particular ways of doing dominance and submission respectively. The ‘Uber Doms’ and ‘twu subs’ are derided in favour of those who take a more casual and light-hearted approach to their chosen kink identities and roles. This also calls into question how one can have a ‘your kink is not my kink’ attitude if there are prescribed ways of doing dominance and submission.

To further problematise the idealisation of the scene as an open and welcoming place with open-minded kinksters, Roslyn observed that the Auckland scene she perceived 4 years ago when she first entered was dominated by an older, more conservative crowd, and she felt affronted and disappointed by the reality that the scene was full of ‘ordinary people’ as opposed to those that she had assumed would be more liberal (there is a noticeable increase in the presence of a younger crowd today and there is a sizeable Auckland TNG (standing for both The New Guard and The Next Generation) group for under 35s).

Roslyn: I think- the thing that shock- I was really really shocked by- and this is just my own experience from 4 years ago, and these people who are older, it was like- these people are so inherently conservative. It was like... “Do you all vote National²⁴ or something?” You know.

Interviewer: [laughter]

Roslyn: And I kind of thought- no that’s what it felt like?

Interviewer: Yeap. Yeap.

²⁴ The National Party is a one of New Zealand’s major political parties with centre-right policies (the other major party with centre-left tendencies being the Labour Party).

Roslyn: It was sort of like, “You mean you’re trying to tell me that you... think that... you have the right to, I don’t know, dress up in rubber and smear yourself with peanut butter but nobody else is allowed to live in this country unless they speak perfect English?” It’s like,

Interviewer: [laughter]

Roslyn: You know? No, that’s how it felt.

Interviewer: Yeap yeap yeap.

Roslyn: ‘cause I remember people making some really racist comments, and I’m just thinking “What the fuck?” like

Interviewer: [laughter]

Roslyn: I don’t give a shit what you do in the bedroom, and I don’t care- I just don’t care, you know. Everyone has a- but for you to do this and expect to be... have this expectation that you’re going to be accepted or tolerated, at least, y- these- these people have these really inherently conservative- I mean, I am, you know, what I would call inherently conservative ideals, I mean I did meet someone a- like, last time round last year, who just said, “Well, you know, you get dickheads everywhere” and I think “Yeah, that was actually the point?” Because I think I kind of had high expectations of the kind of people that I would meet

Interviewer: Right.

Roslyn: But really they’re probably just the same as anybody else. But just *because* they were into BDSM I thought they would have these certain mindsets which a lot of them didn’t. So, I guess in a way I was sort of setting myself up for a disappointment anyway.

The judgemental nature of the community was not the only gripe that participants had – some were adamant that the local BDSM scene did not constitute a ‘community’ but simply a conglomeration of people who happen to have a singular shared interest in kink. People are involved in different communities around the world to different levels of immersion and commitment – fragmented communities with fragmented desires has rendered the term ‘community’ in its truest sense to be fragile when it is applied to BDSM practitioners (Langdridge, 2006a). Nevertheless, at the same time, there were positive points that some participants made about the local scene. It was difficult and in some cases impossible for

participants to summarise and/or make general comments about the nature of the local scene, so they were often asked about their positive and negative impressions and experiences within the community after a lead-in broad question such as ‘What is the scene like?’

Interviewees included event organisers, venue owners and staff. George, a member of this category, made the following comment about the overall characteristics of the local scene:

George: I think- [sigh] so for my experience through, through uh, through the venue that I... am associated with and, and through the event, that’s associated with that venue, uhm, in my experience, in, in, in Auckland city there’s *probably* only about [sigh] Oh, maybe... [sigh] Maybe 200 to 300 publicly active uhm... folk that are, that are interested or involved with the community? And relatively speaking, that’s- that’s tiny, like that’s really small, and as such, I think it- it- it doesn’t allow for very much anonymity and certainly means you’ve gotta be careful about what you say and do because otherwise it will turn around and bite you really quickly.

Interviewer: Mmm.

George: ‘cause of the accountability with such a small community. Uhm, but in saying that, the folk that I’ve, encountered through the public events, uhm, are... relative to the community, really outspoken, happy in public, uhm... generally pretty at ease with the people they are. Uhm, there- there is a moderate turnover? So you- you do see people come and go, uhm, reasonably frequently. But oftentimes my- my take on that is because... a lot of the time, folk that ex- that are exploring the community, *especially* through the public events, aren’t entirely sure what their- where their interests lie anyway, so it- oftentimes it’s just an experimentation process,

Interviewer: Mmm.

George: Where they’re trying to find out more about themselves or- or how they integrate, in a new community.

Interviewer: Mmm.

George: Uhm, there’s not a massive turnover? But it’s not a massively popular uhm... scene. So I think it’s... it’s a fairly high turnover relative to the scene? But it’s- it’s a fairly slow turnover relative to pop culture or- or other things that are going on nowadays.

A list of positive and negative aspects about the local scene can be found in Table 1. Several list items seem contradictory, such as some participants claiming that the scene is a supportive space while others claim that there will be people who will blame the victims of any transgression and speak up for/defend predators. This is detrimental to victims of cases where consent may have been violated, but this is intended to reflect different participants having different experiences with different people. With the obvious caveat that some people are more heavily involved in the scene than others, it is important to note that, as some of my more transient interviewees like Brendan and Dora have observed, the scene in other parts of New Zealand like the Waikato/Bay of Plenty region, Christchurch and Wellington are different from Auckland due to factors such as community size, venue and event availabilities, and differing kink interests. Auckland has the largest community in New Zealand even though it only sports 2-300 regulars, and it has the most number of venues and greatest frequency of events. In comparison, as of early 2014 some regions such as the Tasman Bay do not even have one public venue that is sufficiently equipped to host a public play party. While Auckland does not have a distinct ‘kink interest’ that it is known for, Wellington for example is known to be more rope-oriented – there are more people with rope experience living there and there are more rope workshops, seminars and demonstrations in Wellington. The current states of different regional BDSM scenes throughout New Zealand are not homogenous enough to make overall comments about, let alone generalise to communities overseas. Ergo, the list in Table 1 should only be read in reference to the Auckland scene.

Table 1

Positive and negative aspects of the Auckland BDSM scene.

Positives	Negatives
1. The community is open, accepting and welcoming of newcomers – people readily offered advice, resources and information.	1. The openness of the community has left some feeling vulnerable because predators can easily enter the community and are difficult to detect and eject.
2. People are respectful at public events – partly due to event etiquette, expectations and guidelines that people were well-versed in.	2. Some organisers have felt burdened by intensive community involvement, feeling that event-goers are not supportive or not pulling their weight to making events successful.
3. The community is a safe space to meet and discuss BDSM topics and issues with like-minded people.	3. Kink is the only thing that people have in common – the community is otherwise fragmented, prejudiced and judgemental.
4. Due to the small nature of the community, it is able to police itself through peoples’ reputations – you can avoid unsavoury characters and warn others of potentially dangerous players.	4. The community is small and this has resulted in cliques forming with a lot of drama and gossip – ‘it’s like high school’.
5. Events feel safe and people are safety-conscious. Any rule violators were promptly warned or ejected from the venue.	5. Friendships within the community are shallow – people only meet and talk at events and “friends” from the scene are usually not accessible outside of events.
6. People are supportive – you can talk to someone who understands what you’re going through without ‘coming out’ to a non-kinkster and get advice/support.	6. The community is not supportive of victims when things go wrong; people tend to take sides because of the cliques they are in, predators have friends who act as white knights and victim-blaming is rampant.

These multifaceted critiques of the local BDSM scene do not favour a dichotomous approach – it does not offer an easy, concise answer as to whether the community is ‘good’ or ‘bad’, whether membership is beneficial or harmful, whether it is an open and accepting place or intolerant and judgemental. Rather, it offers nuanced understandings of how kinksters navigate their shared social spaces based on the different aspects of the community they have individually experienced.

As evidenced also in Weiss's (2011) ethnographic work in the San Francisco Bay Area BDSM scene, kink is not without its discrepancies and contradictions. Where she had highlighted inconsistencies along broad dimensions such as race and class, this study shows that there are inconsistencies at a micro-level as well, on issues such as identity stability/fluidity, role definition, accepting/judgemental and supportive/unhelpful peers, fun/serious kink, and so on. One person's perception of one particular instance in a specific place and time is only one beam of light refracted through a prism and reflects only the subjective, perceived nature of a given phenomenon.

Events and playing in public

Interviewer: Do you go [to kink events] to play at all?

Sandra: No. Fuck no. No I would not. No I would not play. Uhm... [sigh] I don't- I don't feel comfortable or I don't see the point in... putting myself out there in front of all these people to- for them to watch me do... s... I don't know, to watch me do whatever was gonna happen. I don't- yeah I'd rather do it privately. ... The public thing, it's just... I don't know. Who're you trying to please? Who are you trying to, look good in front of?

Interviewer: [laughter] So there's like an element of like, sh... 'show-offness' or like, something to prove-

Sandra: Well yeah!

Interviewer: -in a public thing. Yeah. Yeah.

Sandra: I think so, or trying to be like, outdo- outdo someone else or... you know. That's what I mean, it's like high school, it's- the scene is so much like high school. ... I think it's a lot trying to... look good in front of other people. The 'publicness' of it. Mmm.

Interviewer: Mmhmm.

Sandra: ... But it's quite entertaining like going to things and just watching [laughter] Watching the stuff that goes on 'cause it's- it's crazy. The dynamics of things are just... ..How do you explain it... .. I don't wanna say pathetic [laughter] But a little bit. Pathetic. Uh... I think it's all like a head- I think it's all a headfuck. ... Yeah I think... the not-white people are more... conservative. With it.

Interviewer: Mmm.

Sandra: If they're into that. ... They wouldn't go to, public places to do it. Which is what I can't- understand either. Uhm, which is what I can't accept, or something like that. I get it, but I don't. And I'm not into it. Keep that shit to the bedroom you know [laughter] Keep it- keep it to yourself. Keep it private. That's it. White people are show ponies.

This extended interview transcript excerpt with Sandra entails her perception of public play parties. A young woman in her 20s belonging to an ethnic minority group, her views on kink events and playing in public are intrinsically related to both her perceptions of what behaviours and activities are acceptable in public (and do not lose whatever intrinsic value they may hold by being showcased) and what should be kept private, as well as how she perceives the predominantly white community. I suspect that my being Asian allowed her to be more forthcoming with her critique of 'white people' (otherwise she may not have liked to call me a show pony or imply that I was one), but minority groups in kink, namely in terms of ethnicity and disability, will be discussed more comprehensively in a later section. There are people who share Sandra's view that public play is disingenuous, but as my participants are largely recruited from the available pool of public event attendees, it is understandably an unpopular opinion.

Auckland does not have a sufficient number of regular event attendees to sustain a solely BDSM-oriented club, but there are two swingers clubs and one gay cruise club in particular that have the necessary space and equipment to host a public play party, and they host the core local public play parties monthly or on alternate months. There are also annual special events like slave auctions and fetish balls. Additionally, there will be other kinkster-organised events – workshops, munches, semi-public and private play parties at peoples' residences, informal social gatherings (birthday parties, movie nights, pizza and porn nights,

board/card/tabletop game nights to name a few) and so on – thus ensuring that Auckland has at least one event every week. Even though there are few venues, participants have noted that they have different experiences at different venues, so it is not uncommon to see the same regulars circulating around different events each week.

The majority of the kink community is wired. One of the first questions you would inevitably be asked by a stranger at an event is what your username is on ‘Fet’ (shortened from FetLife (www.fetlife.com)) – a FetLife handle is a safe way of starting a conversation as some event attendees are wary of giving real names or other personal information. FetLife, which has been colloquially described as a kinky version of Facebook, is a social network site where people can upload photos and videos, read and write online journal entries, publicly or privately chat to each other, and so on. While FetLife serves as an effective virtual space for communication, community policing and instruction/learning, the majority of my interviewees stated that their primary use of FetLife is as an online event calendar, because many of the local events that are open to the public are advertised through Fetlife.

When asked about their experience of kink events, nearly half of the participants spoke fondly and at length about their recollection of when they attended their first event. Many did not know what to expect and held assumptions fuelled largely by media imagery of anonymous group sexual activities, intense whipping sessions, faceless men sporting the pervasive BDSM-symbolic gimp mask led by aloof dominatrices in heels and corsets, aesthetic rope bondage/suspension, and so on, and were either delighted or disappointed (or

sometimes both) to find that the BDSM scene was full of ‘normal people’²⁵. The excerpt below with Anya is taken from after she describes her struggle with (the limits of) identifying herself as ‘dominant’ or ‘submissive’, and while it does not contain her description of her first event experience in detail (where she did have some of the abovementioned expectations and had refused to go without an acquaintance who was already established in the scene), it gives some insight into her becoming accustomed to the scene after the initial shock when she first started going to events.

Anya: And people even when you first come into the scene, and you go to an event. I remember a girl turn around to me and said ‘So what are you into?’ And I just went [shocked/mouth agape], and like, ‘uh- I don’t know...’ And actually, that first event, was, was kind of such an eye-opener for me, and so terrifying, that when she said that, the words that crossed my mind but didn’t come out of my mouth was “I don’t know, but fucking *not this!*”

Interviewer: [laughter]

Anya: “Because this is *weird!*” [laughter] Because it was- I was, so, just sitting there, just *freaking out* [laughter] Like, “this is so- everybody here is *mental*” [laughter] “This is scaring the shit out of me.” But then, you- I suppose you hone in on little things that you kind of go “ooo that’s interesting,” and uhm... And I think- one of the things I really- actually really love about the scene is how quickly you look at- you go from going “OH MY GOD WHAT THE FUCK?” to “oh, yeah,” [laughter] “yeah there’s this person dressed as a gimp over there.”

Interviewer: [laughter]

Anya: “Anyway, what did you have for tea?” you know, how quickly you just kind of

Interviewer: Yeap.

Anya: Become acclimatised to it and become desensitised to it? I think that’s cool. I love that about the scene. It’s wicked.

²⁵ These are people who are predominantly white and aged between 30 and 70; people who have jobs that span across the blue- and white-collar spectrum – the unemployed, self-employed, university students, pensioners, lawyers, truck drivers, teachers, managers – and people who may not come in sets of monogamous couples in conventional long-term relationship arrangements, but who nonetheless have mortgages to pay and children to raise.

Over time, however, after attending several more events and talking to other kinksters, Anya gradually became more comfortable within the scene. A notable observation that can be made about all the interviewees is that they are comfortable with the scene and with themselves. They have spent time grappling with their kinky inclinations, and have been to enough events that they are comfortable with being kinky, comfortable with their bodies, and comfortable with being intimate with each other in public.

Martin: And even- even that first night, I remember going in there and... feeling comfortable. Like, being in there and everyone was just letting it all hang out, you know? There was nothing, hidden anymore. Just- just on that night. And feeling so at home and feeling so relaxed and just- didn't even need to take my ecstasy [laughter] I felt so comfortable, so just- buzzing. Happy. Talking to everybody, and so much was happening.

[Later on the interview]

Interviewer: Mmm. ... So what do you like about events? What do you kinda get out of them?

Martin: ...last night, in the spa pool. There's a great big pile of completely naked bodies all just touching each other, cuddle piles. It's my favourite thing. [laughter] I love that. [laughter] Just... everyone not caring, not- no- no hang-ups about their belly or,

Interviewer: [laughter]

Martin: The size of their tits or their flabby thighs or- everyone's just get naked. Jump in. It's fantastic. [laughter] It's... I love that. I love the whole, just letting go, let it all hang out, just, just do what you feel. Wear as much or as little as you feel. It's uhm. If you wanna... You have a conversation with someone it's as likely as something... okay not as likely it's not, maybe- I suppose, but. You can say, "Well, you know, so you're- so you're new here and you- you're watching the spanking, you know. How'd you like me to- to take you out there and lift your dress up and spank your bum?"

Interviewer: Mmhmm.

Martin: And that's a perfectly acceptable question [laughter]

The nature of kink – relationships as they are displayed, activities as they are showcased – would be different in a play party setting compared to in the privacy of kinksters’ bedrooms. Even if kinksters claim that their cognizance of the presence of a transient audience during a public play session is merely for spatial awareness/safety reasons (so as to avoid hitting a bystander with the recoil of a whip, for example), there is an element of performativity that is inherent in public play. While it should be stressed that, in line with Newmahr’s (2011) observation, with few exceptions a scene is not a theatrical display put on to entertain an audience but is almost always done for the pleasure of the ‘energy exchange’ between the participants involved. The exhibitionistic aspect may heighten the excitement or serve to exacerbate humiliation. Participants are not completely oblivious to the fact that they are producing sounds and imagery that are being consumed, reinterpreted and often softly discussed by the people watching them.

One such exception is explained by Peter below. Peter is one of fewer than five crossdressers who regularly go to Auckland events. As illustrated by Helen’s account of trying to bring a crossdressing friend to a munch, crossdressers do not always feel welcome in the supposedly open and welcoming pansexual scene. He had struggled with his crossdresser identity for years, had gone through cycles of purging and re-amassing a sizeable collection of feminine clothing, and has come to embrace crossdressing as being an avenue where he can express himself across the gender spectrum. Of course it is gratifying for Peter to wear anything he fancies in private, but wearing women’s clothing in public (albeit enclosed in a bubble of relative safety that kink-positive spaces can provide, where he is far less likely to attract unwanted attention or be chastised/ridiculed) is an especially important, liberating experience for him.

Peter: I enjoy the... people on the voyeurism side, I enjoy the exhibition side – that’s probably part of my crossdressing thing too; there’s no use being hidden in a darkened room, crossdressed, ‘cause that’s just one thing for *you* and nothing for anyone else. So sharing the experience with others, is a big part of it.

Kink does not necessitate an audience in order to be a meaningful experience for participants, and kinksters could have more intimate, transcendent experiences away from public scrutiny, but being able to showcase the aesthetics of kink to others, be it through the effort made to dress up in a hyperfeminine outfit or sharing the photographs of the result of three hours of intricate ropework, can make it a self-affirming, liberating and gratifying experience.

Participants pointed out that this element of performativity in public play can be problematic in two notable ways. Firstly, with the example of impact play, some recipients may feel reluctant to ask to stop or be hit more lightly if there is an audience because they may feel they would be perceived as weak and/or they may be embarrassed. Within the community it is strongly argued that someone who cannot safeword in front of an audience should not be playing in public, but this does not stop people from doing so. Compounding this issue is that people are expected to be forthcoming and have negotiated their scene beforehand. An experienced top is unlikely to do any permanent damage even if the session went beyond the recipient’s pain threshold, thus, event monitors would be reluctant to stop this ongoing scene and the recipient would have had a less than pleasant experience at best, or suffered extensive, deep bruising (or worse injuries) possibly requiring months of recovery. The second issue related to event attendees’ perception is best described below by Dora. She identifies as a female dominant (femdom or femme domme) and has difficulty exploring other facets of kink she is interested in (she later talks about her tentative foray into

daddy/babygirl-archetype relationship territory) in public because her wanting to display an image and an aura of dominance would be incongruent with the other facets of kink that she wanted to explore.

Dora: So there was- and there was a woman there that I have a lot of, uhm, desire for, I guess? Uh, that I know on FetLife. And I saw her flogging someone else and every part of my... bones wanted to go and ask her to do that, but uhm... I struggle with being in that kind of bottom, submissive... place in public. ... So my goal this year is to play in public and just get my needs met and not worry about [laughter] what people think. It's stupid. Yeah. Yeah. Should be interesting. ... And I think that same importance happens around uhm... my dominance. And that's why I f- I- wouldn't... play publicly in a kind of- what would be seen as a submissive role? Even though I might quite like to be in that, situation. So for me, being flogged in public- I- I wouldn't want someone to read that as me being submissive.

This perhaps seems to be a peripheral concern, but events are widely conceived of as safe spaces where purportedly anyone can explore their inner desires, and it is limiting to be viewed, identified and labelled by others based on one or two public displays. Moreover, this may become more of an issue in a smaller community. Performing different roles in a public space inevitably changes the dynamics of the interactions with the other event attendees. The rigidity of role identification and how it opens and closes potential avenues of connections with others renders one's image in the scene as more important than one's flexibility and desire to experiment with different kinks, roles and identities.

Participants consider events in general to be semi-public spaces²⁶ where attendees can explore kink with like-minded people. Anyone is welcome to attend a public play party but

²⁶ Public events technically allow anyone (apart from those who have been previously banned or media personnel who attend with the intention of writing a news story rather than developing their own kink identity) to attend, but usually event attendees find themselves surrounded by familiar faces with the occasional out-of-town couple/group and 3 or 4 first-timers.

there are rules and behavioural etiquette to follow; attendees are expected to be open-minded, safety-conscious and respectful to others. Universal explicit rules include not touching someone else (especially if they are undressed) or their equipment without their expressed permission, giving people in a scene enough space to do their activities without compromising anyone's safety, not interrupting someone else's scene unless in an emergency, and ceasing all activities once the agreed-upon or club safeword (usually 'red') is used. Implicit behavioural norms cover unacceptable behaviours like following topless young women around the venue, attempting to pressure someone to do a scene after they have declined, engaging in penetrative sexual activities without condoms (which are made freely available throughout the venue), or consuming too much alcohol²⁷. Events are closely monitored by organisers and venue staff²⁸. The overwhelming feedback from participants was that events are safe – safer than the average pub or nightclub where no one would be ejected for 'being creepy', alcohol would still be served to someone getting increasingly violent despite the law, and it would be impossible for a man or woman to walk through the venue naked without hearing a comment or being touched. The following quotations are just three of at least 15 instances where participants have explicitly talked about safety at events.

²⁷ In previous ethnographic observations of the North American BDSM scene, alcohol intake is often frowned upon or prohibited. Alcohol is a common sight at the licensed venues in Auckland (it is a socially accepted norm that some 'liquid courage' may be required to go up and introduce oneself to a stranger, or ask someone if they would be interested to do a scene) but anyone inebriated, being rowdy/rude and/or unable to control their actions are removed from the venue immediately.

²⁸ Unlike many other cities around the world, there are no designated 'dungeon monitors' in Auckland. However, venue owners have years of experience with BDSM and tend to prefer consulting other event attendees who are 'experts' in certain kinks if something looks unsafe in lieu of interrupting a scene. There is always someone who is first-aid certified attending an event and there are first-aid kits at every play party (even the private ones) in case someone does get injured. To date (end of 2014), there has been no incidents requiring calling an ambulance or the police at public play parties.

George: I mean, literally, uh, chicks can walk around naked, dudes can be swinging around, large implements, and, 9 out of 10, it's gonna be absolutely fine as long as people are in the right headspace or you're not just being a douchebag and wandering around, getting in everyone's way.

Anya: It never really feels sleazy or dangerous, or... like... yeah, it doesn't- it never feels like you're in a cattle market like, like I used to feel like when I was in a... in a nightclub, you know. And everyone's so fucking up about safe sex as well.

Tyler: But play parties, oh yeah. Mmm. Every party provides clean services, lubes, condom, uhm, you've got a room to yourself and your... uh, partner. And you can establish what you want to do well before the event. Uhm... you're never... entirely alone. If you do have a- "sorry this is not for me," and uh, and you tell somebody. And they will listen. The- the last thing anybody wants, for the community, is to be shown that they are faulty within that community. So yeah, there's a lot of caring, and that's not a bad thing.

Though kinksters may feel comfortable wearing little or no clothing at an event, overt sexual activities (such as penetrative sexual intercourse), while more common at the events hosted at the gay cruise club venue, remain a relatively rare occurrence. The first few hours of an event involves far more socialising than play, and often it is only after midnight that couples, triads or people in other relationship formations splinter off to find an available St. Andrew's cross or spanking bench to use. Intimacy between people is often reproduced through the intense energy exchange during a scene and the cuddling and coddling between participants after a scene (known as aftercare) rather than the explicit sexual displays which typify kinky pornography. As touched upon by Caitlin below, consent is crucial not just in BDSM but in any healthy interaction or relationship. Sex is not the only means of enjoying BDSM and part of policing attendees' personal safety at events is trying to ensure that no one is coerced into doing anything – sexual or otherwise – that they are uncomfortable or unwilling to do.

Caitlin: I don't, think that... I would be very- disappointed knowing that if anybody came down here and they just solely wanted BDSM, and got... pushed or coerced or- pressured into having to do something sexual after it. I would be, absolutely horrified and I would be... uhm, disappointed in myself that I wasn't able to stop that or see

that, uhm, and pick up on it and go “Look hey, you know, you’ve come down here to a kink event, you now don’t have to have that person bring you to orgasm.”

Interviewer: Mmm.

Caitlin: “If that’s not what you’re here for, then don’t do it.” It’s gotta be consensual. On both parties.

When addressing safety, the valid concern of potential peer pressure from friends to try more extreme activities did arise in two participants’ interviews, and people are susceptible to peer pressure in both public and private play parties. Peer pressure is not as easily detected by those monitoring events and, as such, usually requires someone to bring the situation to the party’s hosts’ attention. It would be impossible to enumerate all the instances where someone had been peer pressured into doing something they would ordinarily not consent to doing, but safety precautions would be in place for the actual activities themselves. Just because friends may have encouraged an unwilling person to ride a roller coaster does not make the roller coaster itself unsafe, though it does put the unwilling person in an uncomfortable position and it may also compromise the ability of that person to consent in a potentially dangerous situation in the future if they had been coerced previously.

Safety, and when things go wrong

Peter: But it’s about, being open and honest, with the people that you trust and, and it is a big thing in- this... the kink side of things, is trust. And when the trust goes, then everything turns to custard quite quickly.

Of the 21 people interviewed, 7 recounted incidents that had happened to them where they felt their personal safety had been compromised, and a further 3 described situations where

they may not have necessarily felt unsafe but they nonetheless felt uncomfortable in their scenarios. All 10 interviewees identify as female and the bad experiences were with male-identifying aggressors. There were more interviewees who could recount incidents that they had heard about happen to others, but these secondhand accounts tended to be vaguely described. Interestingly there was one male interviewee who spoke of personal safety. Martin, a white male in his mid-30s, admitted to having a ‘bulletproof syndrome’. He was confident that when he said ‘no’, he meant ‘no’ and no one could coerce or convince him otherwise.

Safety is evidently a major concern for kinksters, who already contend with the publicly-held notion that BDSM is violent and dangerous. Many BDSM activities come with their own sets of risks – anything that involves drawing blood or bodily fluid transfer could risk an infection/disease transmission, kidneys are particularly vulnerable to stray blows from a flogger/whip, inadequate ropework could cut off blood circulation or result in a fall in the case of rope suspension off the ceiling – but these risks are known to the participants involved, and they are managed and mitigated through safe practices (having rope shears within reach for example, or never leaving someone in a vulnerable position unattended), and more training/experience. The kinds of unsafe circumstances that interviewees described involve different kinds of risks. For instance, in the public sphere, chatting with someone online, meeting them at their house for the first time and allowing them to blindfold you and tie you up naked in their bedroom renders you nearly completely helpless, subject to the whims of a stranger and much more susceptible to harm than agreeing to be flogged by a stranger at a public event.

Anya: But sometimes when you do think about it, when you think about when, like,

when you get tied up and stuff and you think, “Jesus Christ, if I’m- you know [sigh] if I did go around to somebody’s house and they tied me up, they could fucking do anything to me.”

While there are some safety precautions that could be taken (arranging a safe call²⁹ is common practice), meeting strangers privately for the first time is highly discouraged within the BDSM community. Even at public events, many participants (especially the female-identifying ones) stated that they would not, under any circumstance, agree to do a scene with someone they are not familiar with. The opening quotation by Peter is about trust and its integral role in not only kink but any successful interaction, and trust cannot be forged overnight with a stranger one has met online.

Because there are event staff and concerned bystanders available at public events to intervene in a potentially dangerous situation, safety violations usually arise when a private scene has gone wrong. There are multiple factors involved, but common examples include:

- when consent was rescinded but the activity persisted or escalated in intensity
- an activity that was not negotiated in the pre-scene discussion or that was explicitly prohibited was suddenly introduced (especially when someone has been blindfolded and could not see what was coming, gagged and could not verbalise a response, or tied up and could not physically react to the stimulus)
- an inexperienced top-identifying individual (the doer) undertaking an activity incorrectly, unsafely or making a mistake, resulting in the bottom-identifying individual (the recipient) getting injured

²⁹ A safe call is someone who knows your whereabouts and what you are doing with whom. They may be given additional information about the stranger as added safety precautions e.g. licence plate number, phone number or Facebook account name. They expect a phone call at a certain time informing them that everything has gone smoothly. If contact cannot be established, they can follow up with the stranger, or inform the police.

- when the bottom-identifying individual has not disclosed or has forgotten to disclose a previous injury or medical condition and the top-identifying individual did an activity which exacerbated the pre-existing condition
- when alcohol, marijuana or other substances have been ingested and rational judgement and/or motor functions have been impaired, resulting in the quality of someone's consent being compromised, or injury in cases where physical motor control and coordination has significantly deteriorated.

Of the 7 incidents previously mentioned, 3 involved severe beatings, 2 involved penetrative sexual activities, 1 experienced two tumultuous abusive relationships, and 1 – the only incident that had significant legal involvement – involved pervasive stalking and blackmail. That eventuated in the perpetrator publicising her BDSM inclinations and the interviewee's marriage subsequently being dissolved. While these women were very forthcoming and willing to share their anecdotes with me and others in the BDSM community, apart from the stalked/blackmailed woman who had positive feedback about law enforcement, the others did not generally see the police as a viable option. Margaret (now in her 40s), met a man online years ago (in her 30s), proceeded to go out and have dinner with him, drank a lot of alcohol during the meal, and later returned with him to his place where she was non-consensually beaten all night. She reflected upon her experience as follows.

Interviewer: Would you... in that situation, feel comfortable telling... people or like, calling the police or anything, or?

Margaret: No. No. Definitely not. So, I told... one of my friends, my- my kink friends. And he was just- really concerned. Wanted to come around, take photos, uhm, go to the police and stuff like that and it's just like, I just... no. I di- I just couldn't. I couldn't- ha- having, you know, experience of... vanilla friends uhm who had rape experiences uhm in the past, it's a really really unpleasant process? And... it's just you know, I could just think of all about online interactions being used as evidence

against me that “Yes this was consensual and blah blah blah blah blah,” it was just- just in the too hard basket.

Interviewer: Mmm.

Margaret: I, I just wouldn't want to put myself through it. If it was a vastly more serious? I mean it- it was pretty horrible, but it wasn't... you know. I was okay.

Interviewer: Mmm.

Margaret: Vastly more horrible, then it- then I think I would have approached it differently, but. I just took- took it as a learning- learning curve. Mmm. Possibly *now*, I mean [sigh] this w- this was years ago and it... you know, I've just... I'm a lot more articulate and, you know, free- I'm free to talk about stuff like that, and... possibly now, I'd be able to... you know... be strong enough to say no, you know, no that was wrong and you know, really stand up... about it. But yeah back then I didn't- I didn't have the emotional tools to- to deal with it.

Because BDSM is a pleasure that is largely sequestered from public view, there appears to be a marked 'kinky' versus 'vanilla' distinction that may not be so pronounced in reality. BDSM practitioners have assumptions about what the police are and are not aware of, and their decision as to whether to pursue consent/safety violations through a legal channel is greatly influenced by what they believe the police's perceptions of BDSM are. If, for example, there is a commonly-held belief that the police are not aware that consent can be rescinded in the middle of a session, then any such consent violations are far less likely to be reported. As is often the case with rape, and compounded with the fear that the police would comb through private emails, phone interactions and FetLife accounts or clamp down on BDSM-catering establishments, BDSM-related incidents are underreported.

Because there may be barriers to getting law enforcement involved, some incidents are handled 'in-house' by the BDSM community. Advice can be sought from more experienced kinksters/community 'leaders', known perpetrators (especially those who have built an unsavoury reputation on preying on young women) are banned from events, and community

gossip steers people away from known consent violators. However, because the ‘community’ is a vestigial term for a group of people with shared kink interests, self-policing within the BDSM scene is not always effective. This was one of the critiques of the Auckland BDSM scene – that the community was not always supportive of victims. Jennifer, the woman who was stalked and blackmailed, was the only interviewee I corresponded with remotely through Google Documents and she wrote at length about her experience.

Jennifer: At some stage after I broke off contact with him, yes, he did resume contact with the mainstream kink community in Auckland. In fact he became a respected and well-regarded member of it, and was asked to run workshops and speak at events, etc. and that continued until close to the time of his death. I was distraught when a few years after he outed me I had a look at his website (which I had not done for ages, because it just upset me) and found he was running a workshop in Christchurch. I contacted the organiser, who said oh yes, he had heard ‘there was some sort of trouble’ (so yes, it was out there in the community) but that ‘everyone does things they’re not proud of at some time’. I think he did believe my story, but I felt pretty unsupported by his response.

While he was alive I did not feel safe anywhere on the social media. He had punished me pretty severely for trying to blow the whistle on him and he still had lots more ammunition he could have used - details about my kids etc.

As I have said, after he died 2½ years ago I discovered Fetlife and one of the first things I did was posted my sad story as a warning to others - not naming him, because he was dead and no longer a threat to anyone, and there were no identifying details at all, but just so that others could learn from my mistakes, in general terms.

Even couched in general terms, my story was identifiable to those in the kinky community who knew him. Immediately I got a message from a ‘very good friend’ of his who said ‘I must have been really frightened’ and that if it was any consolation, he deeply regretted what he had done. Well, ummm, okay, but I doubt they knew the whole story. He had apparently presented it to them as a ‘relationship gone wrong’. And in several years of stalking and emails, not ONCE did I get any indication he understood the gravity of what he had done, let alone a ‘sorry’. That would have been easy enough if he really was sorry, but I think he was still in denial about the whole thing. His emails were full of very weird self-justification and excuses. He did acknowledge that the outing letter had been sent, but said his sub had sent it. Oh, pull the other one.

I still find fond reminiscences about him on Fetlife, detailing happy parties and what a great guy he was etc etc and it makes my stomach turn. I am glad he died with friends around him and (apparently) regained his sanity and turned over a new leaf. But it is still upsetting when I wonder how much they knew, and when they knew it, and whether they ever considered there was a real living breathing person out there who they might have been able to save if they had dug deeper behind what he was telling them.

Exactly what they knew and when I don't know. I think that one day I will have to meet them face to face and ask them, because it is difficult for me to get closure not knowing.

Despite police and community involvement, what little that could have been done to ameliorate Jennifer's horrific experience had not been adequate. At the time of our conversation, she had since found a new partner with whom she can safely explore kink, but she strongly felt that the cumulative damages to various aspects of her personal life over the years by the perpetrator cannot be undone, and she remains ambivalent about the Dunedin community and the New Zealand BDSM scene as a whole.

'Coming out' as kinky is a contested issue within the scene, and one that every kinkster has to contend with at some point in their kink journey. There are different stages of 'coming out' – creating a FetLife account and reaching out to like-minded kinksters can be considered the first step in acknowledging one's kinky inclinations. Learning that one is not alone and being able to get support from others in a safe, kink-positive space can encourage people to come out outside of the internet. Some of my interviewees who have informed their family and close friends have had a positive reaction – people are inquisitive and curious about the scene, and they are supportive of my interviewees looking to explore different aspects of BDSM. Nevertheless, there are a significant number of kinksters who do not want to be outed – interviewees like Anne and Lea are insistent that they have no interest in others' sex lives;

why should others have an interest in theirs? – and there are norms around protecting other kinksters’ privacy. For example, it is expected that you do not acknowledge another kinkster if you happen to see them in a public space and they are with family or friends, as it would be difficult for them to explain how you became acquainted. Those who believed that being outed would negatively affect their lives tended not to disclose personal information like real names, job titles, information about their children, addresses, and so on, and are more likely to feel like they have to contend with the shame of self-mandated secrecy. Below, several participants voice their worries about the prospect of being outed by others. The first two, voiced by Anne and Anya, both concern kinksters finding out about their everyday lives rather than people from their everyday life finding out that they are kinky.

Anne: Uhm... I’m not worried. The fear isn’t that my vanilla friends will find out I’m kinky? It’s that my kinky... associations will find out about my vanilla life? ... Most people are like, “My vanilla friends can never know. They’d judge me.” I’m like, *so* many of my vanilla friends know. ... But if kinky people found out about my vanilla life, especially ‘cause everyone’s got this idea that “If you’re kinky, I’m kinky, we’re friends because we have these similar sexual proclivities,” uhm... it would then be a problem. Especially ‘cause I wanna be a teacher. And the whole ethics board? And I sit there and I’m like, I don’t understand- like, I get it. I do. And, looking around at a lot of the average people that come to kinky clubs, I wouldn’t want them near my kids if I had kids. I wouldn’t want them near my tutoring kids. Like, ‘cause I tutor kids, I- I would not like, no one way in *hell* would I want some of them near them. But that’s more of a personality thing? It’s got nothing to do with their kink.

Anya: Maybe I’m being really naïve, but my- my worry has always been more along the lines of, uhm, people... people finding *me*, you know, the real world me, the vanilla life, and, and... and fucking that up somehow. My worry has never been “Oh my god, I could be raped or abused or killed by a guy, or... a play partner, or something.” I don’t know. Like I said, maybe that’s ridiculously naïve of me? I don’t know.

Melissa: I feel like I could stand in a court of law and, uhm, and- and- very comfortably say, “Yes I’m in a power dynamic which means he makes all the decisions and, I do the dinner and... uhm, all of that stuff.” And that would be okay? But if I start telling them that, uhm... you know, I get caned or I give a lay to maintain our relationship or, uhm... uhm, he pisses in my arse every morning and he- and I... and I drink, pee. I think, I’d be, compromised. ... In the court system of

today. Hell yes. So that's a big thing, yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I'd never put my face on FetLife. For that reason. ... I've got too much to lose.

Olivia: Uhm... so outing- to me, being 'outed' like that? I don't care. I am... afraid of... being outed in the work world. Uhm, so far it hasn't been a problem? But- God forbid I, I don't know, get a big job one day... you know, that that- that- that would scary, so. That- that's the only thing. My job. Is the only thing.

Later on in her interview, Melissa expressed concern that some of her BDSM activities could be classified as professional misconduct. Moreover, she believes that she would lose custody of her children if her ex-husband did know about her BDSM activities. The major concern that most participants had about being outed was, as Olivia noted, work/career-related. Occupations like police officer, politician and primary school teacher are some examples that interviewees gave where being outed could prematurely terminate one's career due to concerns that BDSM interests would make someone ill-suited for those jobs. And yet, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, "I don't think most people would care" was quite a common belief voiced by interviewees. As evidenced below, kinksters certainly believed that being outed ought not to be a big deal. It may well be the case that the nebulous designation of 'most people' are indifferent, but if one's parents, spouse, friend or manager *does* care, their attitudes and beliefs about BDSM would take much greater precedence.

Caitlin: You know like, media with politicians. ... as I was saying before, you know, I mean sex is a part of life. Swinging if you're into it is as well. Kink if you're into it as well. If there's a politician that's into it? Who gives a shit? As long as they can still do their job, who cares if he wants to go home and whip off his business suit and he's got women's clothing and stockings and everything on underneath? Who cares? He can still do his job and he shouldn't be slammed- why am I saying he? Anyway, you know. They shouldn't be- they shouldn't be slammed about it. It's- a personal *choice*, that- I mean, goodness me, isn't that- isn't that a human rights issue really? You know. It- [sigh] it's choice. They can still do their job. Who c- I mean if, John Key, wears women's underwear? He's still the prime minister. ... and *who cares?* Maybe he goes home and- has his wife, tie him up and whip the shit out of him, you know. Some people in high- jobs like that want to relinquish their control from time to time.

And why not? The media should not slam people, that wanna do... that just wanna experience stuff, and wanna have a bit of kink. Who freaking cares?.

Tyler: Whereas a lot of them, think “Oh if I go out, I’ll be outed!” I thought, “Excuse me, outed to what?” “Oh my job will have me sacked.” I said, “Look, don’t be silly, I was a practising lawyer. You- you got the greatest standard of be- of- of professional protection here. You can no longer be- you can no long- you can no- further be sacked for being kinky than you can be sacked for being gay or lesbian. ... Get a grip!” The other thing is that they- they- came up with a – again it’s a perpetual time-waster on- on FetLife – which is, “Oh I can’t go to that event. It’s... it’s- it’s- it’s a ‘public event’.” And I say, “excuse me, we’re running a- we’re running the biggest fetish party with uhm, all the usual stars and uh, circus performers and fire-eaters, have some great bands and uh, and strippers, how is this suddenly a uh, a... a- how is this suddenly a problem for you?” ... “Oh I might get seen.” I said “Well, grow up!”

It may be true that for some, having their BDSM proclivities made publicly known has little effect on their lives – they may already be involved in a related industry, many of their acquaintances are already aware, or their partner may be kinky as well – but for others who carefully manage their kinky identities, like Jennifer who was blackmailed and lost her marriage, having their proclivities made publicly known could have a very detrimental impact on their families or at their jobs.

Communication and relationships

Margaret: Yeah. I do think that – and it could just be the people that *I* hang out with – I think we’re a lot better at, talking? Communicating? Uhm... negotiating? You know? ‘cause that’s kind of like *part* of- part of the whole D/s thing is you, I mean you have to learn to communicate and... work out what’s okay and what’s not okay, so. I do think that we have some advantages, you know? Got some- we’re a little bit ahead of the game. In that respect. Because that’s encouraged, that’s normal, that’s what you’re supposed to do. It’s expected, that you will, you know, talk about things up front before you start getting into... I don’t know. Maybe it’s just my circles. I don’t know.

Open, honest communication is the key to maintaining safety, establishing trust, and fostering functional, healthy relationships with others, and communication is viewed as a skill that can be improved. As Margaret mentioned above, she approaches BDSM interactions with specific end-goals that she wants to achieve by the end of a session. Because BDSM activities involve navigating through desires, boundaries and limits – for example, what is outlined in the pre-scene negotiation might include the things I would like to experience, the things I don't want to be suddenly forced upon me but nevertheless want to gradually learn to enjoy, and the things you absolutely cannot do to me – she believes that BDSM practitioners are better than BDSM non-practitioners at communicating their wants and needs within a specific interaction and in a broader relationship sense as well.

A comprehensive pre-scene negotiation would minimise the potential misunderstandings and facilitate a better scene experience. Ideally a safeword would not be used during a scene as they are often perceived to be a last resort arising from a communication failure. However, the topic of pre-scene negotiation is often played down by kinksters, especially those who have been involved in the scene for several years and are more experienced. Negotiations are seldom formalised³⁰, and between those who have been BDSM partners for many years or decades, there is an implicit understanding of the other's emotional and physical needs and limits that do not need to be outlined anymore. This is not to say that negotiation and communication are viewed as less important – on the contrary, because they are engrained in the BDSM way of life, it is taken for granted that all the familiar faces in a public play party

³⁰ Rarely is a pen-and-paper contract involved unless someone is entering a long-term power exchange relationship such as a 24/7 slave pledging years of servitude to his/her Master/Mistress. There is also a formalised process involved for prospective clients wanting to pay for a session with sex workers or dominatrices, such as a pre-screening phone interview ascertaining what the client wants out of the session, what is and is not permitted (married men often ask for no marks, welts or bruises for example) pre-existing medical conditions, and so on.

setting and all those who claim to have been involved in BDSM for years fulfil the essential pre-requisite of being a forthcoming communicator. While non-effective communicators are not ousted from the scene in the way a sexual predator would be, they may struggle to find their place within the scene after a series of one-off interactions.

Danielle: I've had other minor situations where, uhm... someone that I'm interacting with, you know the first- first time or two and they uhm... they do something out of the blue like, slap your face or spit in your face or, uhm... do something that was not really- forewarned? And that's- I- I can deal with that because of my background in the sex industry? I mean I- I was always good at deflecting unwanted, uhm actions by men so I've been doing that for a long time but. Sometimes it catches you unaware. And uh, then it becomes a point of discussion. Not in the scene. But uhm, afterwards. The day after I usually, make a point of stating that that's- that's not acceptable.

Interviewer: Mmm.

Danielle: Or you have to ask, or you have to at least indicate that that's what you're about to do. Uhm... Or that you would like to do that, rather than just doing it. So. I had one minor and one major, breach of consent. ... Uh, I don't- I don't engage with people who don't have good communication skills.

Interviewer: Mmhmm.

Danielle: Yeah. If there's- there's not an ability to talk openly, because I do, and I expect it back from other people. Uhm, I don't engage in people who have issues with communication.

While it comes as no surprise that better communication enhances the quality of a relationship, introducing a partner to kink may also have benefits outside of enhancing communication. John first became involved in the scene as an event host/organiser, introducing and desensitising kinksters to his speciality which is electrostimulation, but over time he has also embarked on his own kink journey. Where others could potentially lose their marriages by introducing kink into the relationship, John noted below how introducing kink to his marriage has benefitted him.

John: Uhm, in a lot of respects, it's helped my wife and I, uhm, sexually open up a lot more. Uhm, my wife was *extremely* shy. Uhm, she *definitely* wouldn't have been the type of person you would have *ever* have picked to have been in- in this environment. If uhm, someone had said, uhm, if someone had become confrontational towards her, she would be the first one to back down and wouldn't say boo. *Now*, after being in the scene for a while, she *will* stand up and she'll tell you how it is. She's developed an inner strength that is phenomenal, uhm, so, I would say this has probably helped my relationship with my wife more than anything else.

Throughout the rest of this section, kink/play relationships are distinguished as qualitatively different from traditional romantic relationships. While many interviewees made this distinction clear when they described their relationships, it was difficult for some of those interviewees to explain *how* they viewed these relationships differently. Danielle explained play partnerships as requiring “a huge amount of dedication in a practical sense” and romantic relationships as requiring “a huge amount of dedication in the mental, spiritual sense”. Explained in terms of tangible relationship boundaries, Danielle has a play partner of 18 years who has never met her children. To her, that relationship existed in a specific ‘play partner’ category and would not evolve beyond that. Play relationships have also been defined as less holistic and less likely to be monogamous. Some kinksters prefer to have several partners who are experts in their own kinks, so they may have a rope partner, a spanking partner and a needle partner, though others prefer to find one partner who can cater to a few shared kinks and leave the other kinks to be explored in future relationships. Below are some of the ways in which interviewees tried to explain this distinction.

Dora: Yeah and they just- they only get to see- or have a certain part of me. They don't- get to see all of the- the sides of me. And it works. I couldn't do the 24/7 kink thing. Just haven't got the energy for it. ... Whereas if I was going out to... find another partner, the chances of me falling in love with that person and- leaving my partner were higher, whereas with this... you know, I'll prob- I- I- have a love for the people that I play with, but I'm probably not going to set up house with them?

Helen: If you're gonna have a loving relationship, I'm not your Domme. That's something else. You know?

Melissa: Uhm... for me, play relationships are simply that. You know, the- I give- you know for me the example would be the sub that I had, I was with him for 2 years and I never kissed him. ... So for *me*, uhm, that was something uhm... he didn't get to share that part of me? That softer... uhm... ...more intimate, uhm... more connected? Uhm... That's not something that we shared. Uhm... he- he was a sub and he came and he fulfilled that role and then he... put his clothes on and he left. And we *did*- have a- chat and that- Of *course* over 2 years you develop some intimacy and you- you know about each other's lives and you talk about each other's children and... and y- and you *care*, about that person, but it is a, uhm... it's not somebody- he was not somebody who would just drop in to my house? ... He wasn't somebody who would ring me unexpectedly? It was in a- It was almost like a uhm... There was a distinction between personal and the- the... uhm, the sexual relationship we were in. So that was quite clear. Uhm... I'm really good at that clarity [laughter] ... It works for me! So, I'm not good with this in-betweeny shit.

Romantic relationships do not necessarily last longer than play relationships, but they are viewed as more 'long-term' in the sense that you might be expected to make joint financial and emotional commitments as opposed to a play relationship which may only involve regular encounters to have a play session. While kinksters are capable of long-term relationships – the owners of the gay cruise club have been together for 27 years, Edward has been in a 20-year marriage, Melissa was married for 14 years, Martin for 8 years – and long-term relationships are still sought after, kinksters tend to have more flexible relationship arrangements. The importance of communication ought not to be understated in more conventional relationships, but several of my interviewees who are involved in open and/or polyamorous relationships have stressed that their relationship networks would break down if any one party involved was not completely open and honest. One interviewee noted that maintaining a monogamous relationship is difficult enough – when more people are involved, everyone has to put in the effort required to sustain the network of lovers. Polyamorous relationships come in many different formations, but within the kink scene, the most common arrangement involves a married or partnered couple A+B, one of whom has a BDSM play partner A+C. They may each have a BDSM play partner, A+C and B+D, or they may both

have the same play partner, A+C and B+C. These play partners C and D may of course have their own relationships with other people, and there may be children who know the play partners as godparents or family friends, potentially creating an expansive network of interconnected people. Bringing a new party into a pre-established relationship introduces many complications that monogamous relationships do not have to contend with. In Melissa's case, before she became fully established with her partner, they continued seeing the people they had been seeing and playing with, but over time she found she was not interested in having a long-term third party involved in her dyad with her partner, so the couple invites different women to play with them every time.

Melissa: Uhm, we thought that we could do both? For a little while? So we tried that? Uhm... and it *was working*, uhm, but what I found was the other- female- because I was *new*, on the scene, the other female wanted to have- start having dates? And t- With, uhm, with my now partner? And- which had previously not happened, she'd just been somebody who we played with?

Interviewer: Right.

Melissa: So she was trying to move herself into our relationship and so, I just said "Nah. This is not working for me. Uhm, I am the relationship and- even though I'm the sub?" You know it's that thing, you still have boundaries in relationships.

Interviewer: Yep.

Melissa: "I'm the sub, and let's not. Let's not complicate things." And, uhm... you know, my- *my* lover would come and we would- uhm, we would have a session and then he would leave. Whereas this woman wanted- him to stay over. It's not- It's not play.

Interviewer: Mmm.

Melissa: And so, uhm, we ended all of that, and have pretty much- just every now and again brought somebody into our relationship that we... wanted to play for a night.

Interviewer: Yeap.

Melissa: *That's* simple. And that works for us.

Whereas with Lea, she has been involved with the male half of a married couple (Edward and Caitlin) for 18 months at the time of the interview. Caitlin was not interested in being Edward's submissive, but she was open to the idea of him to have a submissive outside of their marriage. Caitlin and Lea get along well with each other even though they do not necessarily have to, since both are partnered to Edward. In all polyamorous arrangements within the BDSM scene, everyone is fully aware of each other's existence. Having an affair is frowned upon because it is, by default, nonconsensual – the other party does not know about the affair and cannot consent to it – and the overwhelming majority of potential play partners are unwilling to 'lower themselves' or take on the complications of being kept as a 'dirty little secret'.

Caitlin: uhm, I've always known- well I haven't actually always known that Edward's been into BDSM, uhm, but I've known that there's been a part of him that he kind of like, locked away in the back room. Uhm, and... I managed to... I managed to give him enough confidence to get that back out again? Uhm, and from... *our* relationship, there was no way that I was- I mean, I'm not a sub. You can... forget it. Uhm... so, consequently, because he... requires BDSM, uhm... I... *accept* the fact? And uhm... I've allowed him- ooo, that sounds really [laughter] alpha-female or, Femme Domme of me, doesn't it? ... Uhm but I can't think of any way- any other way to say it, is, I have allowed *him*, or I've given him the permission, that he can have sub. Subs. A sub. He's, probably had about- hhm. [*names redacted*] About 5? ...sometimes he's had multiple subs [laughter] Uhm... and they've... and the subs have known about each other, but. It's just no way, I'm not gonna have him... bend me over a bench and whip my arse 'til it's black and blue. And then, you know, go home to our son and explain why I've- I'm black and- blue all over and... "mummy it's summer, why aren't you in the pool?" "Uh, sorry, 'cause my arse is black and blue and daddy's beaten the shit out of me." No. Yeah let me think about that for just a- no. Don't even get to that. Yeah so no, it doesn't bother me at all. I'm quite happy for him to have his... outlet and his release. And it hasn't- caused any issues really at all.

Lea: Yeah... uhm the poly thing... with him and his partner, because they're older, uhm... and so they've been through it enough times where he's had different pets and things like that, so they have very strict ground rules established, uhm... in fact, if- what's allowed and what's not allowed, uhm... I mean, she's pretty much like, "Whatever. If you wanna come up for a week, just take him off my hands." ...

Uhm... but we talk through everything, so if there's a problem, uhm, I talk to his wife. Uhm, or she'll say to me, "Look, pull your head in." So, we don't, uhm, a lot of poly relationships work where... each relationship's run individually. Uhm, we don't? ... So we... had to work out that we can all talk to each other.

Because the discourse of monogamy is pervasive throughout contemporary society, and the occasional polygamy narrative that surfaces in the media is negatively framed (usually criticising, satirising and mocking male privilege couched in minority religious groups) there are no standard operating procedures for polyamorous relationship configurations.

Polyamorists rely on books like *The Ethical Slut* or *Opening Up* to guide them through their relationships, regularly seek advice from each other from places like FetLife poly groups, and they expect all parties involved to voice their needs and concerns as they arise rather than allowing them to fester and affect the other relationships in the group.

The label 'play partner' has been used above gratuitously to designate people involved in a relationship that originated from or is characterised by BDSM interactions. 'Play partner' works for people like Melissa – but other interviewees often found several of their play relationships difficult to define. The word 'play' in itself has connotations of being casual or not serious when play partners can be a significant part of each other's lives. Some interviewees expressed that they felt limited by the pre-existing vocabulary used for conventional relationships, noting that their relationships tended to exist in the egregiously undefined, nebulous space between 'boy/girlfriend' and 'fiancé/e' or 'partner/spouse'. Often they are romantically attracted to a play partner but have no intention of cohabiting, getting married and having children, nor do they go through conventional relationship rituals like dating. Ella, whose relationship had ended one week before her interview, was exploring play relationships with two people and spoke of 'figuring out who they are to me' – she defined her relationships through making meaning of her connections and interactions, rather than

trying to create new labels to wedge between tentative beginnings, short-term engagement, long-term companionship and lifetime commitment. Even though people with whom you do BDSM activities with are continuously referred to as ‘play partners’ throughout this dissertation, it should be noted that interviewees often interjected with the caveat that ‘s/he’s more than just a play partner to me’ – their relationships have evolved beyond regularly scheduled BDSM interactions but they lack the adequate taxonomies to define their relationships with a more appropriate label.

In fact, some interviewees prefer play partners who are already in a long-term relationship with someone else. They may view BDSM as a means of escape from everyday life, and/or they are only interested in the play aspect and do not want the ‘complications’ that come from being in a romantic relationship. Brendan spoke of this below in terms of ‘commitment’. The fact that she was already married also made it difficult for Brendan to find his place in her life. It should be noted that at least five interviewees explicitly introduced themselves or defined themselves as being monogamous – open/polyamorous relationships are by no means universal.

Brendan: Uhm... [sigh] I’ve had... ..uhm... I was... talking for a while with m- a lady called *[name redacted]* uhm on Fet for a while. And then we... went to an event together and- well she met me at one event and we played around for a bit there. Uhm... and then she... a few days later we went to another event and played around t- quite a lot more, and then... she came ‘round to my place one night and we had some fun. Uhm, and then... it was, she was already in a full-time relationship and she wanted it- uh she was married and she wanted to have a kind of, a me as well and having a bit of both and I didn’t want the commitment, I wanted the play and she wanted to have more than just play – she wanted *play* but- she wanted play but she wanted the full-on connection as well and it- talking all day everyday and I was like “I can’t have this at the moment you’ve got a husband already and” so that didn’t- we just- it was a mutual ‘not gonna work’.

Interviewees also sought play partners who were experienced with their preferred kinks, but at the same time were adventurous and willing to explore. These preferences must be taken into account on top of having mutual kink interests, role compatibility and other conventional relationship requirements such as shared interests in TV/movie/literary genres, relationship ‘chemistry’, willingness to compromise, effective communication, and so on, and can make it difficult for kinksters to find a compatible partner. Interviewees have speculated that one of the reasons why open relationships appear to be more common in the scene is because some kinksters do not expect to find one person who meets all these requirements, so they have different people in their lives to meet different needs.

The preference for more experienced kinksters, coupled with some power dynamics like daddy-babygirl or mommy-babyboy relationships, could lead to the greater prevalence of relationships between people with significant age gaps. Roslyn views these relationships as problematic – though the younger party is over the age of legal consent, their relative inexperience could leave them in a more vulnerable position to be taken advantage of – but notes that often, age gaps are not commented upon. The norms that kinksters enforce within the community to make it open and accepting of people with different interests from different walks of life could have a detrimental impact on the safety of the more vulnerable kinkster population. Within-community policing can sometimes be hampered by notions like ‘your kink is not my kink’.

Roslyn: So... Yeah. It’s definitely not so complicated as this- that’s actually one thing I’ve noticed about the BDSM community which really surprises me is the- the amount

of- the *huge* age gap that's quite noticeable between young men- uh, a 20 year old woman with a 40 year old guy and nobody says anything? I'm like... "Nobody else thinks this is either weird or inappropriate?"

Interviewer: Mmm.

Roslyn: I mean, I think... in sexual relationships, it doesn't matter if you're of legal age? I think there's still a lot of scope for emotional and sexual manipulation in people. ... And the bigger the age gap is, the stronger it is, but nobody seem- everyone seems to be *too* scared to say anything. I'm not gonna say anything. I remember at- when I was 18, 19, 20, even being approached by a man who was 25, I would think to myself... "I'm a teenager, why are you interested in me?" I'd be innately suspicious of a man who was older than me 'cause I think "Well what can't you get a girlfriend your own age? What's wrong with you? Are you gonna... try to manipulate me?" And... Now I s- kind of see these women date early 20s or late teens with men who are 20 years older than them and I think... "Should somebody say something?" [laughter] But you *can't*, you can't say anything because then you'd be seen as being intolerant or...

Interviewer: Yeah.

Roslyn: A bitch, or... whatever. And I just think, "What the fuck?" I can see this like- is this a trainwreck ready to happen? And I just... wish I could do something or say something 'cause, I know that- at that age, when I was 20, if I- if a 40 year old man hit on me, I'd think "Fuck off, you dirty old cunt!"

When discussing long-term conventional relationships, the centrality of the kinkster identity in interviewees' lives tended to determine whether they were hypothetically willing to pursue a romantic relationship with someone who did not have kinky inclinations. Some interviewees – especially those who were much more heavily involved in the scene than others, or have been kinky for decades – like Margaret for example, stated with near-absolute certainty that they could never 'settle down' and 'set up house' with someone who was not kinky. Others, however, were willing to entertain the prospect that if they found 'Mr/Ms. Right' who fulfilled their other needs, they could forgo having BDSM in their lives.

Lea: In terms of vanilla relationships, it doesn't- to me, if the person's right, the person's right. I'm not going to worry if they're into it.

Melissa: “What is more important, you know, uhm – a relationship, a *primary* relationship where, we can uhm, look after each other and nurture each other and if I have to give up on kink, then I will.”

Roslyn: But uhm, yeah. I- I would... if I think I met the right person, who ticked all the boxes in every other... way, I think I could probably have... a lifelong relationship with a vanilla person. I think I c- well okay maybe I couldn't, but I think I'd- yeah, I probably could.

Evidenced in the above quotations are dominant discursive relationship ideals of searching for ‘The One’ or ‘finding the right person’ that are implicitly reinforced by interviewees. Having a kink identity may result in complex relationship systems where multiple kinksters, sex partners and lovers are involved, but it does not preclude people from desiring and pursuing long-term committed conventional monogamous relationships, especially for those who explain that while they enjoy incorporating BDSM sessions into their schedules from time to time, it is a non-essential facet of their lives.

Kink identities and origins

Helen: And it is a bit of a duality. You have your regular life and then I was always very able to shut the door to the dungeon and just move into my regular life.

A kink identity is not limited to role taxonomies within BDSM like ‘Dominant’ or ‘submissive’. It could be as broad as a ‘kinkster’ identity, or it could incorporate specific activities like ‘crossdresser’. Interviewees found it difficult to answer a theoretical question like “how central is kink to your sense of self?”, so they were asked to explain in terms of whether they had a ‘take it or leave it’ attitude towards kink or if they ‘couldn’t live without it’. They defined themselves along a spectrum of occasionally dabbling in BDSM activities to a 24/7 BDSM lifestyle. Regardless of where they positioned themselves in that spectrum,

even those who were completely entrenched in BDSM had similar comments to Helen quoted above. This duality between ‘dungeon life’ and ‘real life’ is something that all kinksters have to manage, though more of my interviewees fall in the less committed to BDSM side of the spectrum³¹, unlike Newmahr’s (2011) and Weiss’s (2011) participants who have commented that the dungeon is reality and the regular world is the dreary existence that they are forced to return to in the interim.

As for where these kinky inclinations originated from, interviewees had multiple theories that stemmed from both essentialist and constructionist paradigms. The essentialist paradigm of kink being something innate or something that developed from a very young age was the most common point of origin that interviewees claimed – often interviewees would retrospectively attribute their desires to specific childhood experiences that they have vivid memories of. They did not suddenly discover that they were kinky overnight, but it involved a gradual process of grappling with kink and incorporating the kink identity into their sense of selves. In the quotation below, Dora, who later describes her first actual physical experience of kink, initially responds to a question about her first experience of kink in terms of grappling with sexuality from a prepubescent age and role exploration that is tied into her (implied lack of) paternal bonding during her childhood.

Interviewer: Mmm. So I was thinking, like, when was- was your very first experience with- with kink, for yourself?

Dora: Uhm... Hmm... I don’t know. It probably was that very first, uhm... flogging that I had. It probably, I mean as a young, I remember as a young girl always having uhm, a kinky way of thinking.

³¹ Many interviewees jokingly claim to be ‘quite vanilla’ or ‘on the vanilla side of BDSM’, enjoying the ‘lighter’ or ‘fluffier’ types of kinks like spanking, dripping candle wax onto the body and aesthetic ropework compared to ‘some of those other kinksters we know’ who are more interested in activities such as single-tail whipping, being suspended in the air using hooks inserted through one’s back, being lit on fire and passing electricity through genitals.

Interviewer: Mmhmm.

Dora: Uh... and was very- sexualised even though I didn't sort of engage sexually with- with anyone. But it was always- well the whole daddy thing for me, I can remember in uhm, girls that I went to school with used to call their fathers 'daddy' and I used to love it as a word.

Interviewer: Yeap.

Dora: And uhm, and loved the whole concept of having, you know, that daddy sort of person. And my father was in the army and I used to wait for him to come home. We didn't have a particularly close relationship but I used to wait for him to come home and I remember one day I thought, when I run up to meet him, and he'd always looked handsome in his uniform and all that sort of stuff, I thought when I run to meet him on the street, today I'm going to call him daddy, because I really [laughter] really want to, and I ran up to him and I couldn't do it.

Interviewer: [laughter]

Dora: And- and- and I must've only been sort of like 7 or 8, but it's been a lasting kind of memory for me. So ever since- and now when I play with daddies, I always think of that kind of scenario of uhm, that, so there was- that's probably my earliest memory of [clears throat] wanting that strong, sort of, masculine person in my life.

I could not help but wonder if interviewees were talking to me about their childhood experiences and paternal/maternal relationships because of my background in psychology and the strong association in the public consciousness between the discipline of psychology and Freudian psychoanalytic techniques thinking it was the 'correct' answer I was looking for, but interviewees who claim to have been kinky for 'years and years and years' make these claims with conviction, are reflective and spontaneous when they respond, and describe the first kinky experiences that they can recall with fervour.

However, some interviewees had also been introduced to kink by a partner, or claimed that they 'had always been kinky' but did not have an opportunity to really explore that facet of themselves until they found a kinky partner. Other interviewees also credited books, magazines, television and the internet for their initial foray into kink. Even those who have

‘always known’ they were kinky tended to have been taken to their first play party or fetish ball by a kinky acquaintance, who would have introduced them to other event attendees to try and establish a small network of connections within the BDSM scene. Ultimately, theorising the universal aetiology of kink or the true percentages of the kinky population that was ‘born kinky’ or ‘introduced to kink later in life’ were less important than how interviewees made sense of their own identities and experiences.

Interviewees also tried to interpret the experiences of those around them, offering suggestions as to the kinds of people who are more likely to explore kink. General observations made by interviewees of the BDSM scene include people who:

- Got married at a young age (before 25) and have since separated. Interviewees who pointed out this observation theorised that those who married young did not have ample time and opportunity to explore kink, so after their marriage broke down and/or their children grew older, they felt more able to immerse themselves in the scene and experiment sexually with different people.
- Come from a Christian/Catholic background. At least three interviewees self-identified as coming from a ‘conservative, religious 2-parent household’ and could name some of their acquaintances as also coming from a similar ‘traditional household’ and/or having a ‘strict upbringing’. ‘We never talked about sex’ was a recurring comment made by interviewees who themselves fell into this category.
- Identify as working-class or having had a working-class background. This was a particularly pertinent topic for interviewees who were born or had spent years growing up in England. Interviewees with English roots echoed each other’s beliefs that they had always conceived of kink as an upper class indulgence and they had only learnt later in life that it was something that anyone could explore. People in

New Zealand are not likely to use class as a personal identifier (though they may comment that someone is ‘rich’ instead of ‘upper class’; ‘upper class’ when used by Britons has different implications in terms of family legacy, awareness of high culture and so on (Savage et al., 2013)), and the BDSM scene incorporates people from across the class spectrum.

Of course, kink is not limited to only people who fit these criteria, but the fact that these qualities are more salient than others is of interest to note.

In closing, perhaps what is more important than where interviewees theorised kinky inclinations came from is how interviewees feel about their kinky identity – did they feel distressed by what they might have internalised to be depraved pleasures, or have they come to terms with kink and the role it plays in their lives? Despite some interviewees sharing their negative experiences with BDSM – experiences that they would have never undergone if they had never explored kink – and having significant doubts about a positive outcome if their ‘real world’ and ‘kink world’ were to collide, interviewees were unanimously comfortable with their kinky identities. Anya’s response best answers this question.

Anya: I thought, “I don’t feel shame in what I do.” I’d feel embarra- like I’d feel embarrassed having to tell my best mates what I get up to, and having to actually physically say it to them, but I don’t feel shame. At all. And I don’t feel, uhm, like, there’s something wrong with me. I don’t look at other people and- most of them, I don’t think there’s anything wrong with them either. Uhm. I think people are just made in... a variety of different ways. Uhm. Yeah. ... And I’ve not been exposed to any guilt, you know, from other people that I’ve internalised or anything. So, no, I don’t feel it. [laughter] I don’t feel like there’s something wrong with me.

The invisible 'others': Disability and ethnicity in kink

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the only interviewees who discussed issues around minority groups such as those with visible physical/mental disabilities and the pervasive 'whiteness' of BDSM event attendees were those who were disabled, had disabled family members/acquaintances or worked in the provisioning for disabilities sector, and those who were non-white respectively. These minorities within the BDSM sphere, collectively labelled as belonging to the 'Other' group within an already marginalised population, are deemed invisible in the sense that there may only be two or three at a given event who fit in this category. Though they are assumed to not be treated differently or have any peculiar experiences based on their 'Otherness', interviewees spoke about their having to contend with the eroticisation/sexualisation of visible aspects of their identities – the fetishisation of the wheelchair, for example, or as was applicable in my own personal experience, the exoticisation of Asian kinksters. When she was asked to comment about the nature of the scene Roslyn (who is white herself but mentioned ethnicity as a salient characteristic, possibly because she later describes her workplace as being very ethnically diverse) made the following observation:

Roslyn: That's- that's- that's- 'cause that's the other thing I noticed. ... Like, I was thinking "*Shit, it really is white!*" And it's 'cause I met with Patrick- like I used to go to events with Patrick-

Interviewer: Yeap.

Roslyn: -before, I went to a few events with him. And I remember we were sitting there one night and Patrick goes, "You know what? If it weren't for the transgender people you get this feeling you're in the National Front Party³²."

Interviewer: [laughter]

³² The National Front Party is a small, far-right white supremacist/nationalist political party in New Zealand.

Roslyn: I'm like "Shit yeah!" Like all the guys they're like 'unh' and they've got shaved heads and like you know, it's like "Oh my god, everyone looks like an- you know, like, they all look like neo-Nazis except for the trannies."

Interviewer: [laughter]

Roslyn: So it- that- that's how I felt and we were talking about that because I remember saying it to somebody else.

Interviewer: Yeap.

Roslyn: And I think I've seen- you go to like these parties and there seems to be *no...* never see any brown people. You might see a couple of Asian peopl- well, I- I'm sitting there saying 'brown people', kind of, but I mean brown like you know, Maoris, Pacific Islanders and stuff. So you kind of might see a couple of Indians and a couple of Asian people, but that's really it. And I mean it was- it's like the thing, I went to the Fetish Ball, like fuck, it's really really obvious. And the other thing I noticed was also, I mean this isn't related but, 'cause I- uhm, you know, like this kind of retro clothing and hair and that kind of thing, and uhm, like I'd go to the Vintage Day Out and it was the same thing. It'd be like, "*Oh my god, everyone here is really white!*" So there's a kind of another thing. I think there is sort of like a lot of things that white people like. [laughter]

Interviewer: [laughter]

Roslyn: And it seems to be- BDSM seems to be one of them.

While it is more likely that ethnic minority groups either organise their own events or prefer to indulge in kink in the privacy of their own homes rather than BDSM being a 'thing that white people like', ethnic minorities are certainly underrepresented in the events that are advertised on FetLife. George recounts below how his ethnicity had an impact in one play session, and even though he subsequently brushed off the event as a one-off bizarre occurrence, he noted that through experiences like these he has become more self-aware that other event attendees may be, without his knowledge, judging how to approach, interact and/or play with him partially based on his skin colour.

George: Yeah, I mean, there w- there was- there's a gap that, that's uhm... we would beat on each other from time to time and- and he was using another implement, he said "Oh... yeah no I can't do that, because... you're brown."

Interviewer: [laughter]

George: [laughter] "Are you for fucking real?" And- and actually he was so it was like, "Oh okay, well whatever." Not that I was- not that I was even interested in that, but, it- it made me... *wary* that in talking to him with this implement, all of a sudden he wasn't very comfortable with... uh, yeah. But uhm, I don't know.

Alongside ethnic minorities, the disabled are also underrepresented in the scene – during my time in the scene I did not speak with anyone who disclosed they had a mental disability and I had encountered only two who had visible physical disabilities – and interviewees who spoke about disability and kink theorised (and lamented) that the lack of a substantial representation of disabled people could play a role in reinforcing the association in the public consciousness between disability and asexuality. The following is a long excerpt from Dora's interview.

Dora is an educator who is passionate about her work in the disability sector, and she describes in this excerpt some of the issues that those with physical and mental disabilities have to face in terms of their sexuality. It is worth noting that the New Zealand Ministry of Health does not provide any funding toward the substantial costs involved in exploring disabled peoples' sexualities.

Interviewer: So in your line of work, have you met any uhm, people who are kinky and disabled?

Dora: Yeah.

Interviewer: And that-

Dora: Heaps. Yeah. Yeah. Yeap. Uhm, a lot of people who... have autism and it's very- well, what they're into probably falls into the kink uhm... world. Yeah. And it's- the- the challenge for that is when they have support people uhm... that see what- so the support people that are working with the disabled person just see that person's

behaviour as being completely deviant and wrong and, you know, disabled people have to have vanilla, straight, almost non-sexual relationships. Uhm

Interviewer: Mmm.

Dora: And so when people want to explore any kind of sexuality and they're disabled – especially if they have intellectual disabilities – everything's seen as deviant? Uhm, but I have met quite a few people with autism that are into uhm, uh, restraints, so- do you know much about autism? No? Uhm, there's a woman called uh, Temple Grendon, who's uhm, Dr. Temple Grendon I think she is. Now, and she's a woman with autism who has her area of interest, or she has Asperger's probably. Uhm, her area of interest was cattle and uhm, she did a lot of study on how cattle behave especially before they're about to be slaughtered. And noticed that if you get cattle to walk in a straight line, they get really stressed, they spatially find it hard to walk in straight lines. But if you make circular runs for them they would calm down. And when they were being drenched or having- having any kind of... procedures done by human beings like their horns taken care of or whatever, they're put into these vices and as soon as they were in that vice they'd keep still. And so she did all this study and she's become famous because she's designed all these amazing circular uhm, runs for cattle. And abattoirs. And it's made the whole kind of killing of animals a whole lot nicer, et cetera. But then she realised she needed it for herself so she made a squeeze machine for herself while she was at university and still has it. So she can't bear to be touched by human beings but she likes to have some kind of touch so she comes home, and basically puts herself in one of these things that cattle have, uhm, so it's- it's for some people it's part of the autistic spectrum to feel restrained, so some people I've worked with uhm, have enjoyed wearing really tight underwear, so I've talked to them about getting latex and rubber and- 'cause they'd love that confinement or uhm, uh being put into uhm, sleeping- sleeping bags at night that are quite tight,

Interviewer: Mmhmm.

Dora: So there's all that containment. So a lot of what's in the- the uhm kink world, is actually really helpful for- for some people there. Uhm, what's called 'self-harm' with uhm, disabled people, I think is just, you know, sadomasochism [laughter]

Interviewer: [laughter]

Dora: And that- and that uhm, a lot of people are doing stuff to their bodies that they actually enjoy but- it's getting peoples' heads around the fact that it's not about disability, it's, about, people just- you know, enjoying their bodies in a different way. Uhm, one guy I worked with, he used to like to put uhm, a lot of objects into the shaft of his penis. And, you know, everyone was- so concerned about his behaviour and- and he was getting a lot of infections because he was, using bits of wood and nails and all the rest. Uhm, and I didn't actually know about sounds things, you know, those- uh, those things that you put in the shaft of a penis that men like? It- do you know about sounds? They're called sounds. They're rods.

Interviewer: Mmm! Mmm. Yeap.

Dora: Yeah. And so I didn't know about those then. But for this guy, eventually, what uhm, worked for him was that he went and had a Prince Albert piercing put in so then he could hang things off his uhm, his penis and get the same sensation but it took a lot of work for people to get around- their heads around the fact that they just wanted him to stop doing what he's doing.

Interviewer: Yeap. Yeap.

Dora: Uhm, and *my* work with them is all about actually tell them what- he could- let's get him to do what he can do quite safely and stuff like that. So yeah, there's a lot of, uhm, people who are into kink and into polyamory, but it's seen as uhm, people not understanding how to have relationships?

Interviewer: Right.

Dora: So I've met lots of disabled people mainly again with intellectual disabilities who can actually handle multiple relationships but everyone else sees it as them, uhm, not knowing how to have a relationship? ... And lots of- it- it- it is mainly for uhm, intellectually disabled people, but uhm [sigh] a lot of people think that because of the disabled person has never mentioned that they want to have a sexual relationship, it mustn't be something that they want? Uhm, but there are a lot of people that- don't communicate verbally who have never said that they wanted food but we would never not give it to them, you know. You [laughter] wouldn't sort of say, oh, you ring up a parent and said "Look, sorry your daughter died but she never said to us that she was hungry, so we never fed her."

Interviewer: Yeap.

Dora: Uhm, and so that- that seems to be- sex seems to be something that can be taken off peoples' menu of needs.

Interviewer: Mmm yeap. Sort of like optional.

Dora: Yeah. When they can't express it. So yeah it's a bit of a challenge of people. So then a lot of people do sort of get into deviancy uhm, because there's been no other option.

Interviewer: Mmm.

Dora: Or they don't understand boundaries? Lots of disabled people are labelled as paedophiles or as rapists or whatever. But they actually have never had anyone explain the rules to them. Or they haven't grown up in families where they've understood boundaries. Those sorts of things. Yeah. It's good. I like that work, a lot. Mmm.

Brendan is my only interviewee who has a visible physical disability. He spoke at length about his experiences, but because he has been physically disabled before he entered the BDSM scene, he has no point of comparison to a time when he was perceived as an able-bodied young man, and does not know for certain whether he would be treated differently if he was able-bodied or had a physical disability that was not immediately visible. He noted that kinky women were more receptive to his advances compared to the women he met at non-kinky or non-kink-friendly venues, but the limitations imposed by his medical condition on his body has meant that he faces many challenges, which able-bodied people can be oblivious to, in doing various BDSM activities.

Interviewer: Do you think it's something about people in the scene who... r- don't mind you being in a chair so much or is it...

Brendan: I'm not too sure to be honest. I've found... like at clubs and things – when I go out clubbing, I'll get... lots of attention from great girls. All wanting to sit on my knee and all that pity thing and I *hate* that.

Interviewer: Mmm.

Brendan: I don't want that. I don't want pity sex, or things. It's like no, fuck that. Sometimes it's fun. I've been through stages where it's great. But I don't want that. I don't want to... I want something real with someone who sees me for who I am. Uhm, which is funny 'cause sometimes I jump out of my chair and it's different and someone else will be playing in my chair and, I'll be fine with people. So, I do think they're more open to talking about things? And they're less worried that... I don't know. 'cause it's like, "Well, yeah, I can have sex but I'm not the most agile person of course. I'm not gonna be able to grab you and throw you around the room or hold you up like that." I can't physically do that so it's gonna have to work in other ways.

The majority of those who attend BDSM events do not have to contend with the additional issues that minority groups face. They do not have to insist that they 'want something real with someone who sees me for who I am' because they operate on the presumption that this is already the case, rather than being judged on some other characteristic that is salient to the

people around them. Nevertheless, those from minority groups who have to navigate the predominantly white, able-bodied scene tend to be aware of their ‘otherness’, and have often problematic, negative experiences that, though uncommon, are equally important to highlight.

Mainstreaming kink

In terms of kink in the public sphere, many interviewees argued that despite maintaining its taboo status, kink had already (irreversibly) gone mainstream. Though the interviews were conducted before the release of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* movie in 2015 and the subsequent publicity it has brought to BDSM, the literary version had already been in circulation for three years. While the rising popularity of BDSM was largely attributed to the *Fifty Shades* trilogy, interviewees were critical of these texts as well as of the movie *Secretary*, which was released in 2002. Interviewees believed that the negative stereotypes perpetuated by the media – through fictional works as well as documentaries about BDSM and news coverage and tabloid scandals about high-profile individuals involved in kinky activities or a seemingly kink-related death – have contributed to a distorted image of kink, creating a certain ‘type’ of person who is more likely to have kinky predilections, giving the general public an arsenal of incorrect, sometimes damaging assumptions about kinksters.

Few interviewees did not consider kink to be mainstream and debated whether kink ought to become mainstream. Brendan and George noted that the current event attendee size was optimal. They believed that having too many people at events would have a negative impact on peoples’ safety and enjoyment of events. In Brendan’s case, it was important that event attendees were going for personal reasons to explore kink for themselves rather than going to witness the ‘circus show’ and tell all their friends and family about the ‘freaks’ they saw. Whereas in George’s case, he noted that the current size of the event attendee pool made

internal community policing still viable; a larger community size would encounter increasing difficulties in trying to keep track of the individuals known to be predatory and/or unsafe. Anne spoke of ‘the new *Fifty Shades* crowd’ with notable disdain – they would enter the community fresh from reading what, to her, was essentially a ‘sexed-up romance novel’ without doing any preliminary research into what to expect at a ‘real BDSM event’, event etiquette, safety, consent and other important facets of ‘real life BDSM’. She considered that an incident involving one of these newcomers arising from their ignorance would be imminent and inevitable, implicitly combatting the mainstreaming trend and reinforcing the attitude that kink should be reserved for the (exclusive) pre-existing members based on an argument of safety and prior experience.

As noted by Danielle below, even within the pre-‘*Fifty Shades* crowd’ there is a division, albeit an unclear one, between those who are known to be predisposed to the more common, ‘vanilla’ kinks and uncommon, ‘extreme’ kinks. The non-accepting, quick-to-judge attitude that the non-kinky public is often criticised for is highlighted by Danielle as something that also exists within the kink scene itself.

Danielle: Ah, I mean it’s *nice*, it would be nice if it was more accepted but there’s- there’s some- there’s some things that won’t be.

Interviewer: Mmm.

Danielle: There’s just some things in life that won’t be accepted. And uhm... that’s uhm... I mean you look at all the people who have put [*A/N: on their FetLife profile*] “No bloodplay, I’m not gonna do bloodplay, I’m not gonna do cutting, I’m not gonna do- needles, I’m not gonna do bloodplay.” Uhm... but- is that- is that their own perception that it is wrong or painful? Or uhm... unclear or unsafe or is it the- the mass, perception? Because everybody has it in their profiles. That there’s something that’s not done. It’s just something that we don’t do.

Even the division between kinky and non-kinky is blurred because everyone who shares the

same context – geographically and temporally, inhabiting the same society in the same time period – is subjected to the same overarching discourses and are attuned to the same messages promulgated by the mass media that guide their judgements and behaviours. Are the tips and suggestions that any young women’s magazine offer to ‘spice up the bedroom’ or ‘reinvigorate your sex life’ considered kinky, or has sex simply evolved over time to include these activities? Interviewees often struggled with defining kink; Lea observed that what might be extremely deviant to one person could be barely considered erotic for another.

Regardless of whether one can pinpoint the shifting boundaries of kink, some interviewees believed that kink should remain a private, individualised venture versus the publicising and commercialising trends that they blame *Fifty Shades of Grey* for triggering, and they lamented the fact that kink entering the mainstream has ‘taken something away’ from their kink experience. Preston (2001) views this loss in terms of the transition from private erotic pleasures to the public, vocal activist realm of campaigning on the sexual politics front. The tour buses full of voyeuristic tourists with a passing interest in kink arriving at BDSM parties and venues have had an irreversible negative impact on the ‘real’ kinksters and diluted what – albeit exaggerated and romanticised in hindsight – was once a carnal, visceral, authentic experience. Dora below admits that some of the appeal of kink has stemmed from its transgressive nature, and eventual public acceptance would impact on her decision to continue exploring kink.

Dora: Uhm, but yeah, the internet has been... uhm, good in giving information but I think it’s also kind of... vanillarised it a bit or made it- made it very accessible to a range of people which again, is great, but, uh, I guess it’s- for me, what I quite liked about uhm... the being- the- the gay- the homosexual law reform thing, when it was against the law there was some sense of underground solidarity?

Interviewer: Yeap.

Dora: That was really great?

Interviewer: Mmm.

Dora: And I guess I see that BDSM could go down that track now where it's just become the same as- and what I- what I like about kink is that it, uhm, it can be- it's taboo, it's controversial, it's 'outside of'?

Interviewer: Yeap.

Dora: And when I see it being all mainstream, I think, "Ah, I don't know if I want that." [laughter] "To do that anymore." Now that I'm not sure what else there would be to do. Mmm.

Jennifer below interprets her attraction to a transgressive kink in terms of contending with the duality between her 'kinky' and 'real life' selves – for Dora and Jennifer, kink is inexorably transgressive, non- or perhaps even anti-heteronormative, and while both would describe kink going mainstream as 'taking something away' from their kink journeys, their understanding of exactly *what* is taken away or what is lost in the mainstreaming process are very different.

Jennifer: I don't get a kick out of kinky being taboo exactly but I do like having such two such different sides of my character that many people would think was surprising and paradoxical if they knew: the very respectable 'pillar of the community' me and the kinky slutty me. If kink was more widely accepted the paradox would be gone, and that would be a shame.

Media (mis)representations

Olivia: I *do* like the fact that it has opened up- kinky ideas to... uhm, kinky ideas to more vanillas. Like you see more of that stuff in stores. Like I like the fact that mums are reading it. Just wish it was more- it was better represented.

While interviewees had overwhelmingly negative comments about the narratives of kink that are pervasive in the public sphere – notably, the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy and the movie *Secretary* – interviewees mentioned three positive points that have arisen out of these

fictional works. The first has been variously termed as the commercialisation or monetisation of BDSM. Where once sex shops were predominantly stocked with BDSM paraphernalia that cost hundreds or thousands of dollars, the popularity of *Fifty Shades of Grey* has ushered in a new wave of mass-produced, low-quality, low-cost equipment that is affordable. One can now acquire a set of basic bedroom kink items (which could include items like handcuffs, blindfold, feather tickler) for less than \$50. More specialist equipment such as custom-made whips and floggers or BDSM furniture (spanking benches, St. Andrew's crosses, bondage-enhanced beds, and so on) still cost upward of \$600 – and the quality of equipment in someone's possession has now become an indirect marker for their 'authenticity' as a kinkster³³ – but the monetary entry level for kink gear is now much lower than it was in the pre-*Fifty Shades* era.

Secondly, the proliferation of fictional kink narratives combined with the increased visibility that is part of the commercialisation process has introduced kink in a fairly non-threatening manner to 'vanilla people'³⁴. Peter was introduced to kink by women who had read *Fifty Shades of Grey* but he felt too intimidated to go to an actual BDSM event, and he credited them for his serendipitous foray into kink which eventually led him to finding a Mistress

³³ This is certainly the case in Weiss's (2011) affluent San Francisco/Silicon Valley community as well, however there is a do-it-yourself (DIY) culture in New Zealand where being able to make or fix something without enlisting third party support is a valued trait. Thus, self-made or homemade equipment is often praised for its ingenuity, uniqueness and the countercapitalist statement it implicitly makes; DIY gear is not looked down upon or treated with as much derision as that implied in Weiss's (2011) community.

³⁴ Interestingly, the extent to which 'vanilla people' are actually 'vanilla' has not come up in the interviews – those interviewees who were jokingly asked if 'vanilla' meant solely having sex for procreative purposes in the missionary position laughed and said no, but they started giving more thought to the nebulous concept of 'vanilla' once I started asking if slight variations (e.g. doggy style, rough sex, sensation play like tickling or touching someone while they are blindfolded) would begin to be considered kinky. Despite some interviewees noting that kink is an ill-defined, subjective concept, there was an assumption that 'vanilla' did not need to be explained because we have a shared understanding of what is meant by 'vanilla people'.

whom he is wholly devoted to. For Peter, narratives like *Fifty Shades* present to the vanilla public the alternative possibilities in life that could be explored in a way that would not leave people feeling as if they were abnormal or strange for harbouring seemingly unorthodox fantasies and desires. For other interviewees, though, these fictional narratives are a double-edged sword – they could have a normalising effect on kink, but these depictions of kink are so grossly distorted that what is being normalised may end up being non-consensual, oppressive sexual violence rather than safe, sane and consensual BDSM. The normalisation process that kink has undergone is also limited in its impact – what is normalised by the media is what has been termed ‘lite’ kink. ‘Lite’ kink is primarily sex-or orgasm-oriented – the kinds of activities that the abovementioned mass-produced *Fifty Shades* sex toys packages cater for, such as the use of blindfolds and handcuffs during intercourse. What interviewees have variously termed ‘real’, ‘proper’, ‘extreme’ or ‘hardcore’ kink, which could be more sadomasochistically-oriented, remain marginalised – bizarre activities that are relegated to the realm of arthouse/short films, artistic pornography and seedy documentaries rather than mainstream Hollywood movies.

Jennifer provides an unusually long exegesis about the movie *9½ Weeks* (1986) which had kinky themes below. She acknowledges that ‘it was a good movie’ insofar as the audience was given a window into some of the activities that kinky people do, whilst simultaneously decrying its gender stereotypes and non-consensual and objectifying undertones.

Jennifer: I haven’t seen many kinky movies. I recorded *9½ Weeks* off the television when I was about 35 and watched it compulsively when I was alone in the house. I found it fascinating, and shocking, but, you know, even then I didn’t recognise what the couple were doing as ‘kinky’. I can’t remember what the ‘moral of the story’ was. Perhaps there wasn’t one. The main character was dominant and sadistic, but I don’t think there was any suggestion that he was a bad person or sick. They played all sorts

of standard D/s games, including sensation play with food and sex in public, and there was a fair amount of impact play. I've just googled the synopsis of this 1986 movie. She wanted love, he wanted to have fun with her. She was confused by the way she was being drawn into the escalating kinky stuff they were doing. But it's not clear from the online synopsis whether she feels she was being coerced into play that she wasn't comfortable with, or whether she needed more emotional commitment from him, relationship-wise. Without seeing the movie again I couldn't say whether the makers of the film were intending to portray him as sick and manipulative, or simply not good at relationships. I must watch it again. If the movie was trying to portray BDSM as an acceptable and healthy form of sexuality I'm afraid it failed, with me anyway. And that despite the fact that I was turned on by what I was seeing. I was particularly disapproving of her striptease to 'You can leave your hat on'. The singer (Joe Cocker) is carefully stage managing the woman's performance - 'lift up your dress ... go over there, stand on that chair, raise your arms, now shake 'em'. I didn't get that the objectification was consensual, and that was probably because there wasn't any discussion between the two of them that suggested she might find it satisfying, or that it was a valid option in her expression of her sexuality, or that she could enjoy and consent willingly to being dominated and beaten. There was a lot of power exchange, and we didn't hear any of the negotiation that has to go with that. It just happened. In general though, I think it was a good movie... At the least, it was saying 'people do this sort of stuff, and the world keeps turning'.

Fifty Shades of Grey in particular has generated considerable backlash within the Auckland community as well as worldwide (Downing, 2013). While many other interviewees have no interest in promulgating any messages that are related to the *Fifty Shades* franchise, Tyler bemoaned that the community-wide critical response to *Fifty Shades* is a missed opportunity for capitalising on the popularity of the franchise by raising public awareness and better educating the vanilla public about BDSM in real life. His mention of reporting later on in his quotation is in reference to the recurring sensationalist television news and tabloid scandals about high-profile individuals engaging in BDSM.

Tyler: Uhm... . . . I *believe* that... it- uhm... 'mommy porn' 'acceptable porn' et cetera like *Fifty Shades* has in fact done an *enormous* amount of pro-kink work for the uh, for SM play and for kink play. Uhm, it's- it's only unfortunate that, here in New Zealand, nobody recognises it for a fact. And they- just decide to ignore it. If it was me, I'd be setting up franchises of *Fifty Shades of Grey* parties everywhere, and- and

and basically doing it all- all- almost on a vanilla basis. Uhm, but here it's- it's- "Oh we can't- we can't engage with that process, I mean we'll- we'll pretend it goes away." Uhm... whether the film's going to be any good, I don't know. Uhm, where- where- and- but reporting, reporting as, in terms of television has been universally, awful and for a very long time. You *must* remember that the average reporter, has a- has a very limited uhm, capability, a limited brief, they- they've got to put about 1 minute 30 on air, maybe 2 minutes at most. And, to sell story. If it bleeds, it's going to lead.

The final positive point to have arisen out of *Fifty Shades* is that it has provided a common language by which kinksters can engage with vanilla people about BDSM. It can be difficult for vanilla people who are willing to engage with kink and kinksters without any prior exposure to or knowledge about the BDSM vernacular and BDSM subculture to participate in any meaningful dialogue about kink, so drawing comparisons to something like *Fifty Shades* enables people to talk and think about kink without having to first learn all the jargon and the nuances involved in issues like safety, consent and communication.

Anya: I think it's helped slightly. I think it has helped. Because it gives people a c-, almost like a context, a context and a language, so if- like if I did decide to tell my parents, "Oh I'm into BDSM," they might not understand what that meant. But if I said to them, you know, "I'm- I'm into the kind of stuff like in *Fifty Shades of Grey*," you know, I- they would understand that. It gives people a common language.

These positive outcomes of how BDSM has been interpreted and represented in the media were overshadowed by an overwhelmingly negative, critical response from the majority of the interviewees. In particular, interviewees were apprehensive about the consequences that would stem from kink being portrayed badly and inaccurately. Outdated views about kink being morally wrong and/or indicative of individual psychopathology are still being disseminated by works like *Fifty Shades* and *Secretary*, and news outlets have a tendency to scandalise and sensationalise any incidences of kink-related activities/deaths. In particular,

those who have had direct experiences with the media, such as those who have worked in the media or have been interviewed by journalists, have not had positive experiences.

Caitlin: ...media. Yes... Uhm [laughter] from... my experience with- *that*, you've got- good representations or- or you've got, you've got media that have uhm... good uhm, reasons, good... a good re- [sigh] what's the freaking word. Uhm, good intentions, in terms of *why* they wanna come down and find out about it, why they wanna sit down and interview you, uhm... and with all the interviews and everything that I've done, over the years, uhm... I know that Edward has got to the point where he's like, "Fuck, if anybody else wants to fucking ask me to be in an article and everything, they can get *fucked*." Sorry about all the swearing but, because they gleam out of... they gleam out of the interview, what they want? Whether it be if they wanna portray it in a good light, then they'll take the good stuff. They wanna slam it? And throw some shit at it? Then they'll pull the- the shit. They wanna, put it down and go, "These kinksters are fucked in the head, they're all mental cases, and... you guys all need to be committed?" Then they'll do that.

As described above, the media is perceived to be a manipulative conglomeration of self-interested individuals who reach out to kinksters and pursue their stories with an agenda that they are seeking to strengthen through selective, sometimes out-of-context usage of interview excerpts. One of the local BDSM venues had been involved in a media scandal some years ago where media personnel came to an event, participated in some activities unsafely³⁵, had made some recordings in secret and published a story the following day. Event attendees were outraged – especially those who have a vested interest in remaining closeted, who are understandably wary of media and even researcher involvement with the kinky community. Though these are few in number, there are kinksters who have explicitly stated they want to have nothing to do with me or have been outwardly verbally hostile, and definitely do not want anything about them published anywhere. The fallout from that media debacle has had a long-term negative impact on the local scene.

³⁵ It should be noted that the more experienced crowd would not be willing to do any sort of BDSM activities with someone whom they have only met for the first time that night.

Above and beyond the impact that media representations of BDSM would have on kinksters personally, interviewees expressed concern about the potential consequences that the inexperienced - often pejoratively labelled 'newbies', 'novices' and 'amateurs' - might face if they engaged in BDSM practices based on what they have seen and read in mainstream media without doing adequate background research. Interviewees describe this as a threefold problem - the media's portrayal of kink is unsafe, characters in fictional narratives are in unhealthy relationships, and the audience is given unrealistic expectations of what BDSM is like in reality. The unsafe factor arises from the media focusing only on the titillating aspects of BDSM – featuring only the apex of BDSM activities rather than the hours of meticulous preparation that goes beforehand and the wind-down at the end of those activities.

Commercial BDSM is very different from BDSM in the average bedroom; the 'final product' such as the highlights of a photoshoot of a rope suspension does not give an accurate reflection of the crew who had done half a day or a whole day's work behind the scenes of booking and setting up a site, testing the load on suspension points to ensure the ceiling does not collapse and the model does not fall, and setting up the lighting and backdrop for the photographer before the hours of ropework required to do the actual suspension. The crew, preparations, setting up the set, camerawork, editing, debriefing and other background work required are also notably absent in BDSM pornography. People who decide to engage in BDSM activities without doing the necessary checks and preparations beforehand may injure themselves or others in the process.

Ella, who is very involved in the kink scene with organising events, providing resources to newcomers and giving advice to inexperienced kinksters, especially those who are struggling with their polyamorous relationships, describes below how she conceptualises her various

roles in the community. To her, kink is very ‘ordinary’ – similar to any other hobby which requires event organisation and mentoring – and her community involvement bears little resemblance to what the media portrays about BDSM.

Ella: Uh... Most, things in the media focus on the fun, sexy bits and not on the... what it’s really like? Uhm... so like, you get things like *Fifty Shades of Abuse* and... uhm... even like *Secretary* and things like that.

Interviewer: Yeap.

Ella: *Most* of it deals with... the sensationalist stuff? Like whether someone self-harms or... whether... uhm... whether... there’s contracts and shit involved and all this kinda thing. Where for... *most* kinksters, it’s either a small circumscribed part of their existing relationship, or it’s part of the community, just kind of being? Most of the time? You’re not really... doing exciting things and fucking, you’re... having coffee and deciding how you wanna run events and... it’s probably quite similar to Rotary, it’s like you know [laughter]

Interviewer: [laughter] That’s true.

Ella: But you’d never run a story on Rotary, you’d run a story on, you know, what they did in South Auckland³⁶ that time. Uhm... and for us it’s, you know, what you did in that South Auckland dungeon that time.

Interviewer: [laughter]

Ella: Uhm [laughter] Not, you know. Talking to people on FetLife and mentoring them through uhm, the fact that their partner is... may- may not actually be kinky and... [laughter]

Interviewer: Yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah.

Ella: This kinda stuff. Yeah.

For both *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *Secretary*, the heterosexual couples featured are involved in unhealthy relationships. The male protagonists are controlling and coercive - in *Fifty Shades of Grey* he is an invasive, intrusive, persistent presence in the life of the woman he is

³⁶ South Auckland is a poorly-defined area encompassing some of the poorest neighbourhoods in the city, with higher than average rates of violent/street crime.

pursuing. The females are presented as weak and docile, and have the characteristic literary tragic qualities - in *Secretary* in particular, she has a history of mental illness and self-harm, and kink is used as a vehicle for transforming her self-harming habits from being portrayed and understood as destructive and psychopathological to being erotic and pleasurable (Keeseey, 2012). There is little evidence of characters' prior research into the activities they are doing, the issue of consent is not debated, and despite how they are presented, the characters and their relationships are dysfunctional. Combined with the unsafe portrayal of kink, the audience would have unrealistic expectations of kink in reality if they base their opinions solely on these fictional narratives.

The issue with any narratives that feature kink is that the focus on kink makes kink stand out as an unusual trait - the story becomes about an atypical kinky couple rather than an 'ordinary' couple who happens to have kinky interests. This exacerbates the notions that kink is an abnormal, unnatural, morally wrong problem to be addressed, and having kinky predilections is something people ought to feel ashamed or guilty about, which could potentially contribute to internalised anxiety and a reluctance for people to discuss their kink with others. The overall sentiment conveyed by interviewees is that due to the way kink has been publicly misrepresented to the public, the media has done more harm than good.

Anne: With regards to books like *Fifty Shades of Grey*? It makes people think- it's the whole unreal expectations thing? They've taken the Cinderella story, given it a helicopter and a couple of whips. It's dangerous because it's- they make it too easy? Uhm... like, you could just grab some nipple clamps and put them on, everyone seems to lose... they seem to lose the fact that he has researched all this stuff. Like there's one scene I think where she comes to him, like, it's his birthday or something and she comes to him with a box of all these kinky things and she's like, "You can use these on me" and he's like all, "Oh this butt plug's too big and these nipple clamps are too hard" and he's actually done research on all this crap?... Uhm... and

then the other- kind of... major uhm... sort of kinky movie is *Secretary*. Which involves *massive* elements of non-consensual stuff. Yay. And she's also using kink as, uhm, counselling? So is he. Fun times. And then preaching to the perverted. Which, puts up the issue that all kink has to be sexual, all kink has to be- dysfunctional ... These are the media representations of kink? No... why not like, "hi, it's a normal, normal family situation," you know, white picket fence, all that kinda stuff. "Hey, the kids are out at a sleepover, we've got the house to ourselves. Let's go down to the basement and break out the like, whips and stuff from our *locked* chest that's hidden from the small children, have a fun time, a bit of aftercare, sit down and watch a movie and wait for the kids to come home. Ooo, yeah." You know?

Vanilla assumptions

When asked about what some of the stereotypes that vanilla people may have about kinky people, interviewees tended to cite those that would have stemmed largely from public misrepresentations of kink. Kinksters believed that many non-kinky people assumed that kinksters were abnormal, dysfunctional people with histories of child abuse (or alternatively, succinctly termed 'damaged goods'), and kinky events were highly sexual with a room full of strangers engaging in 'doggy piles' and 'group orgies'. 'Normal', 'professional' people would not be interested in kink. Interviewees noted that while they have encountered few dysfunctional kinksters in their midst, there are dysfunctional people in any special interest group. These inaccurate assumptions make caricatures out of kinksters and how they envision BDSM events operating is much 'worse' than what actually happens in practice. Further, interviewees did not believe that this divide between the vanilla world's assumptions and kinksters' lives in praxis could be rectified, because the vanilla people they have spoken with have no intention of going to events and experiencing them first-hand.

The reality as told by interviewees is that kinksters are capable parents, implying that one of the unspoken vanilla assumptions is that kinksters are incapable of being good parents - they might be dangerous to children in terms of violence or in terms of being 'hypersexual'.

Interviewees insisted that, by and large, most kinksters are 'normal' people with 'normal' lives, 'normal' jobs and 'normal' families - anyone from any walk of life is equally likely to dabble in kink regardless of their ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, physical/mental health status and other (what kinksters would consider irrelevant) categories. Interviewees like Roslyn have highlighted that, while most kinksters might be sexually liberal, some are just as conservative if not more so than the average vanilla person in terms of political issues like immigration, social welfare, healthcare, education, and so on.

Melissa: I'm a, uhm, they [A/N: referring to her children] are most definitely one of the best things I've ever done in my life [laughter] Or the 3 best things I've done in my life, and uhm... that- there- the children and... and my relationship are my primary focus in life.

Interviewer: Mmm.

Melissa: And... it used to be work?

Interviewer: Mmhmm.

Melissa: I'm a professional woman. But. That's *kinda* changed over the last 5 or 6 years. That's- that is my passion in life, I've got a passion for my job, but it is, uhm, it is my life's calling but it's not everything.

While interviewees have complained about the frequency and intensity of intra-community drama, often manifesting as occasional explosive outbursts on FetLife or gossip within cliques at events, Jennifer explains below that this stems from the highly-charged nature of kink – kinky people, kinky relationships, and kinky activities – rather than it being a reflection of kinksters having defective personalities.

Jennifer: I had a normal loving upbringing and was never sexually abused, and my marriage lasted 28 years. My masochism and my submission (when it manifests itself) have nothing to do with the way I conduct myself or see myself in the rest of my life.

I suffered from panic attacks, anxiety and depression when I was being blackmailed and stalked and that lasted several years, but had no mental illness that predated my interest in kink. ... A difficult past does not predispose you to being kinky. However it does predispose you to have difficulty with personal relationships and more likely to be triggered by certain people acting in certain ways. The nature of kink (edgy, intense, power exchange) is more likely to trigger an emotional meltdown than - say a chess club. Therefore, you are likely to observe more meltdowns within the kinky community than within a chess club. There are probably as many chess club members with a difficult past as there are kinky people with a difficult past, but chess does not trigger meltdowns.

With regard to how sexual kink and kink events are, although kink is widely conceptualised within and outside of the kinky community as being intrinsically sexual, for some interviewees it is not necessarily a sexual experience. What is meant by the term 'sexual' has been difficult for interviewees to define, but if a narrow definition of 'sexual' is employed as being orgasm-oriented, requiring physical intercourse involving genitals and/or foreplay/teasing leading up to sexual activities, then these interviewees would be adamant that kink is not sexual for them. They may use terms like erotic, sensual, intimate or pleasurable, but they concede that this is because they lack the vocabulary to adequately encapsulate their experiences. In institutional settings, the lived and embodied experiences of BDSM practitioners have traditionally been explored and framed sexually – in medicine, 'sexual sadism disorder' and 'sexual masochism disorder' are lumped into the same category of paraphilic disorders in the DSM-V alongside 'fetishistic disorder' and 'paedophilic disorder' (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In academia BDSM is almost always classified as a branch of sex and sexualities studies – research tends to approach kink with a sexual filter, for example with questionnaires asking participants about sexual experiences prior to learning about/engaging in BDSM (e.g. Sandnabba et al., 2002). The extent to which kink is sexual is largely dependent on individuals' perceptions and experiences of kink. Contrast the various responses by interviewees below to the general overarching question, 'is

kink sexual for you?’

Lea: I don’t do BDSM for sex. In fact, there’s no sex involved.

Dora: Uhm, I was gonna be flogged by a woman and it was gonna be a non-sexual thing? And uhm, in the end I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t get my head around the fact... that, and I- I- yeah I don’t know, lots of people will do this kind of stuff. They’ll play and there’s no sexual component to it. And that’s not my thing. At all. But I am kind of interested in- people that do that. That kind of play.

Helen: You can see why they get the wrong perception? Of it all. And it’s *all about sex!* Well in some cases 99% of it is. I’m not. I’m in the 1% ... It’s not all about sex, and this is the thing, that’s like the elephant in the room? It’s that sexual kind of, “Oh, let’s play. I wanna play with you.” Now play... in some peoples’ heads, means BDSM. In some male Doms’ case, it’s “Let’s have sex.” Why didn’t they say that in the first place?

Interestingly, Dora believes that ‘lots of people’ will play with ‘no sexual component’ involved while Helen claims ‘99% of it’ is about sex. Of course, it is likely that BDSM is sometimes sexual for some people if they are sexually attracted to other kinkster(s) and the mood and the atmosphere is appropriate, and BDSM is not sexual at other times for when that sexual attraction is absent. Kink does not necessarily have to be a dichotomous sexual or non-sexual choice – Olivia has a more nuanced approach to the question, ‘is kink sexual for you?’

Olivia: Uhm, right now, kink is sexual for me? I- I choose if I want kink to be sexual for me. Uhm... s... oh, they’re- there’re definitely people where, uhm, sometimes they do go hand-in-hand just because if I’m really attracted to someone, I do also want that. But... I’ve- I’ve played with people where, it took a long time for us to get sexual, because I wanted to make sure that I was at a level that I was comfortable with? Uhm... kink can totally be not sexual though. Like- Like I said, I’ve been kinky with people... that... uhm, I have never had sex with.

Newmahr's (2010a) ethnographic study has questioned in detail the place that sex occupies within BDSM. Sex *could* be scripted into a BDSM scene, BDSM experiences could be experienced sexually in terms of sexual arousal, and if unscripted, sex could still happen in a BDSM context – but BDSM does not neatly equate with 'kinky sex' and BDSM is not 'all about sex'. Using sex as an explanatory model for BDSM does not sufficiently encompass everyone's experiences.

In the previous chapters kink has been alternately described as a hobby, a means of achieving an emotional and experiential 'high', and as a form of catharsis or release (Beckmann, 2007). Particularly for those who have taken up a specialist skill within BDSM – such as learning how to do aesthetic rope bondage, how to crack a single-tail whip, or what is known as fire play which involves putting rubbing alcohol on someone's skin and lighting it on fire – BDSM can be rewarding in terms of mastery of and achievements within that specific skillset.

Anne: It's not, like... I'm getting beaten and all of a sudden I'm getting 'turned on'. ... My kink is on one side and my sex is on the other and... yeah. You're not gonna get into my pants just 'cause you tied me up and spanked me. ... So. I don't know. I wouldn't really say I was a 'sexual deviant'. I'm still a prude. *[Interviewer laughs]* I'm all like... "You- you do *what?* In public? And- and- and- *what?*" *[laughter]* And when people are like "So why do you do rope? Does it like, make you horny? Are you gonna come?" Like all of t- and you just sit there and look at them like, "What is this profanity you speak of?" *[Interviewer laughs]* "It's rope. It's amusing and it's nice and it's- it's not always about sex! Oh my god." *[laughter]* And you get like a little bit offended. And then you realise that there are people that actually are into it for those exact reasons and it's not such an unreasonable question.

BDSM has been previously conceptualised as ‘serious leisure’, or a form of leisure activity that is career-like in its progression – it requires a monetary investment from the outset and continues to incur costs over time, involves the gradual cumulative acquisition of specific skills and relevant knowledge over a period of time, and yields durable benefits and rewards in the long-term (Williams and Walker, 2006). For people like Anne who have taken up these ‘careers’ in specific BDSM activities, any sexually gratifying elements of their serious leisure activities may be perceived to be incidental or peripheral bonuses. Her statement ‘it’s not always about sex’ could imply that sometimes, under the right circumstances, rope could involve sexual activity – but rope itself is enjoyable and self-rewarding, and sex is not the central focus.

In Peter’s case, impact play gives him a ‘high’ which he describes below as a release of endorphins in his system. In previous studies this high has also been articulated using the language associated with spirituality, transcendence and healing (e.g. Bean, 2001; Beckmann, 2007; Horton, 2013; Portillo, 2001; Vesta, 2001), but this discourse was not used by any of my interviewees.

Peter: Uhm... as a submissive, getting... gently warmed up to a point where you can take heavier and harder hits from different objects, found it releases first adrenaline, and if it goes far enough and you can take enough pain, then the- endorphins release. And one of the first 5 play parties I went to, I was a bit like piggy in the middle, and I took everything I could, and it took me 2 weeks before I even realised how.... Sort of high I was? On the endorphins?

Beyond a physiological chemical release in the brain and throughout the body, some interviewees could also enjoy BDSM for the proverbial emotional/psychological release, which is described as relieving the stress and tension that has built up over the course of a

difficult day, or life hardships in general. People employ different methods of de-stressing and relaxing – some escape or lose themselves in books, video games, rewatching old movies, doing outdoor activities and so on, and others do BDSM. In this way it is conceived of both as a hobby/leisure activity and as a release.

Lea: Sir's like "Oh I'll take you to the cross and give you a beating." I was like "Eh. Okay. Whatever." It was just meant to be a normal, you know, beating. After about... 'cause we always play music. ... 2 songs into it and I'm like bawling like a baby... and... no idea why. Actually I did have some stuff going on in life and... t- I just let go. And I was just bawling. ... And he just knew. And then he just kept going. Didn't stop. And... I felt so much better after it. I was just like... uhm, it was one of those, just, complete releases which I'd never actually had.

Margaret: When I'm, you know, particularly when like, things are crazy at work and I spend all day having, you know, telling people what to do and... you know. Being the- the bad guy and stuff which I don't wanna do. I- that's- I hate that. ... So... I find it really quite therapeutic?

Interviewer: Mmhmm.

Margaret: Uhm, to have... quite a- a hard sort of, SM session I suppose. And uhm... I really enjoy uh, crying as well? As... a type of stress relief.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Margaret: Yeah. And it just- makes everything balance out for me [laughter]

Yet another dimension that few interviewees introduced was those who enjoy BDSM purely because it's fun. BDSM was an intrinsically rewarding activity for them and acted as its own positive reinforcer to keep kinksters engaged and wanting more. These were the people with responses like 'I do it, I enjoy it, who cares why?' and they rejected the notion that there must always be a logical, rational reason behind their decision-making processes.

These are just some of the alternative reasons why kinksters engage in their preferred activities. Those who do conceptualise of their preferences as being inherently sexual

certainly get sexually-related benefits from doing kink, but kinksters perceive and interpret their kink experiences in complex, multi-layered ways, and trying to portray them using a reductive, sexual/non-sexual divisive dichotomy does not adequately encapsulate these experiences.

Conclusion

Without accounting for the innumerable population of 'bedroom kinksters' who are closeted and do not attend public events, the Auckland kink scene is comprised of approximately between 200 and 300 regular/semi-regular event attendees and many more who are predominantly active on FetLife and/or attend only special annual/biannual events. What interviewees have commented on relates to their personal kink journeys and their experiences of public play rather than private play; what people who go to events do or are willing to explore in a public setting can be very different from those who do kink at home.

While interviewees span from their early 20s to mid-60s across the gender spectrum, the scene is predominantly white and most have at least the disposable income required to pay for event entrance fees and BDSM equipment costs. While events may cost between \$20 and \$30 to attend, quality BDSM equipment can run anywhere between \$200 and \$1500 especially if kinksters are buying them in from overseas. This by no means makes kink a homogeneous experience, but it does mean that those interviewees who offered their perspective may come from similar walks of life. Additionally, the ethnographic method does require intensive involvement in the scene on the researcher's part, and participants tended to be people who were at least willing to become acquainted with me before agreeing to be interviewed.

The kink 'community' and its members are not as open and welcoming as they purport to be, and not all prospective newcomers are treated equally inclusively. Paralleling the media's demarcation of 'lite' (naughty, erotic, fun) and 'extreme' (painful, deviant, bizarre) BDSM, some kinks are more socially accepted than others. With the caveat that different interviewees had good and bad things to say about the 'community' because different people have different kink preferences and therefore were received and responded to differently by other kinksters, despite enforcing mantras like 'your kink is not my kink' there is still a pervasive judgemental attitude within the 'community'.

Interviewees may not have internalised what they perceive to be the negative presumptions about kinksters that 'vanilla people' have, but many explicitly rejected the notion that kinksters have troubled pasts and are socially maladjusted people with dysfunctional relationships. Regardless of whether they attributed the origin of their kink journeys to essentialist, constructionist or a mixture of both paradigms, interviewees tended to have had adequate time to grapple with their kinkster identities and over time have become comfortable with their level of engagement with kink, with their bodies and with what they witness and experience at the events they attend. Many feel they have acquired enhanced communication skills and strategies since engaging in BDSM, being better able to communicate their wants and needs, which has had a positive impact particularly for their romantic relationships.

The different degrees of centrality of one's kink identity to one's sense of self has meant that some interviewees are more committed to the lifestyle, immersed in the scene, involved with hosting/organising events, and have more kinkster than 'vanilla' acquaintances compared to

others. Interviewees spoke of a duality or having to manage dual identities as they distinguished between 'kink' and 'real life' as two separate worlds they inhabit, and many had a vested interest in keeping those two worlds apart from each other, fearing the repercussions for their families, careers and potential legal action that could be taken against them.

Public play parties, fetish balls and other kink events bear little resemblance to the media's binary, dichotomous portrayals of either hypersexualised/pornographic/explicitly sexual imagery or dimly-lit dungeons where people are restrained and tortured. Events are monitored by hosts and/or venue staff, and attendees are expected to adhere to the venue's rules and follow unspoken BDSM etiquette. Given its small, manageable population size, the Auckland 'community' is still able to police itself. Consent violators, sexual predators and other unwanted guests are systematically ostracised at events and on FetLife.

This initial foray into Auckland's kinky 'community' was primarily explorative in nature, and several avenues could be pursued further in future research, including:

- Regional differences, comparing a more cosmopolitan, urban environment like Auckland to small towns or rural spaces. Outside of Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch, kinky communities in other parts of New Zealand tend to operate within regions rather than individual cities e.g. Waikato/Bay of Plenty, the KNOTS group (Kinky North Of The South) covering Nelson, Motueka, Picton, Blenheim, etc.
- How individuals with disabilities (a) interpret their bodily and psychological experiences of BDSM and attempt to convey their experiences to others, (b) are perceived and interacted with by able-bodied BDSM practitioners, (c) discuss their thoughts and experiences with caretakers and healthcare professionals, and so on.

- The ways in which members of ethnic minorities position themselves and contextualise their experiences in a predominantly white environment – for example, if they feel they are perceived as ‘exotic’, how do they grapple with the potential accompanying sense of objectification and fetishisation?
- When BDSM practitioners pursue legal recourse for non-consensual activities, how is BDSM perceived by those involved in the judicial procedure such as law enforcement officers, medical staff, psychological assessment personnel and legal officers? Is New Zealand equally susceptible to the biased perceptions and discriminatory practices compared to historical legal precedents in the United States and United Kingdom?

Because this study was conducted using ethnography, I was only able to interview people who were, on some level, comfortable to acknowledge and disclose their BDSM proclivities in a semi-public arena (either at events or on their online profiles). I was not able to access the population that only engages in BDSM in the privacy of their own homes and/or is not on or not aware of FetLife. Additionally, as with any other ethnographer, those who were willing to participate were on amicable, or at the very least, neutral terms with me; there will no doubt be numerous BDSM event attendees who did not get along well with me, and/or do not welcome the presence of a researcher on the scene. At times I have loathed my researcher identity and struggled with the notion of becoming ‘too involved’ with the local scene or with specific individuals, while at other times I have become comfortable with the near-complete lack of researcher objectivity that is constituent of ethnographic research (Mruck & Mey, 2007) and have embraced the opportunity to have an academic facet in my involvement.

As an ‘insider’ I may have access to a greater amount of shared language and shared experiences with my participants (Liamputtong, 2007), and thus I may be more prone to not questioning my participants as deeply or thoroughly compared to a researcher who would have recruited non-acquaintances through advertisements. I may know personal details about specific individuals that could have influenced the direction of the line of inquiry in the interview. The reader may perceive these to be shortcomings of this study or of the ethnographic method in general. On the other hand, participants may not have been equally willing to communicate openly and honestly about their intensely personal kink proclivities, fantasies, experiences (both positive and negative) and their musings and reflections on this aspect of their lives to an ‘outsider’ (Dymock, 2011).

In conducting these interviews and presenting the results, I can claim only to be sharing what I perceive to be the highlights of the narratives generated between my participants and I within the interview setting. The state of the BDSM scene, demographics of BDSM practitioners, levels of public acceptance/tolerance and the legal status of BDSM activities differ across countries and cultures (SM International, 2006). Thus there may not be any representative, generalisable, universal answers embedded within the participants’ accounts that could be used to explain any idiosyncrasies about the Auckland or the New Zealand BDSM scene, or indeed BDSM communities, events or practitioners around the world. There are only personal experiences recounted in interviews which ought to be regarded as sites of spontaneous data creation between interviewer and interviewee (Yeo et al., 2014).

But the burgeoning popularity of fictional narratives like the *Fifty Shades of Grey* franchise will inevitably change the landscape of this pre-*Fifty Shades* scene, in Auckland, New Zealand and other communities around the world. These fictional narratives do not accurately

reflect what BDSM and BDSM practitioners are like in reality. Newcomers, who do not do adequate and sufficient background research in issues surrounding consent, safety, setting and enforcing limits, communicating desires and so on, could potentially be vulnerable to greater physical and emotional risks. While the media could raise awareness about BDSM, encourage people to openly engage in dialogue about kink and perhaps eventually enable the curious and closeted to explore kink without fear of being judged and discriminated against, media portrayals of BDSM in their current forms serve little purpose beyond titillating audiences with fairy tale romances and sensationalist sex scandals.

Epilogue

Journal Entry #67³⁷

After an extended period of ‘abstinence’ (9? 10 months?) - the throes of real life had imprisoned my days in neverending quotidian monotonous cycles and I lost track of time somewhere in between - I went to a few events towards the end of this year. Not many - enough to count on one hand.

The world has changed too much. I went to the very last event of one of the main venues. The owners are in the midst of splitting up and the club had to go. Sat down with a friend for most of the night - introverts have a nasty habit of latching on to one of few familiar faces in the room - spoke to various acquaintances, but I didn’t know half the people there. I’m used to

³⁷ This is the final entry in the journal I had kept during my time in the scene, written on the evening of 15 December 2015. It is reproduced here verbatim to function both as a sample from the journal and as closing comments to end the chapter. Even though the ethnographic study concluded in 2014, I continued to sporadically attend local BDSM events. It was important for me to make the point that it was never my intention to only become involved with the Auckland BDSM scene because of my doctoral project.

people knowing me without me knowing them - 'LordStark', 'that Asian chick', not hard to spot - but there was a mutual lack of sense of connection there. Even among the familiar faces there were a lot of "Oh I'm not with him anymore," and "Yeaah I've been experimenting with XYZ for a few months now." Pity - I seemed to have tripped and and faltered and stumbled accidentally into my life-shaped TARDIS, and I left this old world behind. How did that happen?

I went to the last event of the year at another venue. "Welcome home," a friend said with a smile. 'Thank you, but I don't feel at home,' I wanted to reply. Welcome home - to the same place with all the same furnishings where they all used to be last I was here, but the room is teeming with strangers. Who are all these people? Did they only show up in the past 9 months? Have I been so attention-blind?

"Thanks," was all I ended up saying, with a big smile of my own. I filled the hollow in my chest using banter with old friends.

Was there a point in doing an ethnographic study if the landscape now has changed completely - was different before I arrived, would never be the same again, is always changing, ephemeral and temperamental? I took a black and white photograph in a digital world, I made a VHS recording in a room lit up by smartphones, my Dalí pocket watches have melted as winter turned to spring. My stubborn, stalwart essentialist roots guffawed at the surface-level meaninglessness of capturing elusive truths about peoples' lives amidst the shifting sands of time.

I would be lying if I said I've made peace with my soggy pocket watches. But everything we do is just moments in time that are meaningful now and lost in the next few minutes. My snapshots are important - to me if no one else. I never intended to exit stage left so abruptly, but I'm glad to have been involved in most of the scenes between Acts II and III before my time was up.

Chapter Four: The Vanilla World

Study Two: Public Opinion Survey³⁸

Research Question:

How does the public perceive BDSM practitioners in New Zealand?

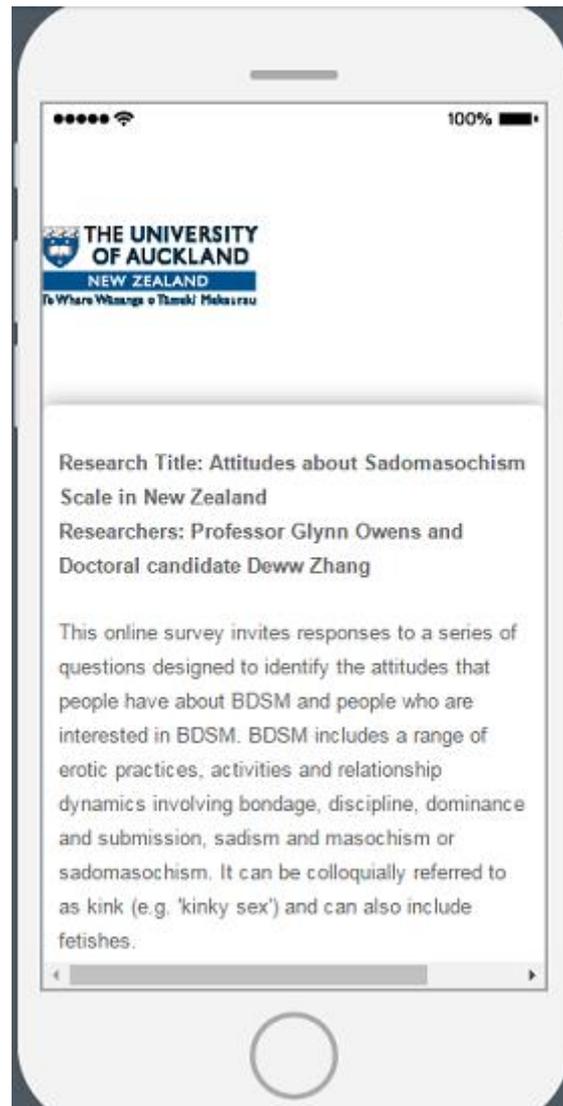


Figure 4. Mobile preview of the survey administered in this study. Screenshot obtained from survey host www.qualtrics.com.

³⁸ Portions of this study were presented at the joint Sex and the State 4/Persons and Sexualities 8 conference in September 2015.

Introduction

The previous chapter investigated the phenomenological experiences of kinksters and how they perceived the kinky and vanilla worlds they navigated. The current chapter seeks to corroborate what kinksters perceive that ‘vanilla people’ believe about BDSM and BDSM practitioners, with a sample of how ‘vanilla people’ respond to a version of the Attitudes Against Sadoomasochism scale (ASMS) developed by Megan Yost (2010) with minor modifications.

Yost (2010) believed that, since BDSM non-practitioners are unlikely to attend BDSM events and develop their own beliefs about BDSM based on first-hand exposure and experience, the views of non-practitioners are influenced by four factors: religious dogma, radical feminist critiques, psychiatric discourses and media portrayals. Out of those four factors, religious ideologies are arguably more influential among certain populations in the United States than they are in a more secular New Zealand society (Ahdar, 2006; Zuckerman, 2009), and it is equally unlikely that a randomly selected member of the public would be familiar with radical feminist discussions about sadoomasochism in the 1980s or Freudian conceptualisations of sadoomasochism. Thus, what both practitioners and non-practitioners understand about BDSM could most likely be attributed to media portrayals of BDSM to a much greater degree, be it through documentaries, sex scandals, Hollywood movies, arthouse films, magazines, or books. The role of media representations of BDSM will be examined in greater detail in the next chapter.

Based on previous research about anti-homosexual/homophobic sentiments, the negative attitudes and opinions that someone might hold about BDSM can likely be attributed to a

broader interrelated set of beliefs in the realm of general sexual conservatism, which is itself a circumscribed aspect of a larger, overall concept of social conservatism (Henningham, 1996). Sexual conservatism has traditionally been defined as the partners, activities, circumstances, and so on under which it is deemed appropriate for people to engage in sexual relations. It is a concept related but not identical to sex role stereotyping, which focuses more on gendered roles such as ‘men should earn the bulk of a household’s income’ (Burt, 1980). Despite the intuitive conclusion that one might make about the relationship between sexual conservatism and positive/negative sentiments about alternative sexualities, the extent to which sexual conservatism impacts anti-homosexual attitudes has been debated; it has even been demonstrated that there is no statistically significant relationship once sex role stereotyping has been taken into account (Minnigerode, 1976).

It might seem obvious that an individual who rates higher than average on a sexual conservatism scale – which can be measured using topics such as sexual activities before marriage, homosexuality, legalising prostitution, polyamorous relationships, swinging and other non-heteronormative identities and practices – is likely to also frown upon BDSM. But the link between sexual conservatism and an ‘anti-kink’ or ‘anti-BDSM’ sentiment – and by extension, how that might manifest into ‘anti-kink’ or ‘anti-BDSM’ *behaviours* – cannot be readily concluded based on the results from earlier research. Sexual conservatism has also been demonstrated to be inter-correlated with other measures of social conservatism such as views on euthanasia, immigration, legalising marijuana and instituting the death penalty (Henningham, 1996). Furthermore, it is important to note that attitudes towards alternative sexualities are not necessarily solely dependent on sexual conservatism levels – for example, racism and sexism have been shown to be independent predictors of anti-homosexual sentiment alongside sexual conservatism (Ficarrotto, 1990). These types of prejudices,

especially against various minority groups, could be related to or mediated by some other factor such as an individual's level of right-wing authoritarianism (RWA). RWA comprises of an inclination or propensity towards deferring to a legitimate authority, aggression directed against 'unconventional people' such as social misfits/deviants perceived to be sanctioned by said authorities because these groups may threaten the established social order, and a higher level of commitment towards societal norms and traditions (Altemeyer, 1988).

Thus, while studies have repeatedly demonstrated the effectiveness of social contact theory³⁹, addressing sexual conservatism alone would not be a magic bullet solution that resolves all the issues that members and practitioners of alternative sexualities face. Prejudice stems from multiple concurrent beliefs about the self and the self's interpretation of various intersectionally layered privileged and disadvantaged 'Others' – negativity expressed towards alternative sexualities may stem from different root beliefs even though they could manifest in the same discriminatory behaviour against sexual minorities (Ficarrotto, 1990).

Nevertheless, while attitudinal change is a slow and gradual process, cross-cultural studies have demonstrated that children have a strong tendency to inherit conservative or liberal views as modelled by their parents (Larsen & Long, 1988). Being able to foster an attitudinal change now will have a knock-on effect on future generations, for instance whether they will have ample opportunity to explore alternative sexualities for themselves, as well as how they perceive and make sense of the representations of alternative sexualities around them.

³⁹ Social contact theory advocates for education/raising public awareness and exposure/face-to-face interactions to uncover socially conditioned, internalised responses to specific cues around taboo/sensitive topics; dispel myths; challenge stereotypes; question irrational fears about the unknown, and; emphasise similarities which reduces in-/out-group distinctions, thereby promoting mutual understanding (for homosexuals, BDSM practitioners or any other discriminated group of people) to reduce negative responses (Wright Jr. & Cullen, 2001)

In assessing how a New Zealand sample would respond to a scale assessing their beliefs about BDSM, recycling a highly esteemed, consistently well validated sexual or social conservatism scale could prove to be problematic, primarily because the scales that have undergone the most scrutiny and reliability/validity testing tend to be older and thus more inaccurate (Larsen & Long, 1988). Using one of these ‘tried-and-true’ scales developed in the 1970s will assess what was considered conservative in the 1970s. The sociopolitical milieu in the 1970s is vastly different from what would be considered conservative in the twenty-first century. Even a scale that was developed after the spread of HIV/AIDS to North America and Europe in the 1980s will have little relevance to a sample drawn from a 2015 population.

There is also the potential issue of spatial differences, because the majority of these scales were developed outside of New Zealand. Just as beliefs that would be considered ‘conservative’ do vary across time, they could also vary across geographical spaces. Even within New Zealand, a rural-dwelling sample may respond different from urban dwellers, and a predominantly white and middle-class sample would also respond differently from a sample where ethnic minorities were overrepresented. Though globalisation trends could potentially reduce these spatially-defined differences, its impact on how participants in one country respond to a scale produced in another country cannot be objectively quantified. It is expected that in using a scale developed in the United States, certain items such as those relating to religion or American politics, for example ‘kinky people should not be allowed to be in religious places/organisations’, may not be as potent of an indicator of the same underlying beliefs that the scale is trying to assess in a New Zealand context.

Approximately one out of three people residing in New Zealand are located in Auckland; it is the most populated and most ethnically diverse city in which the majority of migrants choose to settle (Statistics New Zealand, 2013b; Statistics New Zealand, 2014), giving it a distinct multicultural societal flavour that differs compared to rural and other urban areas of New Zealand. Because the majority of the interviewees from the ethnographic study in the previous chapter are either from or have resided in Auckland for several years, the modified version of the ASMS targeted Auckland dwellers to elicit attitudes and opinions from people living in a similar urban environment.

The original ASMS as it was appended to Yost (2010) has been attached as Appendix C, and the modified version used in this study as it was presented to participants is located in Appendix D. Only minor alterations were made to Yost's scale and the core essence of the scale was preserved to facilitate making comparisons between responses to the same scale from samples with different characteristics. Table 5 located in Appendix E highlights the differences between Yost's (2010) version (henceforth termed 'original ASMS') and the version used for this study ('modified ASMS').

Despite these changes, in order to retain as much of the original ASMS as possible for this study, items that ought to have been refined, edited or omitted – such as “many kinky individuals are moral and ethical people”⁴⁰ – have been retained. It is hypothesised that while participants may have a distorted view of BDSM due to media misrepresentations, they would nonetheless respond neutrally or favourably towards BDSM. The in-group/out-group

⁴⁰ This is a poorly-worded double-barrelled item that participants may find difficult to answer – ‘moral’ and ‘ethical’ often but do not always align, and how one participant makes sense of issues concerning morality and ethics can be wildly different from another.

distinction that kinksters are far more open-minded and tolerant of BDSM than non-kinksters may not be as marked as interviewees from the previous ethnographic study would have us believe, given (a) the publicity that BDSM has garnered in recent years and the ensuing desensitisation process; (b) the discourse of sex-related activities as private and beyond anyone else's scope of concern influencing the degree to which non-practitioners might wish to express or enforce their views about BDSM (exemplified by interviewees' comments along the lines of 'it's none of their business', 'who cares?', '*I wouldn't ask you about your sex life*' and so on), and; (c) the sentiment that some interviewees conveyed that within the kinky community, kinksters can be judgemental of others, especially of those with 'extreme' kinks. As with any other group of individuals with specific interests, there will be a significant proportion of members with politically conservative inclinations so a random kinky sample may not necessarily be markedly different from a random non-kinky sample.

Methods

A modified version of the ASMS was formulated and published online using the survey software provided by Qualtrics. The survey was piloted to 14 acquaintances of the researcher for usability testing and general feedback. Based on this feedback, minor changes were made, and the survey was then advertised to the public. Participants were recruited through various means to attain as diverse of a sample as possible. A small advertisement was placed in the nationwide newspaper, the New Zealand Herald, on Thursday 28 May 2015⁴¹. The survey was also advertised on Facebook between 1 and 30 June 2015, with the broad inclusion criteria of any Facebook users residing in Auckland aged over 18. Flyers were placed around two campuses at The University of Auckland and the study was featured on the University of

⁴¹ It is of interest to note that the words 'kink' and 'kinky' are not allowed to be published in the Herald, even in the 'adult entertainment' section, but the acronym 'BDSM' was deemed permissible.

Auckland's School of Psychology's website. The various advertisements used can be found in Appendix F. The overwhelming majority of participants found the survey through the Facebook advertisement.

Because the purpose of this study is to gauge how people who do not identify as kinksters and are not active participants in the kink scene respond to the ASMS scale, the first page of the survey containing the participant information sheet explicitly requested that those who self-identify as kinksters and/or are working in a related industry not take part.

Participants, including those who were involved in the pilot study, could opt in to receive a \$10 voucher as compensation for their time by providing a contact e-mail address at the end of the survey. This e-mail address field was on a separate page so that individual responses to the survey could not be linked to any e-mail addresses, allowing survey takers to retain their anonymity. All valid e-mail addresses were contacted at the end of the survey and asked for a postal address to send the voucher to.

The survey was made available online from 4.30pm, 14 May 2015 to 8.30am, 1 July 2015. A total of 245 responses were collected, including 14 pilot study participants, 73 incomplete attempts and 3 duplicate responses, giving an official completion rate of 69%. The results are drawn from the data obtained from the remaining 155 participants.

Results

Demographics

Unsurprisingly, because the survey drew the most number of respondents through Facebook advertising, more than half of the participants (89 out of 155) were aged under 35 as this is the age range with the largest number of Facebook users⁴². This is substantially different from data obtained from the 2013 New Zealand census, as illustrated in Figure 5. In light of this, the results should be considered to be more indicative of the views of Auckland residents under 35 rather than of New Zealand residents in general.

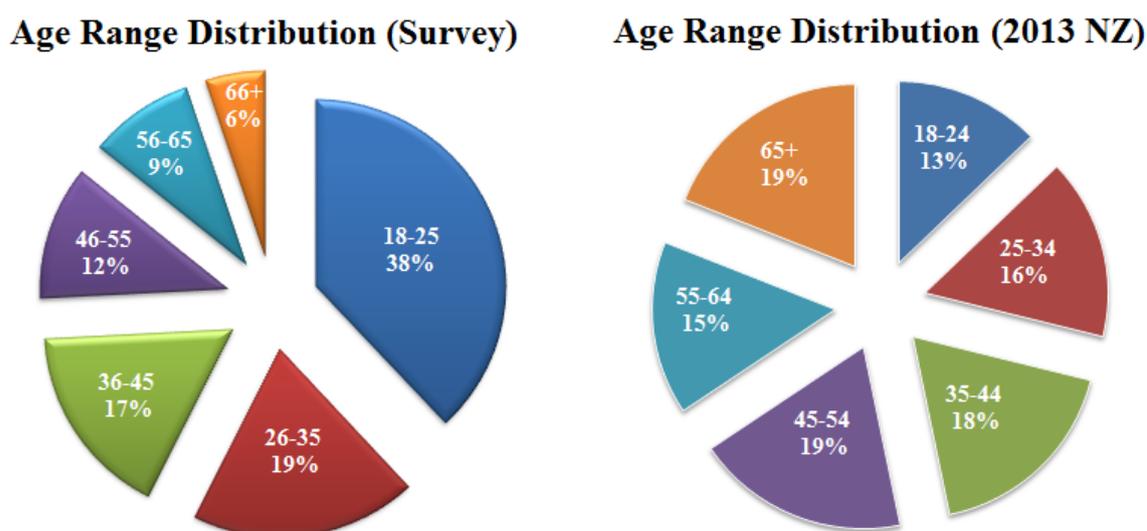


Figure 5. Comparison between participants' age range distribution and data obtained from the 2013 Census (Statistics New Zealand, 2013a). Census numbers about residents under age 17 were excluded. Do note that the survey asked for ages between x6-x5 (e.g. 26-35) while the census data offered a breakdown in multiples of x5-x4 (e.g. 25-34), which renders this comparison not completely accurate. Nevertheless, the general population in New Zealand has a more evenly-distributed age range compared to the survey demographic.

⁴² As of January 1, 2010, 63% of Facebook users are under 34 (J. Smith, 2010).

As a result of this imbalance, responses to the scale items will be post-stratified to weight for age, as an over-representation of participants under 35 may skew the data. Both weighted and unweighted data will be presented in their individual subsequent subheadings.

Though Auckland was the targeted population during advertising, 15% of the participants indicated they resided outside of Auckland. This is likely due to the nature of online advertising not being able to completely restrict non-Aucklanders from viewing the advertisement, or could have occurred due to snowball sampling with participants recruiting relatives and friends. The 15% of non-Aucklanders comprised of 23 participants, of which 15 were located elsewhere in the North Island (3 in Northland, 5 in Waikato, 2 in Bay of Plenty, 3 in Taranaki, 1 in Manawatu-Wanganui and 1 in Wellington) and 8 were in the South Island (5 in Canterbury, 3 in Otago). Data generated by participants residing outside of Auckland were not excluded from the results.

Despite the controversies surrounding the ethnicity/race labels, this question was included to assess the participants' potentially diverse backgrounds. 61.9% of the participants identified as some form of 'European', using terms like 'European descent', 'Caucasian', 'NZ European', 'Pakeha' or simply 'white'. The remainder of the sample consisted of 17.4% Maori, part-Maori and Pacific Islander (Niuean, Samoan, Tongan), 9.0% South Asian (Indian, Fijian Indian, Sri Lankan), 7.7% East & Southeast Asian (Filipino, Korean, Chinese), 1.3% South African, 1.3% Middle Eastern and 1.3% did not specify. Compared to how Auckland residents responded to the ethnicity distribution from the 2013 New Zealand census, the distribution levels are fairly similar. European-identifying participants (+8%) are over-represented in the survey, resulting in the slight underrepresentation of Maori and Pacific Islander (-5%) and Asian (-4%) groups. Given that the ethnicity distribution

discrepancies are minimal, especially compared to the age range variable, no weighting was done to adjust for ethnicity.

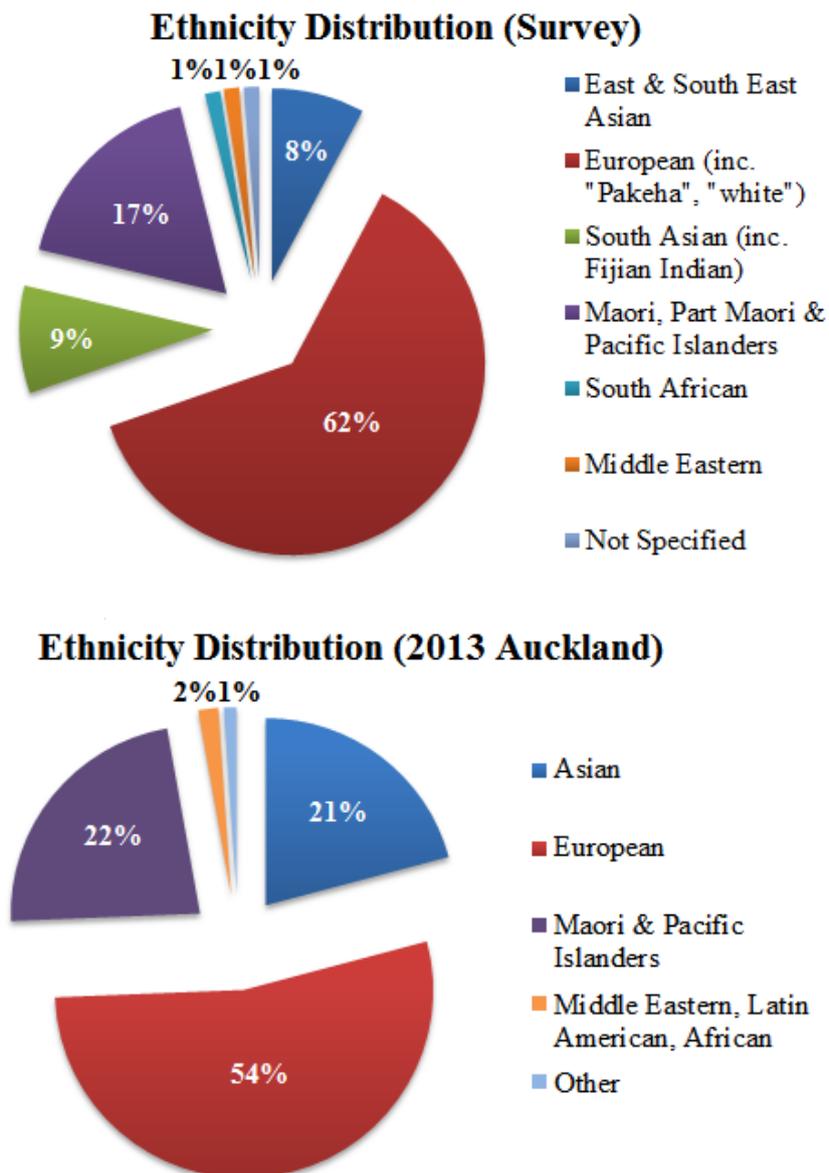


Figure 6. Comparison between participants' ethnicity distribution and data obtained from the 2013 Census (results confined to Auckland only) (Statistics New Zealand, 2013b). The census does allow for residents to identify as multiple ethnicities, so the actual percentages exceed 100%. Do note that the census did not distinguish between different geographical areas of Asia, so the green and dark blue segments from the first chart need to be combined to make up the blue segment in the second chart.

The final demographic variable asked was gender and sexual orientation. There were 81 males (52.3%), 72 females (46.5%) and 2 MtFs (male-to-female – born biologically male and are currently undergoing or have undergone the procedure to transition to female). The overwhelming majority of the participants identified as ‘straight’ or ‘heterosexual’ (71.6%), with 20.6% identifying as ‘bicurious’, ‘bisexual’, ‘pansexual’, ‘flexible’ and other related terms, 3.9% as ‘homosexual’, ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’ and 3.9% unspecified.

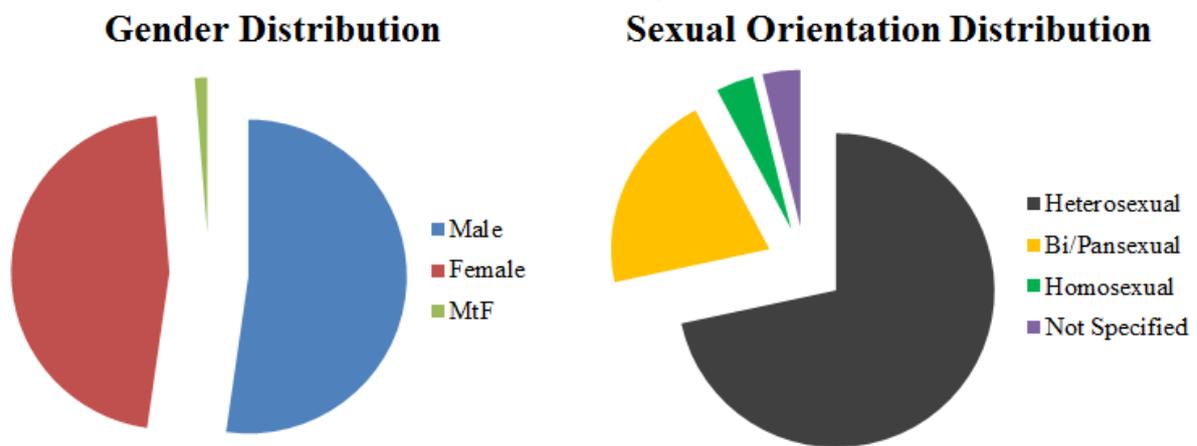


Figure 7. Gender and sexual orientation distributions of participants. Slightly more males than females responded to the survey, and more than 70% of the participants identified as ‘straight’ or ‘heterosexual’.

3 out of 4 participants indicated that they were at least inclined to accept/tolerate kink. This variable was measured as it would have impacted on how positively participants view kink when they responded to the scale items. Participants were asked several related questions, including how often they had kinky thoughts, fantasies and/or experiences, how kinky they perceived themselves to be, and how much they thought they knew about kink. For each of these questions, the majority of the participants generally presented themselves as more inclined towards at least ‘knowing a little bit about kink’ and being ‘a little bit kinky’. Based on the responses to these items, it can be hypothesised that participants will respond more favourably towards kink and kinksters in the ASMS section of the questionnaire.

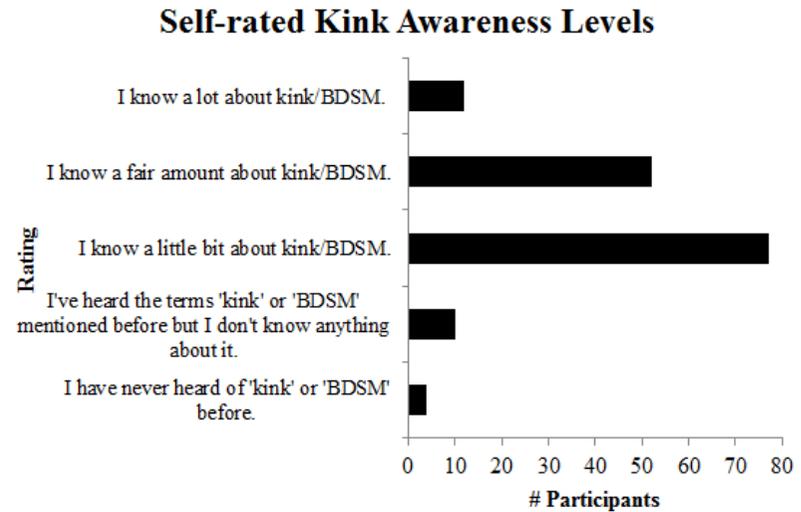
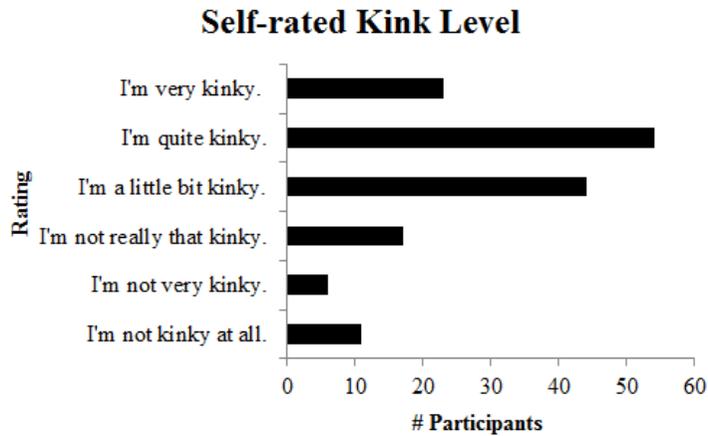
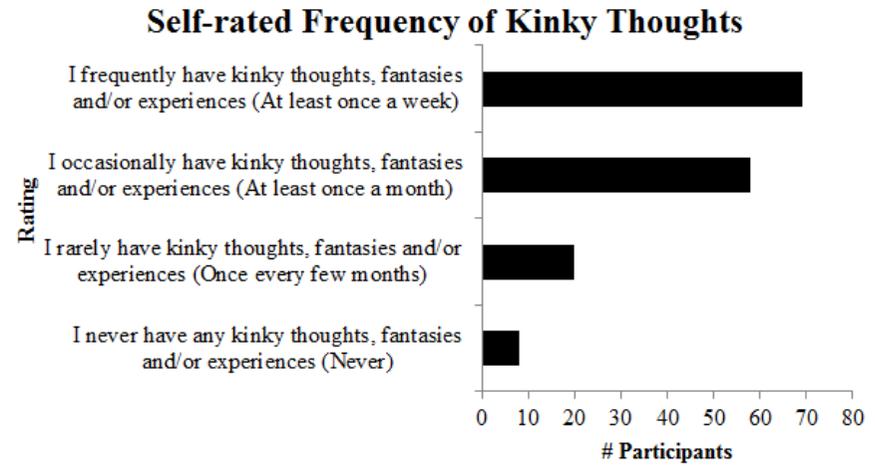
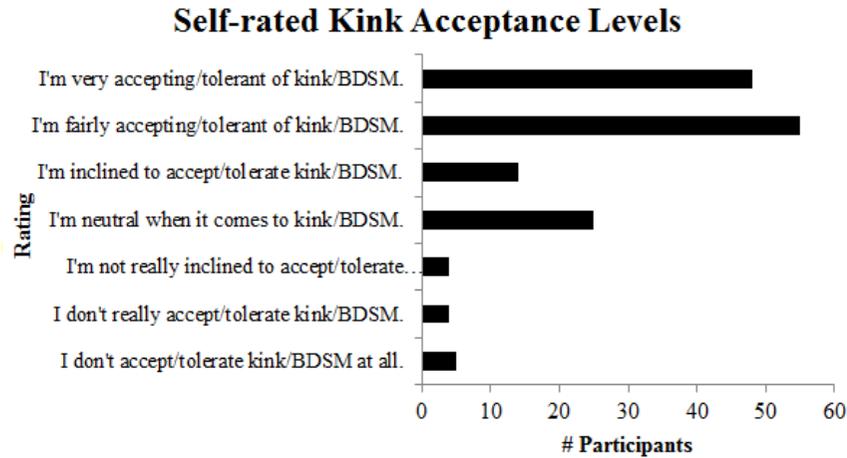
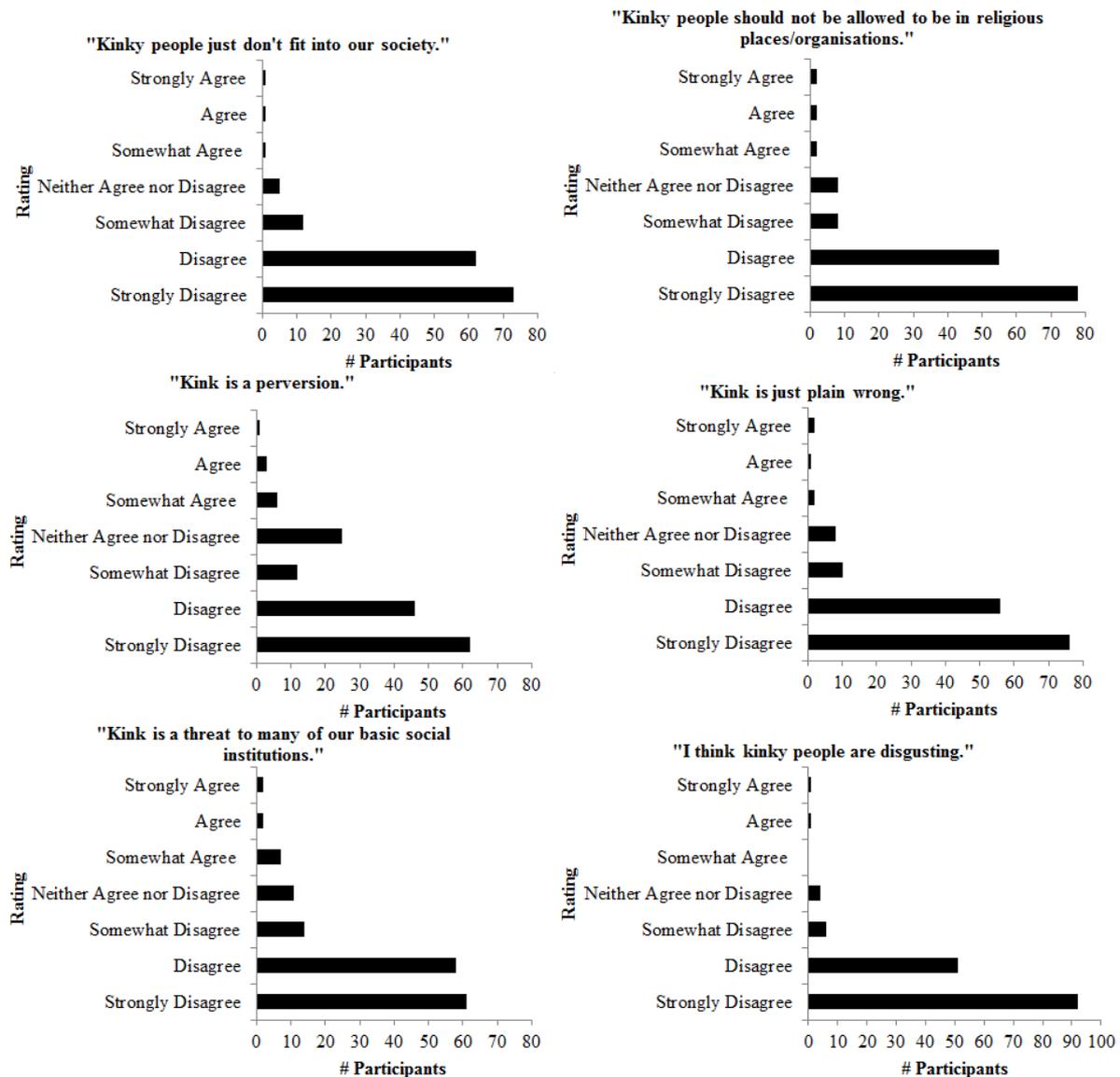


Figure 8. Participants' self-ratings of their kink acceptance/tolerance levels, frequency of kinky thoughts, fantasies and/or experiences, kinky inclinations, and kink awareness levels. Overall, most participants rate themselves as more inclined towards being at least 'a little bit kinky', somewhat accepting/tolerant of kink, and knowing something about kink.

Modified Attitudes about Sadoomasochism Scale (Unweighted)

The original ASMS had 4 subscales, labelled ‘socially wrong’, ‘violence’, ‘lack of tolerance’ and ‘real life’. Having condensed 2 questions into existing questions, the remaining 21 questions were divided as follows: ‘socially wrong’ had 11 questions, ‘violence’ had 5, ‘lack of tolerance’ had 4 and ‘real life’ had 1. Accordingly, responses to the ASMS section of the questionnaire were placed into the same categories and displayed graphically in the subsequent figures. As expected, participants tended to respond favourably towards kink across the entire scale.



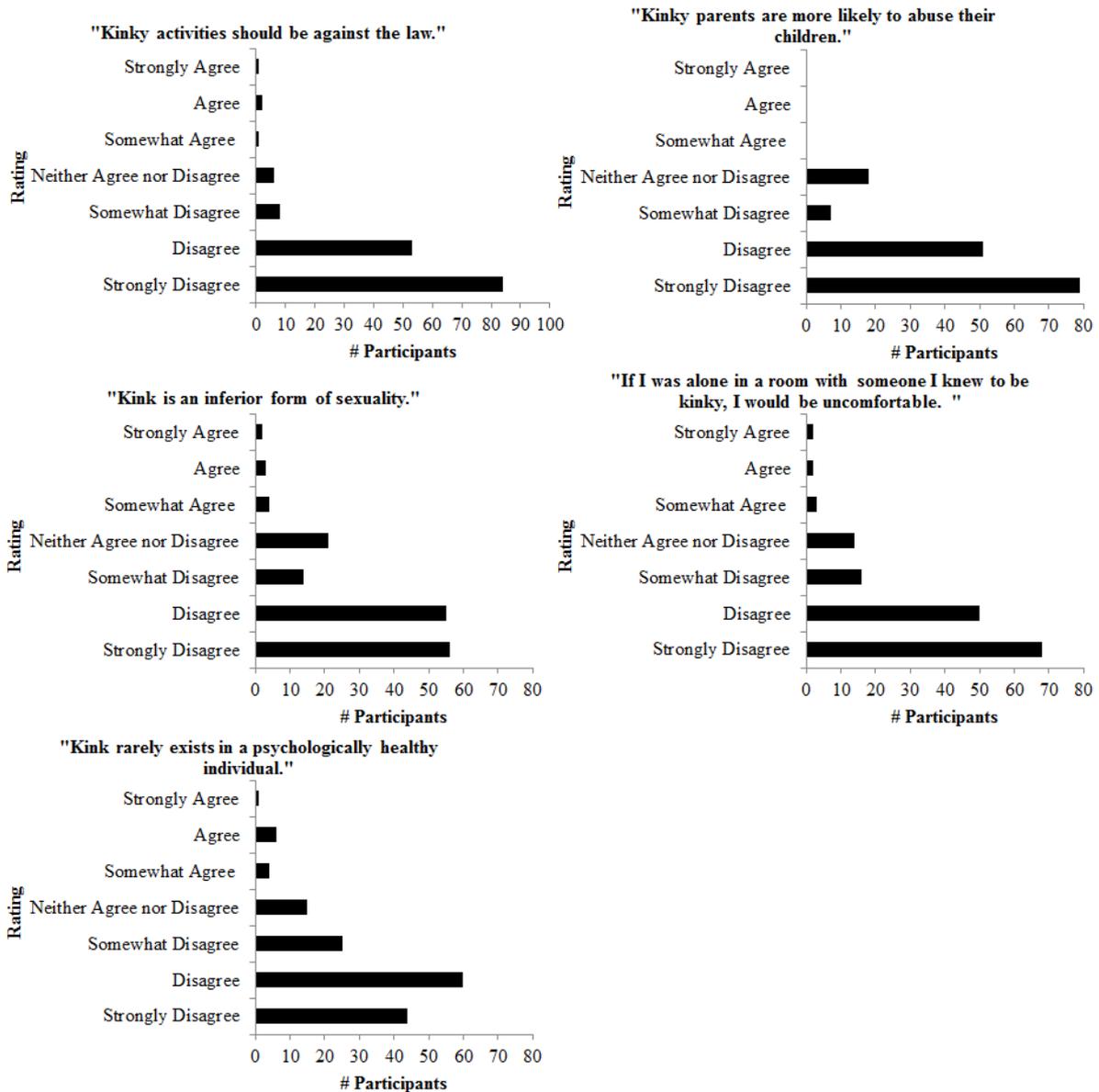


Figure 9. Responses to questions comprising the ‘Socially Wrong’ subscale. Do note that for Figures 9 through to 12, in line with the original ASMS, there are no reverse-scored questions within each subscale.

Participants generally tended to be indifferent or disagree with most of the statements in this subscale, but at least 10 participants did agree with some items such as ‘kink is a threat to many of our basic social institutions’ and ‘kink rarely exists in a psychologically healthy individual’. It may be of interest to note that every single participant was either indifferent or disagreed with the statement ‘kinky parents are more likely to abuse their children’, especially given how several self-identified kinky people with children had experienced or

believed that they would experience discriminatory treatment if they were known to be kinky parents. This is the only question in this subscale that had zero participants agreeing to the statement.

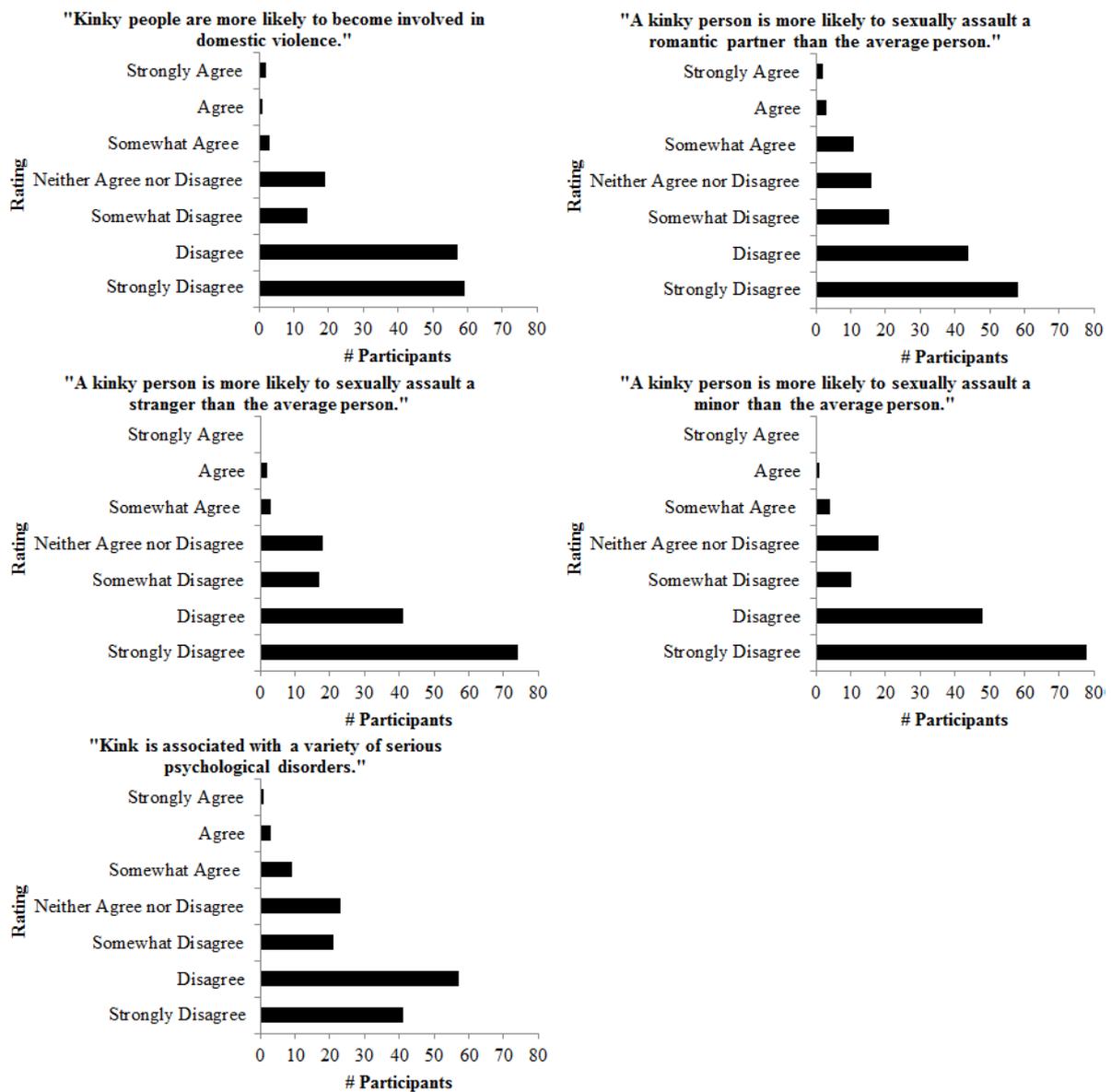


Figure 10. Responses to questions comprising the 'Violence' subscale.

Overall, participants generally did not believe that kinky people were prone to violence.

While responses to the violence subscale did vary across each item, a noticeable minority of

participants did agree on some level to the statements ‘a kinky person is more likely to sexually assault a romantic partner than the average person’ (10.3%) and ‘kink is associated with a variety of serious psychological disorders’ (8.4%). Less than 5% of the participants agreed to any degree with the remaining statements in this subscale. The response pattern to the item ‘kink rarely exists in a psychologically healthy individual’ from Figure 9 is notably similar to ‘kink is associated with a variety of serious psychological disorders’ from Figure 10. More people responded with ‘disagree’ than ‘strongly disagree’, though there appears to be more variation in the responses to the latter despite both questions targeting the same underlying beliefs that participants may have about the relationship between kink and psychopathology.

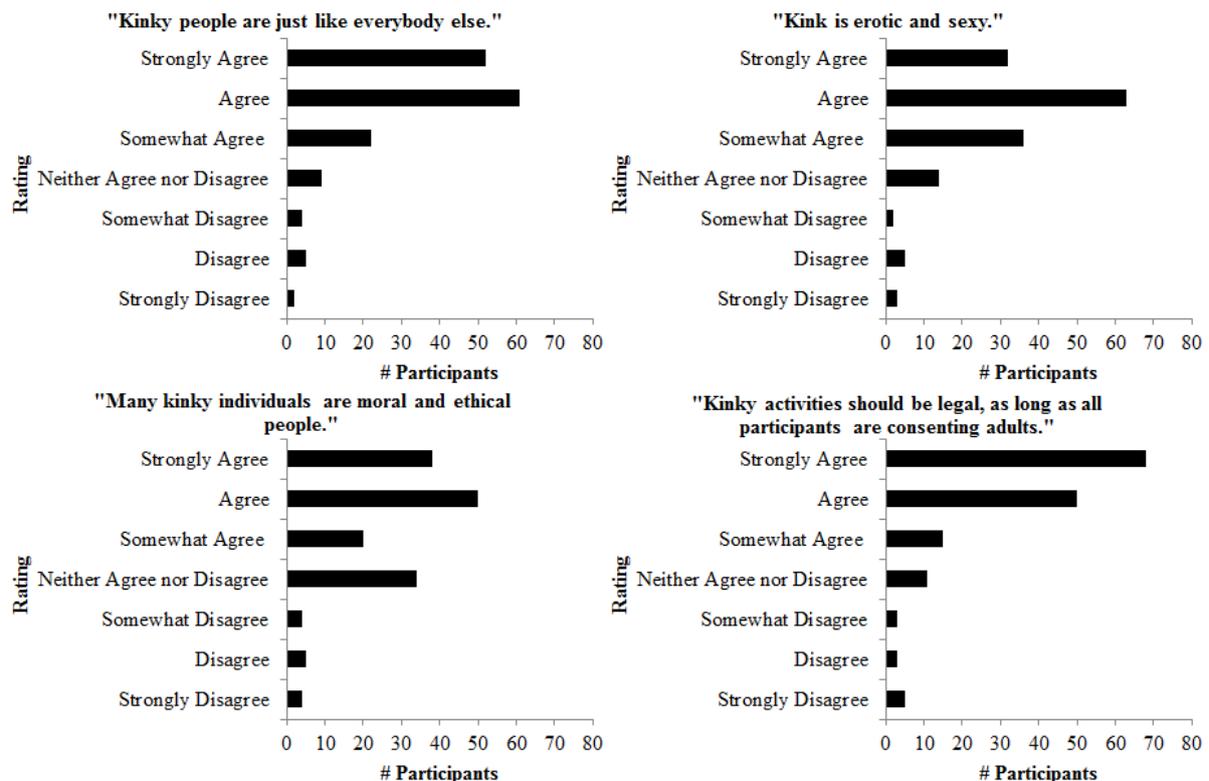


Figure 11. Responses to questions comprising the ‘Lack of Tolerance’ subscale.

There was more variation in responses in this subscale compared to the others, but overall participants tended to have positive views about kink. The ‘Lack of Tolerance’ subscale contains the only reverse-scored items in the entire scale. Its questions cover a wide range of topics including the perceived ‘normalcy’ of kink and the perceived morality of kinksters. The questions in this subscale (shown above in Figure 11) are arguably less straightforward compared to the other questions, so there is greater variation in the responses. Perhaps these questions are better answered in an open-ended format where participants can explain their views better than having to choose from options in a reductive Likert scale.

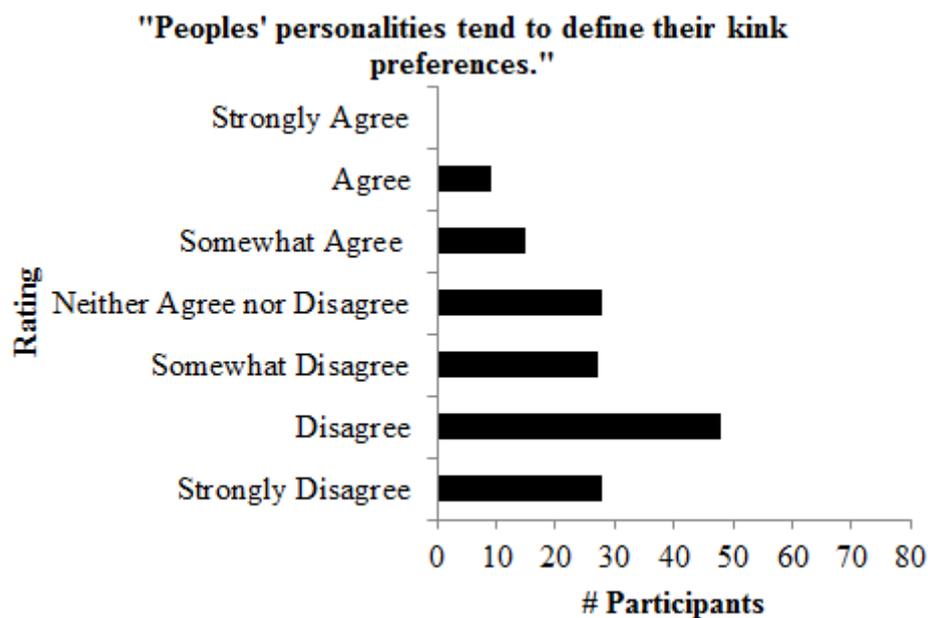


Figure 12. Response to the only question comprising the ‘Real Life’ subscale. The full question asked was: “Peoples' personalities tend to define their kink preferences - e.g. someone who prefers to tie their partner up would tend to be aggressive and domineering in other aspects of their lives, while someone who prefers to be tied up by their partner would tend to be passive and meek in other aspects of their lives.”

24 participants (15.5%) agreed or somewhat agreed to this statement, but it is fairly neutral in terms of whether participants view kink and kinky people positively or negatively, and is more indicative of one of the assumptions that participants may make about kinky people. As explained in Table 5 detailing the differences between the original and the modified ASMS,

the original ASMS had two questions – that people with domineering personalities tended to prefer dominant-leaning kink roles (e.g. master, top, dom/me) and those with subservient personalities tended to prefer submissive-leaning kink roles (e.g. slave, bottom, sub) – but this could give participants the impression that these labels are more like stable ‘identities’ to claim, embody and enact rather than fluid ‘roles’ to be played and explored.

The mean ratings for each item in the modified ASMS and the overall means for each subscale are presented in Table 2. A mean score closer to 1 indicates positive perceptions of, approval of and/or high levels of tolerance/acceptance of kink, and the highest possible mean is 7. The mean across the entire scale is $\bar{x} = 2.11$ (n=155).

Table 2

Mean Ratings for Modified ASMS (Unweighted)

Question	Mean	Subscale Mean
<i>Socially Wrong</i>		1.93
Kinky people just don't fit into our society.	1.75	
Kinky people should not be allowed to be in religious places/organisations.	1.81	
Kink is a perversion.	2.23	
Kink is just plain wrong.	1.81	
Kink is a threat to many of our basic social institutions.	2.09	
I think kinky people are disgusting.	1.55	
Kinky activities should be against the law.	1.69	
Kinky parents are more likely to abuse their children.	1.77	
Kink is an inferior form of sexuality.	2.22	
If I was alone in a room with someone I knew to be kinky, I would be uncomfortable.	2.02	
Kink rarely exists in a psychologically healthy individual.	2.34	
<i>Violence</i>		2.15
Kinky people are more likely to become involved in domestic violence.	2.10	
A kinky person is more likely to sexually assault a romantic partner than the average person.	2.32	
A kinky person is more likely to sexually assault a stranger than the average person.	1.97	
A kinky person is more likely to sexually assault a minor than the average person.	1.92	
Kink is associated with a variety of serious psychological disorders.	2.45	
<i>Lack of Tolerance (reverse-scored)</i>		5.65* (2.36)
Kinky people are just like everybody else. (reverse-scored)	5.81* (2.19)	
Kink is erotic and sexy. (reverse-scored)	5.53* (2.47)	
Many kinky individuals are moral and ethical people. (reverse-scored)	5.34* (2.66)	
Kinky activities should be legal, as long as all participants are consenting adults. (reverse-scored)	5.90* (2.10)	
<i>Real Life</i>		2.88
Peoples' personalities tend to define their kink preferences - e.g. someone who prefers to tie their partner up would tend to be aggressive and domineering in other aspects of their lives, while someone who prefers to be tied up by their partner would tend to be passive and meek in other aspects of their lives.	2.88	

*Note: A mean closer to 1 indicates strong disagreement with the scale item while a mean closer to 7 indicates strong agreement, except for the items marked with * where the opposite would apply. The reverse-scored means are included in brackets.*

Modified Attitudes about Sodomasochism Scale (Weighted)

Due to the overrepresentation of respondents under 35, there may have been an influence of age on the responses if, for example, people over 35 have a tendency to be more conservative than people under 35. The results may then make the population appear to be more accepting/tolerant of kink because of the skewed sample. The average response to each subscale for every age group is shown in Figure 13 below. Though age does not appear to make a marked difference on responses, participants over 46 do seem to have a tendency to respond somewhat less favourably towards kink. In Figure 13, the higher the rating, the more participants agreed to the scale items, with the exception of the green trend line which was reverse-scored meaning higher scores indicate greater tolerance/acceptance of kink.

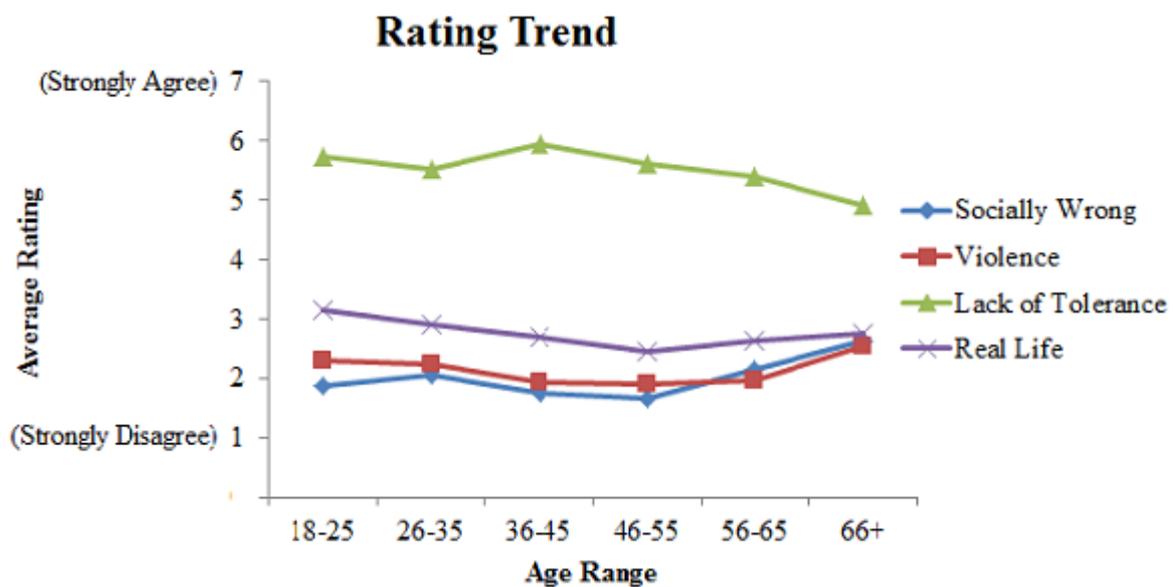


Figure 13. Averaged responses to modified ASMS subscales according to age. There is a slight noticeable trend of older respondents being more inclined to believe that kinksters are of morally dubious standing, more prone to violence, have mental health issues, and so on.

Due to the discrepancy between the sample age distribution compared to the population age distribution in the 2013 New Zealand census, post-stratification weighting was performed on the data in order to better represent the views of older respondents. The amount of weighting on the responses of each age group is illustrated in Table 3.

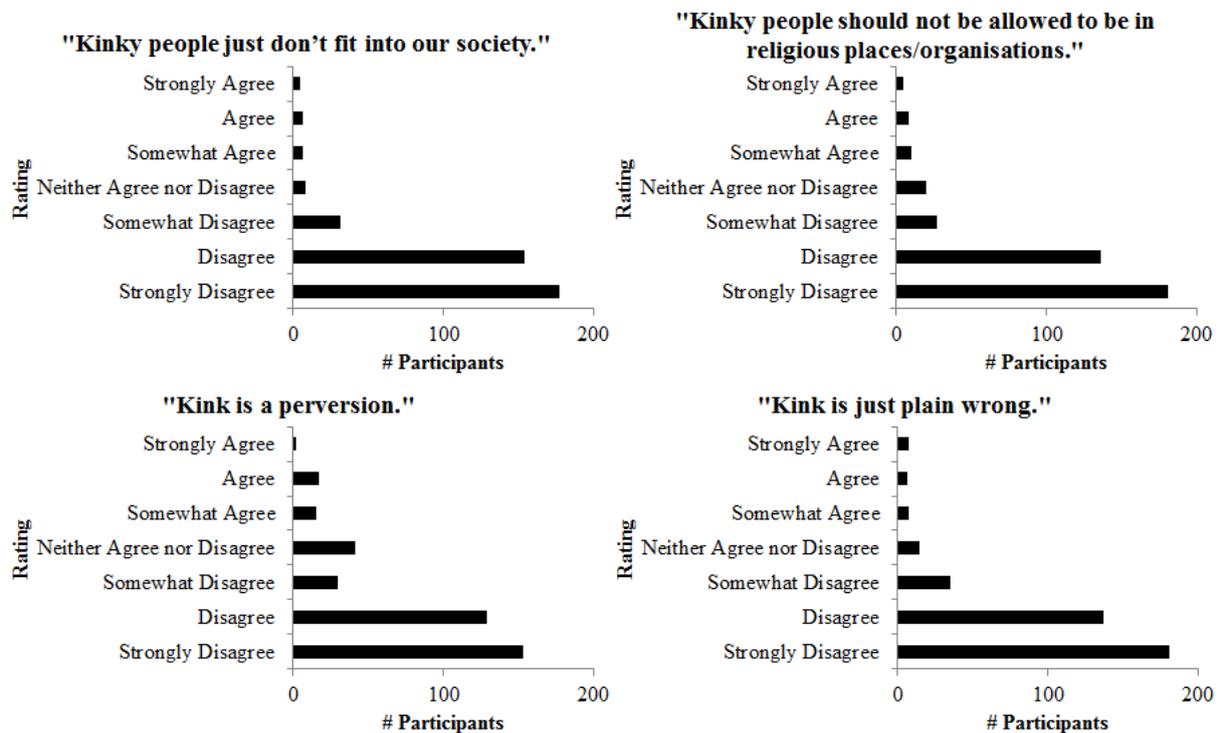
Table 3

Post-stratification Weighting by Age

age	# respondents	% respondents	% NZ population*	weighting
18-25	59	38	13	0.34
26-35	30	19	16	0.84
36-45	26	17	18	1.06
46-55	18	12	19	1.58
56-65	14	9	15	1.67
66+	8	6	19	3.17

*New Zealand residents under 18 were excluded from the percentages calculations.

As expected, after poststratification was performed on the data, there was a slight increase in the percentages of those who agreed with the kink-negative statements (e.g. ‘kinky people just don’t fit into our society’) and disagreed with the kink-positive statements (e.g. ‘kinky people are just like everybody else’). However, the difference between the unweighted and weighted data is demonstrably minimal.



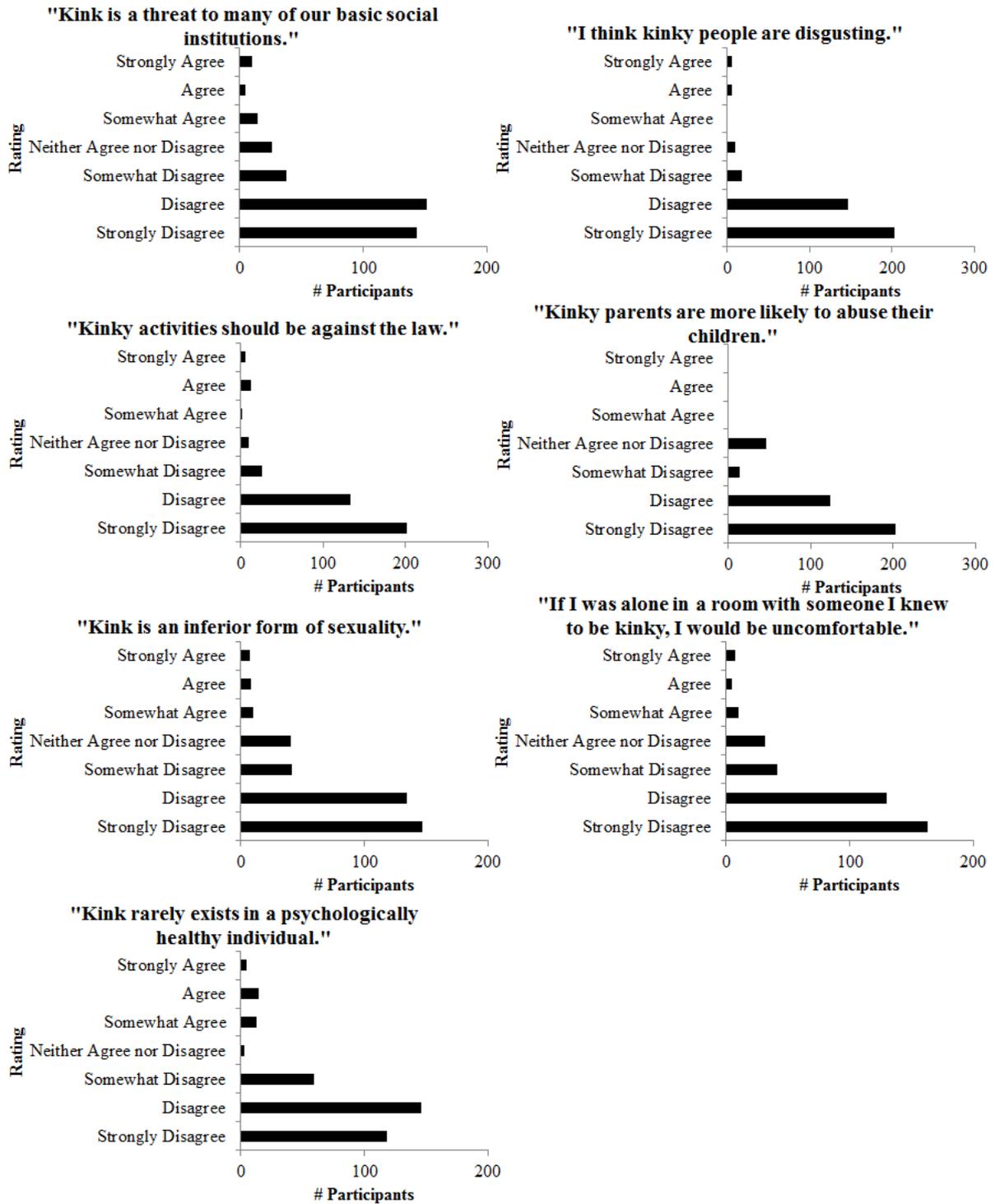


Figure 14. Responses to questions comprising the ‘Socially Wrong’ subscale weighted for age. The percentages of people who agree to the scale items now constitute a more noticeable minority compared to the data before poststratification.

Though poststratification did not make a drastic impact on the response patterns, the greater emphasis placed on responses of those aged over 46 illustrated more kink-negative values

coming through, especially evident in the visible increase of agreement with statements like ‘kink is a perversion’ and ‘kink is a threat to many of our basic social institutions’. However, the overwhelming majority remained indifferent or disagree on some level to the scale items.

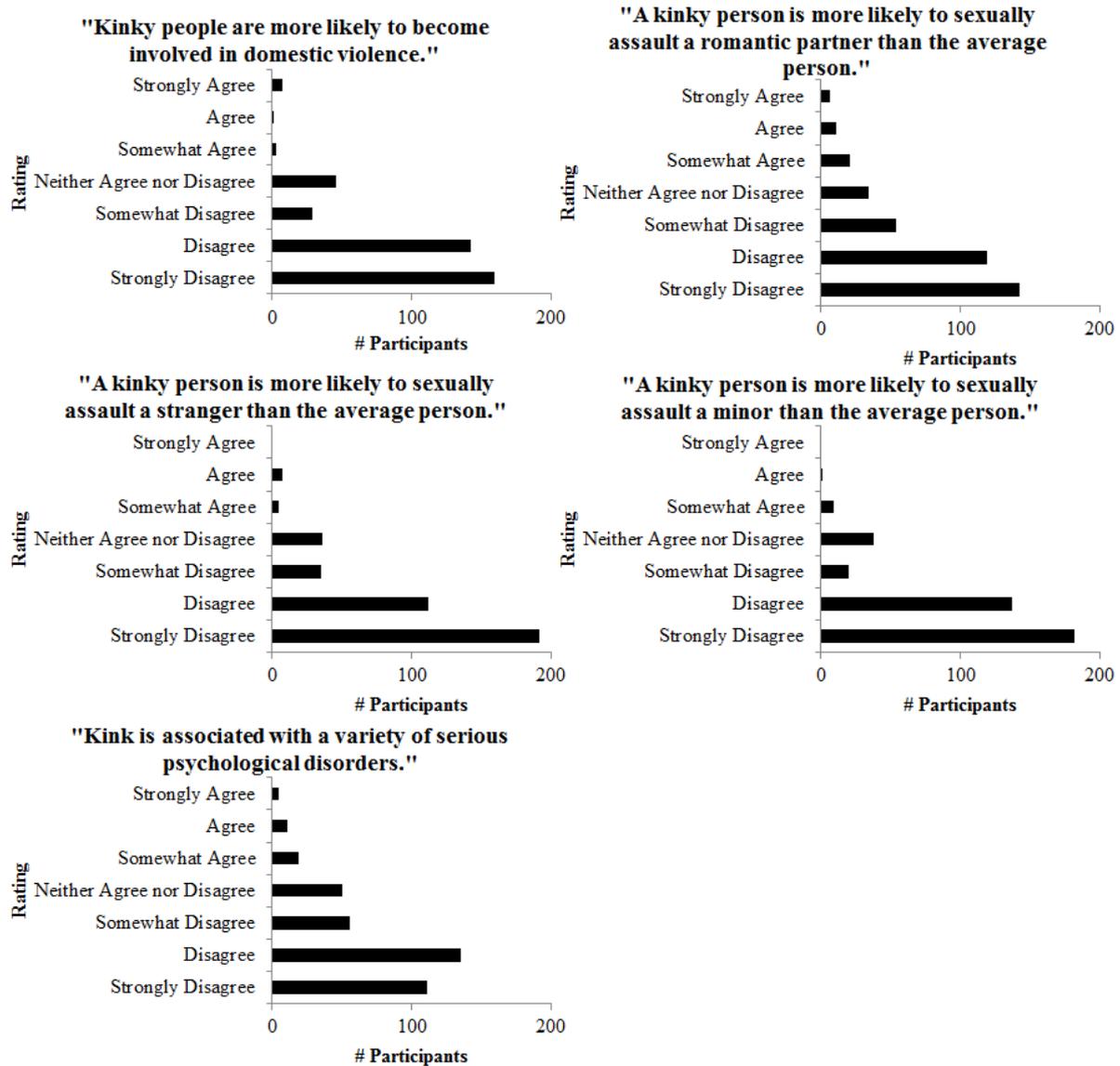


Figure 15. Responses to questions comprising the ‘Violence’ subscale weighted for age. Compared to the previous ‘Socially Wrong’ subscale, the impact of poststratification was almost negligible for these ‘Violence’ items.

Interestingly, poststratification sometimes had a mixed effect on the data. For example, now 9.8% of the responses agreed to the statement ‘a kinky person is more likely to sexually assault a romantic partner than the average person’ compared to 10.3% in the unweighted

data. But 9.0% agreed with ‘kink is associated with a variety of serious psychological disorders’ compared to 8.4% before weighting. In light of this, poststratification does not support any blanket assumption that one might make about participants over 46 being generally more socially or sexually conservative.

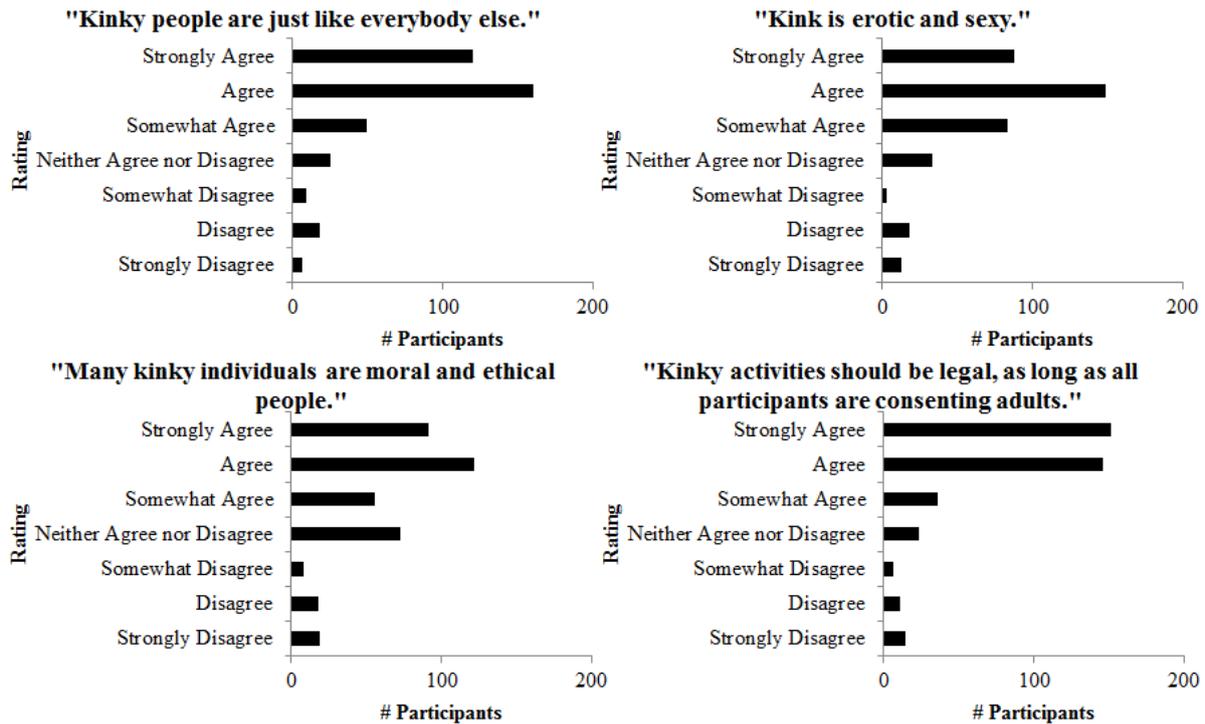


Figure 16. Responses to questions comprising the ‘Lack of Tolerance’ subscale weighted for age. Responses to these items were already varied before adjusting for age, but poststratification has potentially demonstrated a complex relationship between age and attitudes towards kink.

Though 8.5% and 8.8% of the weighted responses now agreed to the statements ‘Kinky people are just like everybody else’ and ‘Kink is erotic and sexy’ compared to 7.1% and 6.4% of the unweighted responses respectively, there was a notable increase in the percentages of participants disagreeing that ‘Kinky activities should be legal, as long as all participants are consenting adults’, up from 7.1% before weighting to 10.8% after weighting. 11.6% now disagreed on some level to the statement ‘Many kinky individuals are moral and ethical people’ compared to 8.4% before poststratification.

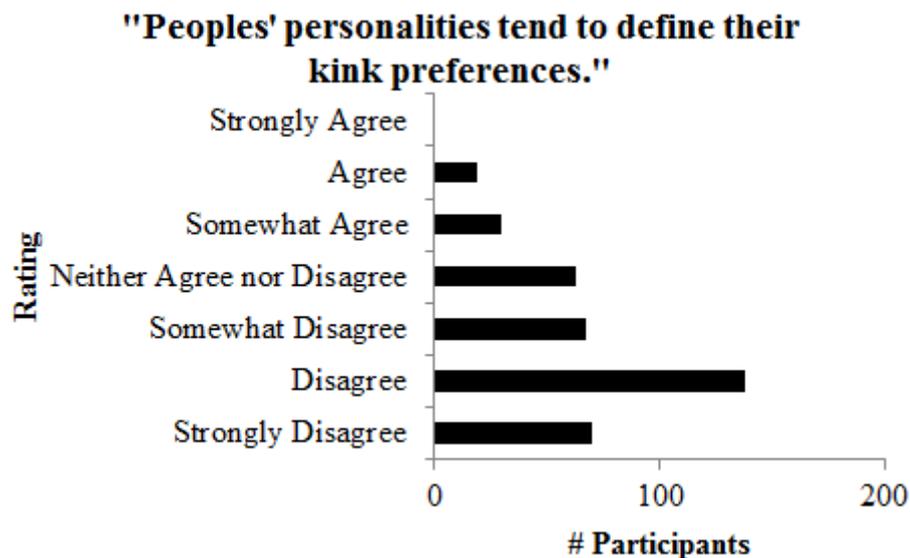


Figure 17. Response to the only question comprising the ‘Real Life’ subscale. The full question asked was: “Peoples' personalities tend to define their kink preferences - e.g. someone who prefers to tie their partner up would tend to be aggressive and domineering in other aspects of their lives, while someone who prefers to be tied up by their partner would tend to be passive and meek in other aspects of their lives.”

There was an increase in the disagreement to the belief that ‘Peoples’ personalities tend to define their kink preferences’, up from 66.5% before poststratification to 71.0%. It must be stressed that Likert scales are a very reductive means of obtaining perceptions of kink and kinksters, and definitely cannot indicate that weighting for age demonstrated that older participants have a greater understanding of kink being an explorative and/or performative act, or any similar complex conclusion. It is nonetheless an interesting result that further supports the notion that age either has no bearing on peoples’ attitudes towards kink, or that, contrary to the widely touted belief that ‘older people are more conservative’ or ‘the older generation just doesn’t get it’, there is simply no straightforward relationship between age and the perceptions, understandings and beliefs about kink and kinksters.

Table 4 contains the mean ratings after poststratification. A mean score closer to 1 indicates positive perceptions of, approval of and/or high levels of tolerance/acceptance of kink, and the highest possible mean is 7. The mean across the entire scale is $\bar{x} = 2.14$ (weighted n=387)

Table 4

Mean Ratings for Modified ASMS (Weighted)

Question	Mean	Subscale Mean
<i>Socially Wrong</i>		1.98
Kinky people just don't fit into our society.	1.84	
Kinky people should not be allowed to be in religious places/organisations.	1.93	
Kink is a perversion.	2.21	
Kink is just plain wrong.	1.90	
Kink is a threat to many of our basic social institutions.	2.15	
I think kinky people are disgusting.	1.70	
Kinky activities should be against the law.	1.80	
Kinky parents are more likely to abuse their children.	1.75	
Kink is an inferior form of sexuality.	2.18	
If I was alone in a room with someone I knew to be kinky, I would be uncomfortable.	2.06	
Kink rarely exists in a psychologically healthy individual.	2.32	
<i>Violence</i>		2.10
Kinky people are more likely to become involved in domestic violence.	2.03	
A kinky person is more likely to sexually assault a romantic partner than the average person.	2.30	
A kinky person is more likely to sexually assault a stranger than the average person.	1.89	
A kinky person is more likely to sexually assault a minor than the average person.	1.86	
Kink is associated with a variety of serious psychological disorders.	2.44	
<i>Lack of Tolerance (reverse-scored)</i>		5.56* (2.44)
Kinky people are just like everybody else. (reverse-scored)	5.72* (2.28)	
Kink is erotic and sexy. (reverse-scored)	5.47* (2.53)	
Many kinky individuals are moral and ethical people. (reverse-scored)	5.22* (2.78)	
Kinky activities should be legal, as long as all participants are consenting adults. (reverse-scored)	5.84* (2.16)	
<i>Real Life</i>		2.75
Peoples' personalities tend to define their kink preferences - e.g. someone who prefers to tie their partner up would tend to be aggressive and domineering in other aspects of their lives, while someone who prefers to be tied up by their partner would tend to be passive and meek in other aspects of their lives.	2.75	

Note: A mean closer to 1 indicates strong disagreement with the scale item while a mean closer to 7 indicates strong agreement, except for the items marked with * where the opposite would apply. The reverse-scored means are included in brackets.

Discussion

Overall it appears that this New Zealand sample is fairly tolerant/accepting of kink, with the overwhelming majority of participants tending to disagree with statements linking kink to interpersonal violence, mental illnesses, moral deficiencies and other negative perceptions. Participants disagreed most strongly about items in the ‘socially wrong’ scale, such as “I think kinky people are disgusting”, “kinky people just don’t fit into our society”, “kinky people should not be allowed to be in religious places/organisations” and “kink is just plain wrong”. Notably, none of the participants believed that kinky parents were more likely to abuse their children, though a substantial proportion (12%) neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement, which may indicate some level of ambivalence about this topic.

This revelation is particularly enlightening given that some of the local kinky parents interviewed in the ethnographic study, such as Melissa, expressed concern that they may be discriminated against or placed at a significant disadvantage if their kinky inclinations were discussed in the process of getting a legal separation/divorce. Though interviewees did not believe that any kinky parent would lose custody of their children solely due to their kinky activities or identities (unless in exceptional circumstances, such as if the kinky parent was a high-profile celebrity or politician and negative publicity from the media has impacted on the legal proceedings of their case), it would nonetheless be an unpleasant, distressing experience to have to have one’s kinky predilections dissected and showcased in court.

Melissa: Yeah that would not be cool in a court of law, with daddy calling mum a sexual deviant and, children having to think about that?

Interviewer: Mmm.

Melissa: That’s not cool. So yeah I’m a bit careful around all that. Mmm.

Interviewer: Was it a tough, uhm... divorce or?

Melissa: Mmm. Mmm. Yeah, he would use it if he could.

Interviewer: Mmm.

Melissa: Maybe not so much *now*, but a few years ago, yeah. I'd have been very vulnerable. Mmm. Or still possibly now, yeah.

Interviewer: Mmm.

Melissa: Mmm. But nobody can argue, that you have, you know, if *you* were really clear that you've got a healthy relationship and *you're* really clear... that these are acts of joy and love and caring and... and fun, and... it works. If *you're* really clear about why you're doing it, but there's some things I wouldn't want- because people just judge you, just like that.

Similarly, participants do not generally believe that kinksters are more predisposed towards violence than non-kinksters, though slightly more participants believed that kinksters are more inclined to sexually assault a romantic partner than a stranger or a minor. Participants may be making a distinction between kinksters being indiscriminately violent and being violent towards people they know ('romantic partner') and/or people they do kinky activities with, while at the same time rejecting the notion altogether that kinky people would be more sexually interested in and/or violent towards minors.

Poststratification to account for the oversampling of respondents under 35 years of age had a negligible impact overall – the mean rating across the scale increased very slightly to 2.14 after weighting compared to 2.11 before weighting, indicating a very minimal decrease in levels of acceptance/tolerance of kink. On the surface, this may suggest that older respondents are marginally more 'anti-kink' or more socially conservative in general. However, it was demonstrated that weighting did not make a uniform, consistent change to the response patterns; levels of agreement and disagreement with kink-positive and negative attitudes varied depending on each individual statement, sometimes in seemingly counterintuitive ways. For example, the weighted data showed a small increase in agreement

with the general sentiment that kink is ‘erotic and sexy’ and kinky people are ‘just like everybody else’, but also a moderate increase in disagreement with the notion of legalising consensual kinky activities. Whether this is because respondents simply do not want kinky activities legalised or if the reasoning behind their responses is more complex (for example, legalising kink may give perpetrators the opportunity to try and use kink as a legal defence in spousal abuse or assault cases, or the state should not intervene in private matters between consenting adults) cannot be deduced from the data.

Regardless, weighting did not produce changes greater than 5% in any level of dis/agreement on any item. This does not rule out the possibility that age or ‘generational differences’ can factor in to how people perceive kink, but it does indicate that there is no straightforward correlation between age and attitudes about kink, and by extension possibly other alternative sexualities.

Limitations

The results from this survey are largely indicative of the attitudes about kink held by predominantly Auckland residents in the 18-35 age group. No amount of data adjustment can account for the lack of respondents over 36, especially those aged 55 and over, and a more representative sample would have greatly benefitted this study. Nor should the results of this survey be considered easily generalisable to attitudes held by New Zealand residents outside of Auckland. Unlike the rest of New Zealand, 90% of Auckland’s population lives in the urbanised areas, which account for only 10% of the total land mass, and it has a much greater diverse ethnic profile compared to the rest of New Zealand, with the overwhelming majority of migrants choosing to settle in Auckland (Auckland Council, 2014).

As with other surveys advertised to the general public, nonresponse bias would have impacted on the results, as we would expect people who are interested in kink (and therefore more open to the idea of kink and willing to accept kinky people and their predilections) to be more likely to take a survey about kink than people who have no interest or have negative opinions about kink. There may also be acquiescence and/or social desirability biases at work, and respondents may be consciously or unconsciously influenced to disagree with kink-negative and agree with kink-positive statements in order to appear more open-minded or to respond in the way they expect the researcher would have wanted them to respond. Ergo, the data would be skewed towards respondents having kink-positive attitudes rather than reflect the attitudes across a cross-section of Auckland society.

As the survey was administered online, internet accessibility may have impacted on response rates. However, wireless internet is widely available in public spaces in central Auckland and at fast food restaurants and cafés, and as of 2012, throughout New Zealand 4 out of 5 households have internet access, with Auckland having 85% of households connected to the internet (Statistics New Zealand, 2012). Thus, internet accessibility is arguably no longer as significant of a barrier for web-based surveys, though it may result in the undersampling of populations that are less likely to have internet connectivity, such as lower-income households or people living rurally or in more remote suburbs with limited telecommunications coverage. Moreover, web-based surveys (20-47%) tend to receive lower response rates than those administered on paper (55-75%) (Nulty, 2008). Though the costs incurred would increase substantially, a more random sample with higher response rates could be achieved by mailing a physical copy of the ASMS to potential participants.

The modifications made to the ASMS may also render this study to not be easily comparable to other attempts at administering the ASMS. Most importantly, the usage of the terms ‘kink’ and ‘kinky people’ may ultimately be polling different attitudes from the original ASMS which employs the more clinically-/psychopathologically-oriented terms ‘somasochism’ and ‘somasochists’. While relying on participants’ definitions of ‘kink’ may be too broad and could result in one participant responding on the basis of ‘kink’ being using handcuffs and blindfolds during sexual intercourse and another participant believing the scale is asking about rubber fetishists and scarification practitioners, sadism and masochism only constitute a small circumscribed aspect of kink. Yet, items in the original ASMS ask about perceptions of ‘dominants’ and ‘submissives’, which are role designations in power exchange relationships with some but limited relevance to the somasochistic facet of kink. In this way, the original ASMS arguably falls short of polling attitudes about BDSM holistically – asking a participant how they perceive people who have an erotic interest or fixation with activities that induce pain is qualitatively different from asking how they perceive kink and kinksters in general. A follow-up study where half of the participants are given the original ASMS and the other half given the modified ASMS would better be able to illustrate that people have separate conceptualisations of ‘kink’ and ‘somasochism’ if there is a significant difference in the response patterns.

Conclusion

This survey was intended to be synergistic with the ethnographic study, either supporting or calling into question what kinksters believed about non-kinksters’ perceptions and attitudes about kink and kinksters. From the response patterns to the ASMS it can be surmised that –

the limitations of the study notwithstanding – in line with the hypothesis, the general local attitudes about kink and kinksters are fairly lax. Participants rated quite strongly as being accepting/tolerant of kink and kinksters, if not at the very least as indifferent about the subject. Of course, this may not necessarily translate to a positive, receptive attitude on an individual level if a BDSM practitioner were to have their preferences exposed to their family and co-workers, but it does reflect a general sentiment of some level of public awareness about kink and a permissive attitude about it in Auckland. Though those who are indifferent may be complicit in allowing covert discriminatory practices by those who do feel strongly and negatively about kink to continue, kinksters interviewed in the ethnographic study did not feel actively persecuted nor did they believe that New Zealanders would be interested in a ‘witch hunt’ for kinksters.

Perhaps it is common knowledge, or at least to be expected, that by and large, kink is ‘not a big deal’ and most people are content to embrace, accept, tolerate or ignore what consenting and communicative adults choose to do to each other. What is arguably a more crucial point that has arisen from this study is the critical assessment of the way in which we as researchers are measuring attitudes about kink, using tools like the ASMS. If academics and clinicians are to develop attitudinal scales, they shoulder the burden of responsibility to accurately represent the people and the activities asked about by the scale. The problematic assumptions conveyed by the original ASMS to participants – including conceptualisations of BDSM being pain-oriented, the stability of role identities, the notion that people who prefer dominant roles are ‘in control’ and pose more of a threat to others than those who prefer submissive roles who ‘do not have control’, and so on – are too greatly influenced by the way the researcher who had developed the scale perceives BDSM, and do not reflect BDSM practices in praxis. Consulting BDSM practitioners during the development of the scale or

piloting the scale to them would have greatly minimised the possibility of these inaccuracies being retained in the final incarnation of the scale. If participants are rejecting the notion that kink is linked to psychopathology, why are the people developing and administering the scale still entrenched in the discipline, approaching the topic with these presumptions and using Freudian-derived terms like ‘sadomasochism’?

Introduction

The majority of participants interviewed in Chapter Two were critical of the various portrayals of BDSM in the media.⁴⁴ Though the various academic disciplines that engage with media discourses have been increasingly wary of conceptualising audiences as passive subjects that sometimes unquestioningly absorb everything that they consume (Talbot, 2007), the media continues to be an important social institution that informs, instructs and influences its viewers, playing a major role in shaping and perpetuating the dominant social and moralistic discourses in many contemporary societies including within New Zealand (Silverblatt, 2004). Though recent developments in new media⁴⁵ have been disrupting the unequal power structures in an industry traditionally conceived of as authoritative voices being disseminated to the wider population through various technologies, public broadcasters such as the BBC and neoliberalist trends that have given rise to privately-owned media conglomerates such as The Walt Disney Company continue to exert disproportionately greater sociocultural influence than smaller corporations and individuals (Matheson, 2005).

How our beliefs and behaviours are influenced by the media is one of the central questions in the media studies discipline, and the ways in which we consume, react to and are affected by the media have changed over the years as media technologies continue to develop (Berger, 1995; McLuhan, 1964). Throughout much of the 20th century, the audience was considered to be passive recipients of information. This view was prevalent during World Wars I and II as

⁴⁴ Please refer back to the ‘Mainstreaming kink’ and ‘Public (mis)representations’ subheadings (pp. 132-144) for a more detailed account of the ways in which participants have celebrated and critiqued various media portrayals of BDSM and BDSM practitioners.

⁴⁵ New media encapsulates the way the media has changed between the 20th and 21st centuries – ‘audiences’ have become ‘users’ who consume and generate media content differently with the advent of the internet the proliferation of mobile devices, giving rise to phenomena like citizen journalism, viral marketing, amateur pornography and so on (Lister, Dovey, Giddings, Grant, & Kelly, 2009).

radios, newspapers and later televisions were the dominant forms of communicating news, political messages and propaganda to the public (Katz, 1959). The 1970s saw the rise of personal computing and the nascent field of computer-mediated communication started to take shape (Windahl, Signitzer & Olson, 2009). Less than a decade later, theories around subjectivities and social constructionism also started to gain traction, and the notion that people simply unquestioningly absorb all the media content they are consuming started to seem increasingly less plausible (Burr, 2015). At minimum, there is an interpretative element that individuals actively engage with, reacting to and making sense of what they are hearing and seeing in relation to their own experiences (Gergen, 1985). For example, they may choose to accept at face value new information about things they have little prior knowledge of or interest in, and they may challenge information that conflicts with their pre-existing beliefs, or try to seek a second opinion. The advent of the internet in the 1990s signalled a fundamental change from a unidirectional broadcast of information from a limited number of local sources to a more interactive platform of global media, where end user-generated content has a wider reach than it ever had before (Bryant & Miron, 2004; Webster, 2006). Where once it was considerably more difficult to assess how people are responding to public broadcasts, now we are able to gain a sense of public response to any issue very quickly with online petitions and other public awareness campaigns, response videos, comments sections, hashtags and so on (Dijck, 2009).

Media portrayals of BDSM could have a profound influence not only on how BDSM non-practitioners perceive BDSM and BDSM practitioners (e.g. Yost, 2010) but also on how BDSM practitioners perceive themselves, each other, and their activities. While BDSM imagery has been prevalent in various media formats in European and later on North American contexts especially in the era after World War II, currently the most culturally

salient popular narrative about is the highly contentious *Fifty Shades of Grey* franchise. Incidentally, the most common examples used by participants from the ethnographic study to explain their main concerns with media representations of BDSM were the movie *Secretary* (2002)⁴⁶ and the *Fifty Shades of Grey* book trilogy. The interviews in the ethnographic study were conducted one year before the release of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015)⁴⁷ movie, though several participants were aware that a movie was in the making. In a previous study, *Secretary* had been screened to participants who do not self-identify as BDSM practitioners, and viewers were asked to evaluate their interpretations of how BDSM was portrayed in the film (Weiss, 2006a).

Weiss's (2006a) analysis of participants' responses to the movie highlighted two processes that *Secretary* engineered: 'understanding via pathologizing' and 'acceptance via normalization'. *Secretary* is told largely from the perspective of the female protagonist, Lee Holloway, who had recently left a mental health institution and secured her first job working as the secretary of the male protagonist, E. Edward Grey. 'Understanding via pathologizing' is the process by which the audience is led to make sense of her engagement with BDSM through this lens of mental illness and 'self-abuse' – her masochistic tendencies are seen as a result of her psychopathology and dysfunctional family background. BDSM is reduced to a 'coping mechanism' or a 'natural consequence' of the character's troubled past rather than a positive, self-driven, explorative experience (Weiss, 2006a). 'Acceptance via normalization'

⁴⁶ *Secretary* was originally released as a small-scale Lionsgate production with a budget of \$4 million, screened initially on January 11 2002 at Sundance Film Festival 8 months before its limited US cinema release on September 20 (IMDB.com, 2002). However, the movie generated sizeable public interest, and it continues to be a well-known movie in BDSM-practising circles.

⁴⁷ This first movie (there are two sequels planned for 2017 and 2018) was released in the US and UK on February 13 2015, and in New Zealand one day later on Valentine's Day itself (IMDB.com, 2015).

is showcased through the way the plot of the movie unfolded conformed to tropes that are similar in other romantic movies: the male and female protagonists' romantic relationship develops over the course of the film, their relationship undergoes some strain, but true to the romance genre their story invariably ends 'happily ever after' where they get married and live together in the suburbs. The framing of BDSM within this heteronormative paradigm is how the movie promotes acceptance through normalisation, endorsing certain elements of BDSM as long as it is practised in a way that fits within circumscribed, pre-defined notions of romantic (heterosexual, monogamous, long-term, committed) relationships. It could be argued that the movie's adherence to the dominant discourses of 'conventional' romance had undermined its transgressive, subversive potential (Weiss, 2006a).

At the time of the composition of this chapter, the *Fifty Shades of Grey* movie had been released for less than a year. Therefore, while there has been some academic attention across various disciplines such as contemporary literature studies and sociology on the book trilogy, not enough time has lapsed for there to be academic critiques about the movie. While several commentators do concede that the surge in popularity of the book series has had a positive impact, the majority of the analyses have problematised the book series and its portrayal of the protagonists, of BDSM and of BDSM practitioners in general (e.g. Downing, 2012). Nevertheless some of the positive outcomes of *Fifty Shades* have included: highlighting the underrepresentation and sometimes overlooked importance of female consumers; the elevation of the erotic and romance fiction genres and its writers into the realm of 'real' books written by 'real' authors (as opposed to 'those' books written by 'those' women); the growth of self-publishing and the e-book industry, and; empowering women in particular to talk about (female) sexuality by encouraging open dialogue about kinky sex and sex in

general without the clout of cultural taboo or embarrassment (Dymock, 2013; Hollomotz, 2013; Perkins, 2012).

One of the notable problematic elements of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series is encapsulated by Weiss's term 'understanding via pathologizing', with the male protagonist Christian having a background of childhood sexual abuse and his troubled past being inferred to as causing, explaining and justifying his excessively obsessive and controlling behaviours. 'Acceptance via normalization' is also exhibited as the heterosexual couple's romance unfolds – not unlike a formulaic romance narrative where the main characters meet and experience 'love at first sight', elaborate courtship rituals ensue but with the occasional 'kinky escapade' to set it apart from other traditional romance novels – and culminates in the woman 'taming' the man: they get married, settle down and have children (Downing, 2013; Nilson, 2013). Their relationship has been characterised as abusive and unhealthy (Bonomi, Altenburger, & Walton, 2013). Consent is portrayed poorly and in a limited, primarily sexual context (there are several problematic non-consensual incidences in other aspects of their relationship, such as his pervasive stalking) (Barker, 2013), and only certain less 'extreme' and more 'palatable' aspects of BDSM were portrayed as an extension of normative sexual practices as opposed to a more transgressive, exploratory and/or liberated form of intimacy (Tsaros, 2013). Importantly, the dialogue about the 'bedroom BDSM' aspect of *Fifty Shades of Grey* has also potentially detracted from other problematic aspects of the narrative, such as the protagonists' relationship and the way Christian attempts to regulate Anastasia's body through controlling her diet and enforcing her use of contraception (Downing, 2013), or the role that Christian's wealth and affluent lifestyle plays in the framing of Anastasia's attraction to him (Hunter, 2013).

Actual reader responses to the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy, as opposed to how academics believe that readers would respond to the texts, suggest that some readers do agree that the texts are poorly written – though this does not necessarily deter them from reading all three books – and overall, readers *do* engage with the texts in critical ways, finding some elements of the protagonists’ relationship or sexual/BDSM engagements problematic and/or perturbing (Deller & Smith, 2013). Many readers ‘do not take the books seriously’ and explain that they read the ‘trashy novels’ as a form of escapism similar to reading any other romance novels, or to be able to engage with public dialogue about the books. These reasons are not congruent with the supposed moral panics of innumerable, vulnerable female consumers being harmed by ‘buying into’ notions of naturalised male domination, domestic violence/abuse and/or using the book as a definitive guide for how to safely do BDSM (Deller & Smith, 2013).

Unlike *Secretary*, *Fifty Shades of Grey* is a Universal Studios production with a budget of \$40 million, so while *Secretary* retains the vibes of an ‘independent’ film, *Fifty Shades of Grey* has a distinct ‘Hollywood’ grandeur and would have garnered a much larger audience. With some insight already gathered from viewers of *Secretary* and readers of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, this study continues exploring public opinion by assessing the general public’s response to the *Fifty Shades of Grey* film through analysing movie reviews given by non-professional film critics.

Fifty Shades of Grey depicts the first meeting of the male and female protagonists, Christian Grey and Anastasia Steele. Christian has substantial prior experience with BDSM and introduces it to Anastasia in their budding, tenuous relationship. Her initial foray into several

BDSM activities with him is interspersed throughout their whirlwind courtship, though their relationship appears to have dissolved at the end of the movie.⁴⁸

What is not portrayed in the film but would be known to book readers is Christian's background. His biological mother was a prostitute with drug addiction problems, and he and his mother were abused by her employer until she died from suicide when he was four years old. He spent four days with her body until law enforcement discovered them. His adoptive mother was the doctor who greeted and tended to him at the hospital, and he was subsequently adopted into the Grey family. He had regular therapy sessions but continued to have adolescent delinquency issues, struggling with alcohol and prone to violent outbursts. At 15 years of age he worked for his mother's friend Elena, with whom he secretly had his first sexual experience. He had an undisclosed 'BDSM relationship' with her for six years (with her as the dominant and him as the submissive) until her husband at the time found out and brutally assaulted her. At the time he met Anastasia, he has already previously had fifteen 'BDSM relationships' with other women (with him as the dominant and the women as submissives).⁴⁹

⁴⁸ The couple do get married and have two children at the end of the book trilogy, so they are likely to reconcile in the as-yet-unreleased sequels if the films are to follow the same plot trajectory as the texts.

⁴⁹ *Fifty Shades*' portrayals of 'BDSM relationships' are incongruent with how BDSM practitioners explain their own relationships with each other, hence the use of the single quotation marks. As illustrated in chapter 2, communication, openness, trust, respect and honesty are some of the qualities which BDSM practitioners feel are essential in order to have a positive experience and minimises harm to others. To have an undisclosed extramarital BDSM relationship is frowned upon (the spouse cannot consent to something that has not been made known to them), and Christian's previous BDSM relationships resembles sexual slavery more so than dominant/submissive relationships.

Although Christian presents himself as a young, capable and charming business magnate, his childhood trauma and abuse history continue to haunt him throughout the narrative.

Throughout the book series and to some extent in the film, he deals with his difficult past through what is presented to the reader/audience as ‘BDSM’ – even though some commentators would argue that the narrative presents more like Christian achieving self-affirmation through sexual violence. He has exclusively dominant/submissive and sadomasochistic relationships because this is the only way he can relate with women; he repeatedly states he is incapable of romance. At one point during the film, Anastasia confesses that she loves him, to which he responds, “no, you can’t love me.”

Methods

Study 3A – IMDB movie reviews

As of 1 September 2015, there were 1248 reviews on the internet movie database website (IMDB.com) for *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Of these, 838 were submitted by 28 February 2015, within the first two weeks of the movie’s official local release date. These reviews are posted by members of the general public worldwide and are available on the IMDB website for anyone to view.

A thematic analysis was conducted on the 838 reviews posted within the first two weeks of the movie’s screening. The analysis was inductive and semantic in nature (Braun & Clarke, 2006), focusing on what reviewers explicitly say, though some of the themes will reflect prevalent discourses about how heterosexual couples conduct themselves and engage in relationship rituals. 4 of the reviews were exact verbatim duplicates and 1 was a review of a completely different movie, so these 5 reviews were discarded from the analysis leaving 833

reviews. This chapter is concerned with the audience's interpretations and reactions to the ways in which BDSM is represented in this movie. What is important for this research question is how the reviewers explain what they understood from the movie rather than the content that was 'actually' present in every kink-related scene. Whether the movie had any intended 'take-home messages' is less relevant than the messages the viewers did take home and write into their reviews. Thus the analysis focuses on these elements of the movie reviews, and other elements that one might expect in a holistic movie review (such as how well the characters are portrayed by their corresponding actors and actresses, the substance of the plot and plot twists, cinematography, etc.) are less relevant to this project. The CADQAS package, NVivo 10, was used to manage and facilitate the coding and subsequent analysis of the movie reviews, of which there were 452 pages.

Study 3B – Auckland Participants

A separate but related study was conducted with 10 Auckland-residing participants from the online public opinion survey described in the previous chapter who had indicated their interest in taking part in a subsequent project. They were each assigned an ID code, given a copy of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* movie to watch, and asked to respond to ten open-ended questions (administered in an online questionnaire format) about the movie after they had viewed it. The questions asked are listed in Appendix G. The first four 'lead-in' questions are an opening for participants to begin thinking about, engaging with and discussing the movie. The last six questions are more relevant to assess how participants interpreted the movie's portrayals of kink, kinky relationships and kinky people. Participants were each compensated for their time with a \$40 voucher.

The analysis section will integrate the movie reviews (Study 3A) with participants' responses (Study 3B), combining the two sources of data so that international and local perspectives are both adequately represented. Reviewers are not given pseudonyms as their IMDB usernames are linked to their reviews on the website anyway, but the Auckland-residing participants are quoted using a randomly-allocated 4-digit ID.

Analysis

Introduction

As might be expected, responses to the *Fifty Shades of Grey* movie varied, with comments ranging from 'the greatest movie of all time' to 'the worst movie ever made'. The 833 reviews have an average rating of 5.7 out of 10, indicating that it was not well-received by the audience overall.⁵⁰ However, as demonstrated in the graph overleaf, the movie had a polarising effect as reviewers tended to score the movie either extremely well (10/10) or extremely poorly (1/10), so a substantial amount of reviewers did think of the movie positively. Of course, it could be the case that viewers who thought the movie was 'very bad' or 'very good' were more likely to submit a review than those who thought the movie was mediocre, thereby skewing the scores towards the extremes. The numerical data is also affected by various reviewers' behaviours such as:

- The same reviewers voting multiple times in an attempt to skew the score;

⁵⁰ It is worth noting that movie review sites like IMDB, Rotten Tomatoes or Metacritic consider any rating above 8.0 to be 'critical acclaim', between 6.0 to 8.0 as 'average', and below 6.0 to be 'unfavourable'. These sites also weight their averages to combat vote stuffing. It is fairly rare for Hollywood movies to have an average score below 4.0 – these tend to be 'independent' or 'B-grade' films. Rating scores also tend to peak when the movie is first released and gradually decline over time as more viewers express their opinions, and people who have seen the movie multiple times become more critical of their evaluation.

- Reviewers voting 10/10 despite acknowledging several notable flaws in the movie because they believed that other reviewers who rated the movie 1/10 were being ‘too harsh’, ‘critical’ and/or ‘unfair’;
- Reviewers voting 1/10 despite acknowledging some positive aspects of the film because they believed that other reviewers who rated the movie 10/10 were ‘delusional fans’ who were ‘overly eager’ about the franchise;
- Reviewers who voted and reviewed the movie either without having seen the movie at all, or they left the cinema within the first 15-30 minutes.

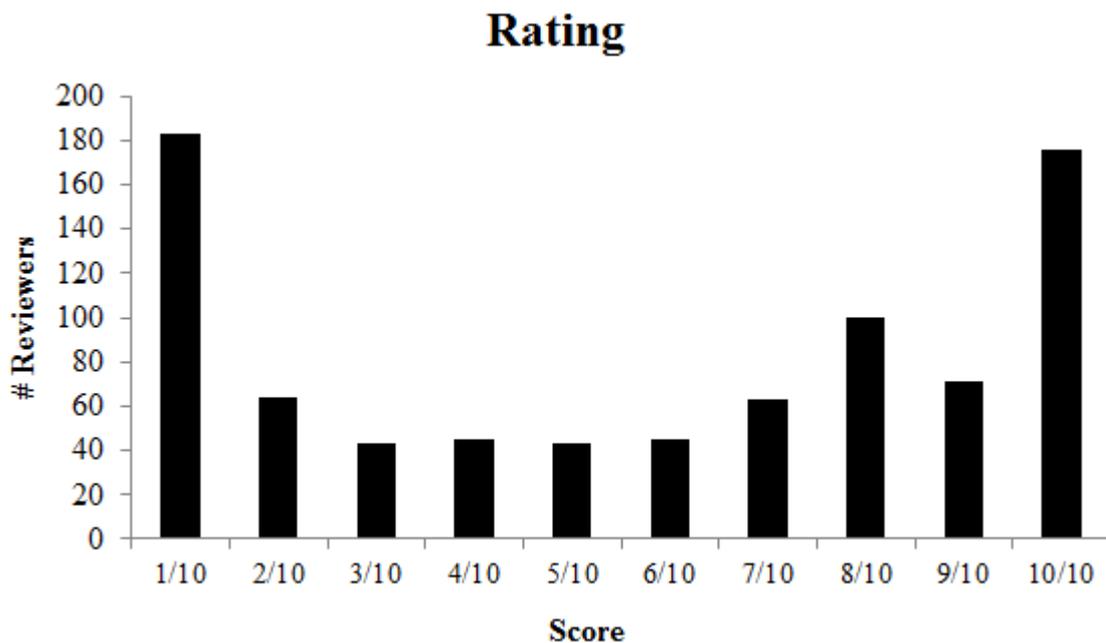


Figure 19. IMDB movie reviewers’ scores of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015) movie. The movie appears to have had a polarising effect on viewers as many reviewers tended to aggregate around the extremes 1/10 and 10/10 scores.

The overwhelming majority of the reviewers who explicitly claimed not to be avid fans of the *Fifty Shades* franchise watched the movie within the first two weeks of its release either accompanied another viewer or went out of curiosity about the franchise itself or about the hype or controversy surrounding the franchise. It is important to highlight that those who

rated the movie negatively did not necessarily disapprove of the entire *Fifty Shades* franchise – some of the reviewers who rated the movie 1/10 were ardent *Fifty Shades* readers who thought that the movie did not portray the texts adequately. Additionally, some of the reviewers who rated the movie 10/10 would concede that, while the books were poorly written ‘trashy romance novels’ and the movie was ‘not going to win any Oscars’, it should be judged on qualities such as romance, fantasy, escapism and other merits. A given reviewer’s numerical rating is simply a rating score and is not indicative of whether the reviewer likes/dislikes or is even familiar with the *Fifty Shades* franchise as a whole.

The analysis will focus on specific instances where reviewers have discussed the movie’s portrayals of BDSM practitioners, BDSM activities and the aspects of the protagonists’ relationships which pertain to their BDSM proclivities, such as relationship boundaries, consent, how they negotiate what they are willing and unwilling to do with each other, and so on. The five interconnected themes explored in greater detail below – romance, sex, abuse/consent, power/wealth and childhood trauma – are the main ways in which reviewers have discussed various scenes and concepts from the *Fifty Shades* movie or franchise overall in relation to BDSM. These themes were derived based on the frequency with which they were mentioned by reviewers as well as how strongly they felt about these topics. As with previous chapters, reviewers and participants are directly quoted verbatim throughout the analysis.

Representations: Romance and BDSM as mutually exclusive

Vinay Sital: I've seen the notebook... that's romance. This is a poor attempt to romance. It tries to tell you they're madly in love, but it's just a weird sexual relationship.

In discussing the romance aspect of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, reviewers often compared the movie to *Twilight*⁵¹ and *The Notebook*⁵². There was a consensus among reviewers that, primarily due to the volume and frequency of explicit content of *Fifty Shades*, the intensity of the couple's romance could not compare to *The Notebook*, because explicit BDSM/sexual scenes did not constitute romance. BDSM was interpreted by the audience to be fundamentally a carnal sexual experience; while the protagonists' relationship does involve dominance and submission, the audience's response is focused on the explicit sexual content – it is the numerous instances of *kinky sex* rather than the characters' lifelong *kink journeys* that dominate the overarching *Fifty Shades* narrative.

osbornb: If your looking for romance, then stick with Jane Austin and movies such as the Notebook and steer clear of Fifty Shades if this isn't the type of sex you want or even fantasize about.

While it is evident from the outset that *Fifty Shades of Grey* is not 'that type of love story' exemplified by storylines like *The Notebook*, it has nonetheless established itself as a popular series in the romance novel genre. Unsurprisingly, movie reviewers sought to make sense of BDSM in *Fifty Shades* within a romantic context. Though some reviewers pointed out that the *Fifty Shades* love story unfolded in non-transgressive and predictable ways, the majority of the reviewers conceptualised the characters' interests in BDSM to be an exotic element of the protagonists' relationship that distinguished *Fifty Shades* from other romance narratives. Sometimes BDSM functioned as a plot device to generate conflict and drama between the characters as the storyline unfolded, at other times it was a 'stumbling block' in their

⁵¹ *Twilight* is a young adult 4-part novel series with accompanying movie adaptations centred around the relationship between a vampire Edward and teenager Isabella which the *Fifty Shades* series was originally based upon.

⁵² *The Notebook* depicted an elderly man recounting the story of two young lovers from different socioeconomic backgrounds reuniting in the 1940s. *The Notebook* was considered by numerous reviewers to be the penultimate definition of a romance movie.

relationship that the couple had to overcome. In Christian's case BDSM was a means of 'dealing with his traumatic past' and for Anastasia it became one of Christian's many mysteries that she tasked herself with solving.

While there were elements of (inherently sexual) exploration and experimentation in *Fifty Shades*, BDSM activities were primarily purpose-driven (e.g. 'I can only have sadomasochistic relationships with women because...' or 'I will let him hurt me so that I can...') rather than existing simply because BDSM identities and practices are important to and a positive, intrinsically rewarding experience for the characters. By using BDSM as a vehicle of expression of (self-sacrificial) love, it could then function as a means of reinforcing heteronormative ideals about long-term relationships. Anastasia's way of showing that she loves Christian despite his sadistic tendencies by 'allowing' him to beat her, for example, is one way of reading the character's motivations that implicitly endorses the beliefs that BDSM practitioners are dangerous and violent; BDSM is maladaptive, harmful and abnormal; and ultimately BDSM would be detrimental to what would otherwise be considered 'healthy', 'nourishing' or 'fulfilling' relationships. The movie further reinforces this notion that the concepts of BDSM and romance are mutually exclusive by having Christian say lines such as "I don't do romance. My tastes are very singular. You wouldn't understand,"⁵³ and "I don't make love. I fuck... hard."

Justin Tobin: He is not a psychopath, but he seems to only be able to express his sexual interest through sadomasochism. He himself was once a submissive. His mother's friend was his dominant when he was fifteen. Okay, so does this explain his

⁵³ In the book, this line is longer and more nuanced: "I'm not a hearts and flowers kind of man, I don't do romance. My tastes are very singular. You should steer clear of me." Christian perceives and explains his 'singular tastes' to be both (1) antithetical to the romantic relationship that he believes Anastasia is yearning for, and (2) a dangerous aspect of his character that she needs to be wary of.

behaviour? Yeah, they're consenting adults, but Anastasia wants more than just kinky sex. She is saddened by his constant desire to punish her, even though she enjoys it. She wants more. She wants a loving "normal" relationship.

Reviewers were particularly critical about the 'underlying plot' of *Fifty Shades* – that is, the love story involving a powerful, wealthy, charismatic man with fatal character flaw(s) and an innocent, young, inexperienced woman with low self-esteem falling in love at first sight. Of course, for some of the audience, part of the appeal of the *Fifty Shades* franchise was precisely the formulaic romance script that unfolds between the protagonists.

do-arellano-mayra: I understand why so many women would find this romantic. It's the same love story that has been favored by female readers for centuries in a way or other. From Cinderella, to Beauty and the beast. This fantasy of taming a not approachable man with your love. Unrealistic and unhealthy as this is, those kind of books bring the kind of drama that keep some people turning the pages.

But while many of the reviewers who rated the movie positively enjoyed this fairy tale romance aspect, those who were less enthusiastic were concerned about the relationship and character dynamics that the film was implicitly endorsing. Reiterating this romance formula (aptly described by one reviewer as 'Beauty and the Beast') in *Fifty Shades* was deemed to be particularly problematic because the film's portrayals of dominance and sadomasochistic activities bore a dangerously close resemblance to domestic abuse and interpersonal violence. Notably in the example below, the reviewer has conflated the film's portrayal of BDSM with abuse and found BDSM to be completely incompatible with love.

mystht: perhaps the writer⁵⁴ should seriously consider getting psychological help or perhaps save everyone the trouble and get admitted in the mental hospital. HOW CAN YOU TELL PEOPLE THAT IT'S OK TO ABUSE Each other?????????? And this is NOT a romantic movie...love is so different than this S**T.

⁵⁴ It is not clear whether the reviewer is referring to the author of the *Fifty Shades* books or the movie's scriptwriter.

Because of the implicitly negative ways that BDSM is portrayed in the film, *Fifty Shades* then becomes a celebration of the triumph of ‘true love’, couched in terms and concepts like ‘the boyfriend experience’, ‘flowers and dinner romance’, marriage and children over relationship adversities like dominant/submissive dynamics and sadomasochistic desires. Given that kinky sex has become synonymous with the BDSM elements of the *Fifty Shades* narrative, the following theme is devoted to how reviewers engage with the sexual content of the film.

Representations: Sex as the sine qua non of BDSM

Reviewers argued over whether *Fifty Shades* was, at its core, a pornographic movie or a movie about love. While there were gratuitous amounts of nudity, there were 14 minutes and 17 seconds of ‘sex scenes’ (difficult as the term is to define) out of a total runtime of 125 minutes (Yahr, 2015), equating to approximately 11.5% of the movie. Whether this percentage of explicit scenes is large enough to constitute a pornographic movie is debatable. Yet by and large *Fifty Shades* was deemed by several reviewers to be a tasteful representation of what some might otherwise consider to be a distasteful and taboo topic of conversation.

The word ‘tasteful’ appears 56 times across all the movie reviews. The perception that the explicit scenes in the movie were ‘tastefully done’ was something that several reviewers felt important to highlight. They perceived that the love story between Christian and Anastasia elevated *Fifty Shades* from the miry depths of generic softcore pornography to a chic, modern romantic film. Any potential that *Fifty Shades* might have had for challenging heteronormative discourses about how relationships ought to be conducted would have been

undermined by this notion of ‘tastefulness’ as reviewers sought to emphasise how tastefully the kinky sex scenes were filmed, edited and presented to the audience.

The movie’s target audience is not necessarily sexually liberated or even tolerant of alternative sexualities. Reviewers’ responses to the filmmaker’s decision to omit the infamous ‘tampon scene’ from the book – a scene where Christian removes Anastasia’s tampon and has penetrative sexual intercourse with her – highlight a general sense of discomfort and sometimes disgust with the idea of having penetrative sex during menstruation, which might seem incongruent given how the audience appears to be more readily tolerant of the couple’s BDSM inclinations. Why does the audience perceive penetrative sex during menstruation differently from penetrative sex involving the use of various bedroom paraphernalia? This would seem to be one of many examples of the overall sentiment of ambivalence about the narrative – it is a fairy tale with whips and chains, it is transgressive but safe, unusual but familiar, and the variations of BDSM-reduced-to-sexual interactions that Christian and Anastasia have with each other are simultaneously arousing, edgy, undesirable, exciting, and somewhat repulsive.

ironhorse_iv: The film tones down or removes most of the creepier parts of the book, including the infamous "tampon scene" to get an R rating than an X rating. I don't know if that it was the wisest decision. While, yes, it makes the audience more comfortable, watching the film; it also makes the movie, a bit safe and dull. Nothing, they did was really that strange. This movie does an incredibly poor job of portraying BDSM culture.

lazlips2003: It has a perfect balance between the sex and the relationship. The book describes almost every sexual encounter they have but you cant have it all in the film, otherwise yes then it would be edging on pornographic. Especially the tampon scene.

seanpmurphy2009: Porn was never meant for mainstream theaters. This is another example on why. The book ventures into bizarre forms of paraphilia and gender abuse that readers can't seem to get enough of. While many were making their pants moist, or pitching a tent for the tampon scene, the film had to be heavily edited from the "Fifty shades of sexual abuse" guide, in order for it to enter into theaters.

kikay10000: Moreover, my main focused when I was watching the film was to get into the visual love story of Christian and Ana. And not the sex scenes. So if that's what the other viewers were really rooting for. Then they are missing the whole point. I'm just glad the they did not include that very disturbing "Tampon Scene". For it would have been insanely disgusting.

canoodle_movies: Oh and thank god they didn't add the tampon scene!

The reviewers quoted above seem to be making a similar distinction between what has previously been described by interviewees from the ethnographic study as 'lite kink' (the more 'socially acceptable' types e.g. intimate interactions between couples in the marital home) and 'hardcore kink' (the 'less socially acceptable' types e.g. the amalgamation of pain, humiliation, degradation and erotic pleasures in a dominatrix's dungeon). There was little consideration of BDSM beyond the visceral depictions in the movie, and BDSM scenes tended to be categorised and discussed as either sex scenes – where there was penetrative sexual intercourse involving bondage, blindfolds and other kinky paraphernalia – or violent scenes – encompassing sadomasochistic activities.

Moreover, the negotiation that takes part in the movie – where Christian outlines a business-like contract which Anastasia has to agree with and sign – encompasses more than the BDSM-related activities. As he narrates a portion of the contract during the movie, there are also details of, for example, what she can and cannot eat, and his enforcing of her using oral

contraception prescribed by a physician that he chooses for her.⁵⁵ However, in the ensuing negotiation scene, where Christian and Anastasia sit in a dimly-lit room to discuss the contract, Anastasia does not raise any issues with his propensity to regulate her body, and only outlines the limits around the sexual-related activities and paraphernalia that she is willing or unwilling to try with him. Her willingness (or at least non-resistance) to be subject to the majority of Christian's contractual demands inside and outside the bedroom is a cause of concern for some reviewers like Soph100 quoted below.

Soph100: Grey is allowed to control, manipulate whilst physically and emotionally abusing Anna. Even allowing to dictate her food and drink consumption. She even has to sign a contract allowing Grey to do anything he was wants to her and if she does not abide by these rules he is allowed to punish her by hitting her. Is this the message we want to be sending to young girls? It gives the green light to allowing someone to control, manipulate and hit you. How is that pleasurable or acceptable on any level. This film glamorises domestic abuse and should never have been allowed to be shown.

Nevertheless, this limited portrayal of BDSM as being confined predominantly to the bedroom serves little purpose in educating the audience about BDSM in praxis. The following quotation is one example where, not only has the reviewer failed to grasp how consent (and by proxy, other interrelated concepts like mutual trust and respect) operates even in a non-BDSM relationship, there is also a misconception that it is necessary for someone to be or know how to be dominant in their 'personal life' in order to be dominant in a BDSM interaction or relationship. Just as in *Fifty Shades*, the notion of consent is limited and is not deemed to be necessary for every aspect of a relationship.

⁵⁵ 'Total Power Exchange' (TPE) relationships, where one party has this level of overreaching control over the other, are not unheard of in reality. However they are very rare, the parties involved tend to enter TPE relationships for a fixed term of between 6 months to 2 years, and they do not exemplify a 'typical' BDSM relationship which one might find in BDSM communities. There was no one present at any public Auckland BDSM event during the course of the ethnographic study in chapter 2 that was in a TPE relationship.

DT Linda Gross: Jamie Dornan [...] I hear that he wants to drop out of the sequels because his wife doesn't approve of the kind of movie this is. First off, why are you doing what your wife says when it comes to business? Pussy. Secondly, didn't your wife know what kind of movie this is PRIOR to signing the contract? This insecurity translates to the screen. If the script calls for you to be a dominant man (both in business and in bed), you have to have that element in your personal life to tap into the role properly.

The following theme explores how reviewers have perceived consent as it is portrayed in *Fifty Shades*. It should be noted that consent is portrayed differently in different parts of the film – for example, where he is asking for permission to do something to her, consent is an explicit, concrete request that he makes of her, but where he shows up uninvited in her spaces at various points in the film, her consent becomes irrelevant for him to consider.

Representations: Blurring the immutable line between abuse and consent

beazeta-948-123661: At least Anastasia is not as submissive as Grey wants but she tolerates a manipulative,jealous, controlling and abusive guy just because she wants him to love her... Sorry girl, that's no love.

Leaving sex apart,it seems to be an apology for domestic violence with all those rewards and punishments.... and all those excuses for his behavior because he is a complex, traumatize man who has shades... No woman should tolerate a man like Mr Grey and, actually, it worries me that so many women have fallen "in love again"

The notion that *Fifty Shades* espouses domestic violence/abuse generated intense, heated debate among reviewers. On the one hand, those who stressed that the film did not depict abuse, assault and rape cited the instances where Christian had actively sought Anastasia's consent before they engaged in any BDSM-related activities, as well as his insistence on her doing her own background research and signing the dominant/submissive relationship contract he had drafted up, and the explicit negotiation that takes place around the contractual terms. For some reviewers, *Fifty Shades* depicts two consenting adults engaged in consensual

activities, and any objections that audience members have with this are either watching a movie that does not suit their tastes, or are ignorant and/or intolerant of BDSM.

chrystal-winter: Firstly, nothing about this movie, NOTHING, merely whispered abuse. This movie does not even slightly suggest domestic violence. There is a contract, which is discussed and amended between the lovers. There are safe words. There is a limit and the Dom/sub relationship is discussed openly - it is not a typical relationship.

xosabrinashen47: I watched the movie looking for signs of an abusive relationship, but I really didn't see anything of that nature. In fact, all I saw was this confident and empowered woman that made all of her own decisions. She was not forced to do anything that she didn't want to do. She wanted to explore Christian's dark world and her own sexuality. You can argue that Christian abuses her physically and emotionally, but he does what she tells him to do. When she says stop... he stops. He tries to make it work with her.

Sarahyeah: There is a lot of controversy surrounding the subject material, but it is very apparent that their relationship is based on mutual trust, understanding and consent. The film highlights this more than the book does, so be assured that it in no way 'glamourises' domestic violence (frankly, to compare this film to victims of domestic violence only does an injustice to them and further alienates people who enjoy a BDSM lifestyle)

On the other hand, those who believed the film portrayed non-consensual activities tended to find Christian's behaviour both within and beyond their sexual interactions to be inappropriate, disrespectful and/or objectionable. Some reviewers argue that the BDSM accoutrements serve to draw the attention of the viewer away from the more insidious elements of their relationship – such as his mercurial temperament, the stalking, the excessive level of control, the pressuring to push limits around and coerce her into doing what she is unwilling to do with him, and so on.

ajscotland: This film is about two people who have no chemistry "falling" for each other. "Falling" like off a three story balcony leaving you without the use of your legs for the rest of your life. I'm just going to be blunt. This film is about GLORIFYING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE and a little girl in over her head who tolerates it. ... Not only does he creep onto her, HE BEATS HER, non-consensually while they have

intercourse, he stalks her, HE INTIMIDATES HER and he shows no love for her. If this were any other film, he would be the antagonist

Shiori-Ikatashi: Their, uhm, "relationship" in no way, shape, or form, could even begin to reflect what true BDSM is. I'm not an expert, but I know for a fact there's more to it than whips, chains, handcuffs, and bondage. They tried, but failed miserably to accurately depict the fundamental dynamics of a D/s relationship. I'm pretty sure you're not supposed to walk on eggshells with your dominant in fear he might get angry. I'm pretty sure you're supposed to respect your submissive's personal space and not track him/her down and show up unexpectedly at their location and demand what they're doing every second of everyday, sounds a little impulsive and controlling, would you agree?

Hannah Ryder: Glorifies the abuse of women, tries to disguise it as 'BDSM.' Features a 'weak, submissive' female with a powerful, disrespectful male counterpart who ignores safe words, follows her, is extremely over-protective(to the point of it being creepy), and again, hides abuse by calling it 'BDSM.' Please do not waste any money on this shitty movie, instead, donate all the money you would have spent to go see it on a donation to a women's abuse shelter.

What is particularly problematic about the film's portrayal of abuse/consent is how some of the responses supporting the notion that the film does not depict non-consensual activities attempt to explain, or are tolerant of Christian's disposition and behaviour despite acknowledging that what he does to Anastasia could be interpreted as violent or abusive. The three quotations below use different methods of justifications which could work synergistically to both absolve Christian of responsibility and accountability, and also minimise the impact and consequences that his behaviour has on Anastasia. However, using explanations or justifications like he 'had a traumatic past', 'only hits her twice' or his level of abuse would be considered 'mild' ought neither to reduce the severity of his actions, nor put the responsibility and blame onto the victim.

adreamergirl12: Christian Grey is not that bad! He only hits her twice, and, sadly, she asked for it that last time.

pewshda: From an 'abuse' standpoint this is really mild and not anything the level I was expecting from comments on Facebook and the general hype based criticism following the story/film. I feel like I am defending the story or film here which is not

the case I am just trying to be reasonable and honest here, there are either a TON of overly sensitive pussies out there or I'm missing something.

metzler22: Christian Grey had a traumatic past and that is what shaped him to be what he is now, with the help of Elena. He is no abuser or does he intend to hurt women in the abuse sort of context.

The function of Christian's 'traumatic past' is explored further as a standalone theme, as it operates in conjunction with his wealth alongside numerous other factors that explain and excuse his questionable conduct in their relationship.

Representations: Wealth as inexorably linked to power

Vlad_Imirivan: "Lifestyles of the Rich and Perverse" might be a more fitting title for the unusually explicit bedroom drama.

jeph_b: Mr Grey is supposed to be desirable, however he's actually a complete prick who apart from a set of abs to be proud of, and being very rich, has nothing going for him at all. Women aren't that shallow are they? He stalks her, lavishes her with expensive gifts and refuses to be romantic in any way shape or form. It's the perfect cliché that doesn't exist, rich handsome multi-talented manly fella who can't love because of his past, but she's going to 'tame' over the course of 3 movies I guess.

Christian is a 27-year-old self-made billionaire living in an opulent penthouse with an array of pristine suits and a sizeable collection of cars which he makes little use of as he can travel by helicopter. He courts Anastasia by giving her memorable experiences such as going gliding together, or buying her expensive gifts like rare first editions of well-known books or a new car. His extravagant lifestyle seems to play an important factor in Anastasia's attraction to him, and his wealth affords him greater access to different aspects of her life and allows him to exercise more control over her than in a typical relationship. For example, Anastasia's desire to spend time alone with her family was overruled without discussion as Christian unexpectedly appeared at her family home to take her on an impromptu trip. His

invasive, pervasive involvement in Anastasia's life blurs the boundaries between a dominant/submissive dynamic in a BDSM relationship where both parties' needs are considered equally, and an obsessive, controlling, abusive and unhealthy relationship favouring the domineering individual's desires over the victim's. It is important to note that what many reviewers found particularly offensive was not merely his behaviours and his expectations of their relationship, but that the movie vindicates his behaviours and expectations through the showcasing of his wealth.

Davina Legg: A film portraying a tycoon seducing a young women...

OK if he was on the dole shed run a mile... a torture room OK weirdo I'm outa here but he's a billionaire so its different? Romance? 24/7 contract on a relationship, phone tapping, stalking, rape and violence..

I fear for society if people vote this 10/10 its everything that is wrong in a relationship.

His wealth and status fuel the sense that *Fifty Shades* is a kinky repackaging of a standard '(rich) boy-meets-(poor) girl' story that has been told in countless iterations before. However, with the inclusion of the film's rendition of BDSM, there are additional elements of potential exploitation and manipulation to consider. Is Anastasia's consent given based on the benefits and risks involved with the activities she is consenting to, or were her decisions influenced by the allure of Christian's wealth? The following excerpts exemplify some of the visceral reactions to the way Anastasia's attraction to Christian is portrayed in the film. As the first reviewer noted, Christian's wealth, whiteness and attractiveness (and youth) operate conjointly and sometimes in implicit ways within *Fifty Shades* to refashion what might otherwise be considered rape and abuse.

alwaysdewright: There's nothing good, or original, or edgy, or thought-provoking about 50 Shades. It feels dated, and designed to be fantasy porn for those too vanilla to try anything risqué in their own lives. Truthfully, if the main character wasn't a billionaire, or white, or attractive, this movie wouldn't be so popular. It would be a drama about horror, rape, and abuse and real issues people don't want to talk about. 50 Shades is a false portrayal of kink and a subculture that is already misunderstood.

elailiesi: Besides being full of clichés, I find this film to be sexist and encouraging of prostitution. If it were just a movie about BDSM I would of been OK with it, if it were just a romantic move I would of been OK with it. But promoting this poor girl - rich boy romantic story is getting really old, really fast. As a society we are starting to realize the damaging effects stories like Cinderella and Beauty and the Beast have upon our kids ideals and their ambitions in life. This film is nothing but worse. Cinderella goes for Prince Charming, the Beauty goes for the Beast with Money, and the female protagonist of this film goes for a rich man that would also like to whip her from time to time. What's next? - I don't even want to imagine.

Viswanath Dhanisetty: But the most insulting of all, that I can't understand how it is acceptable in the mainstream, is how weak of a "character" Anastasia is. The entire movie, she doesn't stand on her own. Even though she is being emotionally abused, she needs a man. Even when she is whipped and doesn't enjoy it, she is still in love with him. What did he do to deserve your love Anastasia? Oh right, new computer, new dresses, new Audi, helicopter rides, and glider rides. Simply insulting.

Wealth is not the only mechanism used to mask the severity of Christian's behaviour and its implications on their relationship. As we will examine in the next theme, his troubled past alluded to in the film is used as a means of explaining his sadomasochistic and sexual inclinations. Ergo, wealth gives Christian the luxury of unbridled access to a near-limitless range of experiences and also threatens to distort Anastasia's attraction to him as less fairy-tale romance and more prostitution – but the complications in Christian's background are used to make his cornucopia of erotic desires excusable (though BDSM practitioners may argue that nothing they do requires excusing). Simply put, wealth allows Christian to 'do anything he likes', and the added dimension of childhood trauma means Christian can 'do anything he likes' *and* 'get away with it'.

Representations: Childhood trauma as the aetiology of undisclosed desires

nicol_1985: This movie is a complete disaster. It lacks any meaning whatsoever. There is no real story line. Some poor girl meets a rich guy who buys her everything. She falls in love with him but he is insane and it all goes back to his childhood. And that's it, the rest is just pure porn.

Christian's troubled background is alluded to in the movie but explored in greater depth in the book series. As many of the moviegoers had read at least one of the books, some reviewers were already aware of his character history prior to watching the film.

An unfortunate cumulative effect of Christian's background is that he is diagnosed by the audience to be a disturbed psychopath⁵⁶ shaped by his difficult circumstances, and correspondingly Anastasia becomes his victim. The narrative treads a dangerously fine line between a romantic story about two young lovers and Hollywood endorsement of the wealthy involved in perpetuating abusive, exploitative relationships.

aharmas: there are hints and demonstrations of this being a Cinderella story, of this going into the pantheon of great love stories, but it's burdened by its origins. Is he a psycho? Is she just plain dumb. You would think that with all that money, therapy would have been more effective.

olsonco: Christian Grey comes out looking like a depressed psycho, using his money and business acumen to act out his seediest fantasies whilst fixating on a woman he hopes to abuse into next week, all without a smile.

Fifty Shades takes Weiss's (2006a) 'understanding via pathologizing' one step further and also achieves 'rationalising via pathologising'. Christian's troubled past becomes an

⁵⁶ Incidentally, the actor who plays Christian Grey in the movie, Jamie Dornan, has a current role as a Belfast serial killer Paul Spector in an ongoing BBC television series *The Fall* (2013-present). Unsurprisingly, given how Christian and BDSM are portrayed in *Fifty Shades*, at least a dozen reviewers drew some comparisons and noted some similarities between Christian Grey and Paul Spector.

aetiological explanation for what he reluctantly terms his ‘singular tastes’. He advises Anastasia to stay away from him – presumably because he perceives himself to be dangerous and/or have a negative influence on her life – but he repeatedly and relentlessly pursues her time and affection. In this way, his personality, demeanour and desires are explained by and become excusable when they are framed within this overarching pseudo-Freudian, psychopathological paradigm. And as a result, some of the audience are more willing to forgive the instances in *Fifty Shades* where his actions would normally be deemed inappropriate or unacceptable. His struggles with Anastasia are reduced to ‘teething problems’ in his first ‘proper romantic relationship’ rather than glaring symptoms of someone who is struggling to come to terms with his past and has the potential to be abusive and violent without appropriate therapeutic interventions.

chaplinman13: The male character had a severely traumatized childhood, give him a break to learn and grow, we're all only human, not perfect Mrs. Beaver.

adiel13: In the second book Christian realizes that what he does to woman is wrong, and that becoming a submissive at the age of 16 was wrong. What that woman did, was psychological abuse. He came from an abusive childhood. He was physically abused before he was adopted. In his love for Ana he realizes that he was made into something, that wasn't who he really was. Ana teaches him intimacy. And love. And that is a really important part of the story. Without it, he just looks like a sadistic animal.

Portraying Anastasia as a panacea that can ‘rescue’, ‘heal’, ‘cure’ or ‘fix’ Christian during the course of their relationship so that he no longer requires hurting women in order to come to terms with his unresolved traumatic past experiences paints BDSM as a violent outlet for a psychologically damaged individual rather than something ‘normal people’ do. The end result is that Christian and Anastasia come across as capricious characters trying to sustain a dysfunctional relationship, and BDSM becomes more of an unhealthy obsession than a mutually-rewarding and relationship-enhancing pursuit.

Ira: The sad part was that both characters seemed to be mentally and emotional unstable. There's no romance in there, no chemistry, just abuse.

The film's representation of BDSM through characters like Christian and Anastasia paints a very different picture from how BDSM practitioners in reality talk about their experiences. As previously discussed in the first and second chapters, framing BDSM as therapeutic or healing has the unnecessary and unfortunate side effect of presuming there are underlying (psycho)pathological conditions that require healing. Interviewees from the ethnographic study should not need to have to stress that they are 'normal people' – nor do the majority of BDSM non-practitioners perceive them to be 'abnormal' – and yet in light of immensely popular fictional narratives like *Fifty Shades* and characters like Christian, it is perhaps understandable that BDSM practitioners do feel defensive and protective about their preferences, lifestyles and communities.

Conclusion

Assessing these five themes collectively, the film does not accurately reflect BDSM practices as experienced and retold by BDSM-practising interviewees in reality. In the film, BDSM is portrayed as a sexual endeavour that is on one opposing dichotomous end to romance.

Christian's turbulent upbringing and his struggles during adolescence, combined with his current wealth and status, privileges his position in their relationship. He is afforded greater levels of control over Anastasia than many movie viewers were comfortable with and the instances where he transgresses her boundaries tend to be overlooked. Whether the film's representation of their dominant/submissive relationship is out of line with BDSM practitioners' enacted or idealised dominant/submissive relationships is debatable.

While many of the positive reviewers enjoyed the film and may even be inspired to do further research and dabble in some BDSM activities, for many of the negative reviewers the film has had the effect of presenting Christian Grey as a sexual predator taking advantage of a naïve and innocent Anastasia Steele. Her attraction to him is not distinguished from her attraction to his extravagant lifestyle, and she consents to doing a range of BDSM activities with him with the intention of turning him into 'boyfriend material'. Both characters are infatuated and have an unhealthy level of obsession with each other, and what some reviewers perceived to be caring and protective behaviours were for other viewers excessively controlling acts of jealousy.

The notion that *Fifty Shades* is 'just a movie' and there were no 'take home messages' or 'morals of the story' intended is rendered untenable by those reviewers who were concerned that the teenage female viewers in particular would be particularly susceptible to some of the implicit messages that the film had endorsed.

sice-100: First what I should mention is TRIGGER WARNING this movie is not suitable for people who are/have been in an emotionally abusive relationship. This movie managed to get so much attention, so please, do not write me "it is just a movie, chill", young girls are going to watch this movie and what will they see? They will see themselves in the role of Ana, young, poor and inexperienced woman with low self esteem and no self worth. The movie/book will make them believe that what they need to find is somebody to "take care of them". And then the problems start. The care taker, Christian, is portrayed as this "damaged" person who is into bondage stuff and needs saving. What's really going on there is so much different and so horrifying, honestly. If you know anything about BDSM, you know that its about intimacy and bringing pleasure to both partners, who both agree to this. What is portrayed in the movie/books IS NOT BDSM. Ana did express her dislike for being spanked, but Christian didn't really care. Even though she did have a safety word for when in red room of pain, after she'd use it, Christian would mock and ridicule her for using it, making her feel sorry for doing so. The only way of making sure Christian stays

around is doing what his sick perverted mind desires, and since Ana has no self worth, she will do all of that. This is not okay. He controls her every move and is turned on when she refuses him (mm... kinda sounds like a damn rapist) He holds her away from family and friends, manipulates her actions so they would fit him, controls what she eats, even. Girls will think it's fun when a boy does this to them, girls will think this is how he expresses love. Girls will stay in an abusive relationships, because the man just needs "saving".

Charlotte Smith: The consent in this movie (if you can call it that) is questionable at best, and the fact that he doesn't even CONSIDER her input and tentativeness towards some things in his contract shows that. He tries to OWN her. He stalks her and controls everything she does from the moment they meet. That is not a consensual relationship. That is abuse. It sickens me that young women BELIEVE that this sort of behavior is OK.

BDSM is nothing like anything in this movie. In a BDSM consensual relationship EVERYTHING is on the subs terms. Absolutely everything. If the sub says stop, you stop. If the sub is happy, you're happy. If the sub says no, you don't push it. What Ana and Christian exhibit is a controlling, manipulative relationship, please look up BDSM and be safe if you're wanting to try and spice up your love life. DON'T USE THIS MOVIE (OR THE BOOKS) AS A LEAD BY EXAMPLE.

What types of messages were conveyed to *Fifty Shades* viewers? The following list contains ten examples of what the audience might take away from the movie.

1. **BDSM is destructive and antithetical to romance.** A partner who is interested in BDSM would not be interested or be incapable of 'the girl/boyfriend experience' – the 'dinner dates' and the 'chocolates and flowers' flavour of romance is incompatible with BDSM.
2. **Wealth permits excessive levels of control and restrictions in a relationship.** If your partner is wealthy, you are subject to their whims. Behaviours that transgress personal boundaries should not be discussed or negotiated.
3. **Indulging in BDSM proclivities in adulthood is a means of dealing/coping with unresolved childhood trauma.** BDSM is therapeutic for psychologically damaged individuals. By the same token, certain 'types' of individuals are more likely to be involved in BDSM – people with troubled pasts, people with certain personalities (on

both the overbearing and docile ends of the spectrum), people who require a certain level of control and order in their lives, and so on.

4. **‘True love’** (along with other components of the heteronormative monogamous marital package, like ‘settling down’ and having children) **will overcome all relationship obstacles.** For instance, a partner’s inability to cope with his/her troubled past, or BDSM inclinations, or the complications that arise in a relationship between two people from different socioeconomic backgrounds.
5. **BDSM is something that people ought to feel ashamed or guilty about.** They should feel compelled not to disclose their desires.
6. **Consent is important and a partner’s limits should be respected.** Activities must stop if consent is withdrawn/rescinded.
7. **BDSM is all about sex.** Central tenets of BDSM like consent, trust, respect and communication are less applicable outside the bedroom.
8. **BDSM practitioners are dangerous, violent and unpredictable.** You should stay away from someone whom you know is interested in BDSM.
9. **A woman should enter and stay in a dysfunctional relationship if she believes that she can ‘fix’ her partner.** Even if this may compromise her personal safety, her long-term commitment to the relationship might ‘change him for the better’.
10. **Sexual inexperience is a problem for young women. They should rectify this quickly** so that they can embark on journeys of sexual exploration as early as possible.

While some of these statements, that the film implicitly or explicitly espouses, have an element of truth, or are applicable in certain contexts to some individuals, the majority of them are problematic generalisations about BDSM, romance and gendered expectations and

roles in monogamous heterosexual relationships. Many of these misrepresentations of BDSM are not only detrimental to public perceptions of BDSM, but also have a negative influence particularly on young women and their sexualities, their perceptions of romantic relationships, and how prospective partners should conduct themselves.

The latest instalment in the *Fifty Shades* franchise joins a long line of media representations of BDSM that, on the surface seems to be a nascent agent of transgression, but upon closer scrutiny serves to continue policing ‘unnatural desires’. Its appeal to many of its fans rest on the laurels of privileged heteronormative archetypes about romantic love. Its heavy reliance upon these idealised concepts of romance, to which it can attribute its success in becoming a mainstream narrative, compromises its potential to broaden the scope of what would be considered acceptable sexualities. *Fifty Shades* is arguably not a complete overhaul of the quintessential love story, nor does it revolutionise symbols and representations in the romance genre. By portraying Christian as ‘damaged goods’ or a ‘lost soul’ who has found his salvation and absolution in Anastasia, the film reinforces the notion that BDSM is destructive to individuals and their relationships, and people have to be ‘saved’ from their depraved perversities. ‘True love’ can only be achieved through the same means advocated for in this film and countless love stories before it – through conventional courtship leading to becoming a couple, marriage and children, whilst the sheer strength of their bond has the ability to overcome all obstacles and hardships that may arise during the course of their long-term relationship.

While reviewers could argue that *Fifty Shades* does not necessarily present BDSM in a negative light, it is certainly not an accurate depiction of how BDSM practitioners manage and live their lives on a daily basis. While the film gives a commendable level of attention to

sexual exploration and issues surrounding consent, these very limited facets do not account for a holistic experience of BDSM. Sex dominates the storyline with little room for psychological aspects of BDSM, and wealth taints the film's portrayal of power by rendering the allure of Christian Grey as a person indistinguishable from the allure of Christian Grey's fortune. Ultimately, *Fifty Shades* is not a story about a BDSM-practising couple, but a reiteration of a rich-boy-meets-ordinary-girl plotline sprinkled with several intense and explicit – though not necessarily novel or transgressive – sexual encounters. As interviewees in the ethnographic study had concurred, fictional narratives like *Fifty Shades* portray BDSM as more of a public spectacle that serves to shock, inspire and/or titillate an intrigued and voyeuristic audience, rather than an exposition of a potential shared interest for an 'ordinary' couple in an 'ordinary' relationship. While it could arguably have some merit as a fictional work, it does not serve many of the purposes that BDSM practitioners and communities would want from popular narratives with BDSM content – such as increased awareness of BDSM; positive or at least neutral public perceptions of BDSM and its practitioners; increasing social acceptance of BDSM practices; decreasing social stigma and discriminatory practices against BDSM practitioners; promoting communication, negotiation, safety and trust within intimate relationships. *Fifty Shades* may have introduced something *different* to the romance genre, but when it is delivered to the audience in a 'tasteful' heteronormative package, it does not subvert or challenge romance/relationship norms and practices.

Chapter Six: Summary

This dissertation is a compilation of three interrelated research questions, querying:

1. Phenomenological experiences of BDSM practitioners in New Zealand;
2. Public perceptions of BDSM and BDSM practitioners in New Zealand, and;
3. Mainstream media's influence on how BDSM is portrayed, rationalised and perceived, examined through the *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015) movie.

These three questions seek to explore and understand how BDSM practitioners live their lives within contemporary New Zealand society, and in doing so simultaneously challenge socially-delineated heteronormative confines by redefining the ways in which they interact with and relate to each other, the various levels of intimacies they are able to explore with each other, and the different depths of relationships that they can have. However, the phenomenological experiences of BDSM practitioners cannot be examined in isolation from the environmental contexts in which they operate. How BDSM practitioners juggle, manage and self-regulate their identities and practices are partly influenced by how they are perceived – or, more importantly, how they *believe* they are being perceived – by others, as well as the collective reception, reaction and response to popular BDSM narratives that are portrayed in fictional and non-fictional depictions. Some of the questions which can arise when BDSM practitioners' experiences are explored in conjunction with environmental factors include, but are certainly not limited to:

- How open and inclusive can a BDSM group/community be if they perceive the local vanilla environment to be intolerant and hostile?
- How do perceived positive or negative moral judgements – or the complete lack of judgement – from those within and outside of these BDSM groups/communities affect BDSM practitioners' perceptions of themselves and their activities, stigma

management behaviours, and their willingness to disclose and have open dialogue about their practices?

- Do practitioners and/or non-practitioners draw immutable lines between deviances, diversities and desires?

The main objective of this project is to produce research that provides a more detailed account of BDSM in New Zealand as told by local BDSM practitioners than that which exists in current literature. While research in which BDSM practitioners themselves are heavily involved has been rapidly growing over the past 30 years, the overwhelming majority of the work in the BDSM field is conducted in USA and UK/Europe (Langdrige & Barker, 2007). In these countries, BDSM tends to have a longer and complex history of private gatherings and underground publications, and the development of regional BDSM subcultures throughout the 20th century have been influenced by different factors abroad (Sisson, 2007a, Weiss, 2006b). Looking within New Zealand holistically, the studies conducted in this project illustrated BDSM identities, relationships and practices of local practitioners, some of whom openly shared their good, bad, humorous and unfortunate experiences through interviews with the researcher. Though some of these interviewees spoke of perceived stigma that they felt came from other practitioners as well as non-practitioners alike, the results from an online questionnaire strongly suggest that the vast majority of participants view BDSM either neutrally or positively, and are generally accepting/tolerant of BDSM practitioners and practices. While this does not necessarily generalise across New Zealand, it may highlight some potential discrepancies between how BDSM practitioners *believe* that they are perceived by the public, and how some members of the public actually perceive them.

Popular narratives like *Fifty Shades of Grey* have the potential to ameliorate public perceptions of and address common misconceptions about BDSM, some of which have been perpetuated by other media avenues such as other Hollywood movies, short films, news reports and tabloids. However, the response to the polarising, controversial franchise as evidenced by more than 800 publicly-submitted reviews on IMDB.com has sometimes been critical, highlighting numerous problematic elements of the protagonists' interactions, activities and relationship dynamic. The *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015) movie has reinforced some of the positive and negative stereotypes about BDSM and BDSM practitioners that are already prevalent in the public consciousness, and its distorted depictions have captivated and enraptured some audiences as much as it has disgusted and repelled others.

Phenomenological Experiences

Twenty-one people who have varying levels of involvement in a New Zealand BDSM community as of 2013~2014 were interviewed as part of a larger ethnographic project in the Auckland BDSM scene. The researcher obtained consent to be present at BDSM events from venue owners and event organisers prior to attending, and attended BDSM events regularly for 6 months in order to make observations and build rapport with local BDSM practitioners before commencing interviews. While the researcher has continued attending BDSM events and remains in regular contact with several members of the Auckland BDSM scene, the ethnographic project officially lasted for 12 months, spanning from August 2013 to August 2014. The scene has undergone drastic changes since – as of 2016 one of the major venues has closed down, the number of people in the pool of regular attendees has decreased as the community grows increasingly fragmented, and a trend has emerged for new faces to attend several events sporadically rather than cementing themselves as long-term regulars. Even

within a short span of 2 years, some of the fieldnotes that the researcher has made may already become a part of the growing body of ephemeral historical observations.

Nevertheless, the snapshot captured in that 2013~2014 window has provided unique insights into the Auckland BDSM scene, which has been observed to be different from the BDSM communities studied in other parts of the world. Notably, while the local population also has an overrepresentation of ‘white’ individuals, there is a more diverse range of ages and classes represented in the Auckland scene. Where previously researched communities overseas tended to be dominated by well-educated, middle-class and upper-middle-class professionals who can afford the accoutrements, event entrance tickets and other costs associated with kink, you are equally likely to find university students, people who have never completed high school, retirees, unemployed, or minimum wage workers at a local event. While Auckland boasts the most active BDSM scene in New Zealand in terms of number of brick-and-mortar stores, event attendees, number of venues and frequency of events, the Auckland scene size pales in comparison to Australian cities like Melbourne and Sydney. The Oceanic cities cannot compare to those long-established communities in European and North American cities which, if the numbers on FetLife are anything to go by, have BDSM-practising populations numbering in the thousands like Berlin, London, New York City or San Francisco. A scene where ‘everyone knows everyone’ (or as some interviewees noted, ‘incestuous’ because ‘everyone has played with everyone else before’) manufactures different relationship dynamics, event structures and observable power differentials than a scene comprising of a thousand strangers.

Though the researcher's observations have been informed by direct observations, casual research, and informal conversations both face-to-face and online on FetLife, the bulk of chapter 2 is dedicated to the analysis of the interviewees' narratives.

There were many themes that could be derived from all the topics that interviewees covered. In summation, listed below are ten of the most important points that interviewees wanted to convey.

1. **Kink is a journey.** It is generally a very personal long-term endeavour, spanning for decades. It involves cumulative personal growth as kinksters explore and experiment with different kinks.
2. **There is no 'one size fits all' approach to kink.** How people define kink (and by proxy how they would define other terms like 'vanilla', 'extreme' or 'lite' kink, or what does being a dominant, submissive, sadist, masochist, and other identity labels entail) and the ways in which kink supplements, enriches, enhances or sometimes detracts from one's life varies between individual practitioners.
3. **There's trouble in paradise.** The term 'community' can be applied to the local scene loosely at best. While the scene is purportedly open and welcoming for anyone to join, people can be judgemental especially of the more 'extreme' types of kink, and there is a perceived lack of support for those who have had negative experiences with BDSM resulting in physical/emotional harm.
4. **The BDSM scene is full of 'normal people'.** Several interviewees noted, not without some level of embarrassment, that prior to attending their first BDSM event, they had similar misconceptions about BDSM events that they thought other 'vanilla people' also believed – that it would be very overtly sexual, did not involve long-term

relationship commitments, participants would be very violent, and so on. Interviewees were keen to stress that, after a brief acclimatisation period, they found the local BDSM scene to be full of ‘ordinary people’ with a myriad of interests from all walks of life.

5. **(Semi)-Public kink and private kink are completely different.** While public kink is not necessarily less intimate, there is a level of showmanship in public. Public ‘kink space’ is also a safe space where people can express themselves and experiment with different kinks, and these spaces are monitored and policed according to local event etiquettes and codes of conduct. How effective this intra-community policing is remains debatable, but where applicable, several interviewees expressed some level of ‘trust in the system’.
6. **Basic tenets of kink like consent, communication and respect should be honoured by all kinksters.** Trust is paramount for a good experience and those who violate these behavioural ideals should be warned or sanctioned against.
7. **Aetiology of kink.** While interviewees did not generally believe that they were ‘born’ kinky, they did have a vivid recollection of their ‘first time’ – first kink-related thoughts, first fantasies, first actual experiences, and so on. And this ‘first time’ was instrumental in shaping the trajectories of their kink journeys.
8. **The ship has already sailed.** For better or worse, kink has already gone mainstream, and local communities have to deal with the fallout from media portrayals of kink, which has to date tended to be inaccurate and has led to the proliferation of misunderstandings and wrong assumptions about kink and kinksters.
9. **The internet has had both positive and negative consequences on kink.** While it has facilitated access to a bigger community, allowed for a plethora of kink imagery to be disseminated to a global audience, and online shopping has made acquiring kink

paraphernalia more convenient, more affordable and more discreet, the internet has become another avenue where people are harassed, blackmailed and bullied online, there is also misinformation online which could compromise an inexperienced kinkster's safety, and people who consume kink solely online may be inclined to believe that the proliferation of extreme/violent pornography which may be the product of extensive editing is de rigueur for everyday kinky experiences.

10. **Outsiders are viewed as a threat.** Many interviewees expressed their distrust of 'vanilla people' and did not believe that the public were open and accepting of BDSM. They would not want their proclivities made known to their families, neighbours or colleagues, fearing they may compromise their careers or pending court cases involving family violence or child custody.

Public Perceptions

Because several interviewees perceived 'outsiders'⁵⁷ to be ignorant and judgemental – ultimately to the detriment of members of the BDSM scene if these 'outsiders' believed that kinky people were violent, dangerous and psychologically unstable – the second study put this theory to the test by asking predominantly Auckland residents who do not identify as BDSM practitioners to respond to an altered version⁵⁸ of the 'Attitudes about Sadomasochism Scale' (ASMS). The ASMS was developed and tested in 2010 in an academic setting, and originally contained 23 items on a Likert scale designed to assess how people perceive kink and kinky people (Yost, 2010).

⁵⁷ 'Outsiders' refer to people who did not attend BDSM events but more broadly, people who do not actively engage in kinky activities.

⁵⁸ Refer to the introduction of chapter 3 for the list of amendments made to the ASMS.

The results from the questionnaire was $\bar{x} = 2.11$ (n=155), suggesting that respondents were not as biased against kink and kinky people as interviewees from the ethnographic study might have believed. Even after acknowledging that more than half of the survey participants were under the age of 35 and noting a trend in the data towards older respondents tending to agree more with negatively-keyed items and disagree more with positively-keyed items, the weighted result after poststratification was $\bar{x} = 2.14$ (weighted n=387).

This survey was not without its limitations. It is possible that other demographic factors would influence how participants responded. And without knowing the results from other attempts at administering the ASMS in other countries, it is difficult to surmise whether an aggregate response of 2.11 or 2.14 is 'good' or 'bad'. Nevertheless, if these results were indicative of how New Zealand residents as a whole perceive BDSM and BDSM practitioners, 'vanilla' New Zealand residents may be substantially more tolerant if not accepting of BDSM than interviewees believe them to be. This of course has implications on how BDSM practitioners in New Zealand manage their various 'kinky' and 'vanilla' identities. Interviewees and other BDSM practitioners may not need to employ the same level of self-regulation, impression/presentation management and stigma management measures to protect themselves from the people who supposedly 'just don't understand anything about us' as they currently do.

If New Zealand is fairly tolerant of kink, numerous flow-on effects could include:

- Intracommunity policing could be expanded to include law enforcement personnel. Victims could gain access to support and legal restitution, and perpetrators would face greater consequences than being banned from venues and ostracised from the kinky

community (which would still allow them to operate online, at private BDSM events or in ‘vanilla settings’).

- Workshops could be run in a more public arena. Information about consent, safety, open communication and other essential elements of a safe and positive kinky experience could be disseminated more widely without fear of public backlash.
- People who have been injured due to accidents or unsafe procedures during a BDSM session can seek professional medical advice/attention rather than seeking assistance from other BDSM practitioners who may not be qualified to tend to their wounds or relying solely on homeopathic remedies.

In its current state however, the Auckland BDSM scene continues to operate as a semi-exclusive, closed group. BDSM events are ‘open to the public’ in the sense that anyone is welcome to attend, and regulars who do not violate event etiquette and rules eventually become subsumed into the ‘community’. Events tend to be advertised largely in places where only those who are interested in kink or who are already regular practitioners are likely to look. There is still some level of distrust when it comes to law enforcement and medical institutions, and many interviewees (in fact, the majority of the people who were suspicious and sometimes hostile to the ethnographer and adamantly did not wish to be studied, observed or interviewed) stressed the importance of keeping their kinky lives and identities private and sequestered from their ‘vanilla’ lives. Ironically, the Auckland BDSM practitioner’s quest for sexual citizenship may be hampered by the reticence and self-imposed privacy and secrecy of kinksters themselves rather than conservatism or resistance from the status quo.

Media Representations

One of the major avenues which disseminates information and misinformation that influence the way people conceptualise a myriad of social issues and phenomena is the mainstream media. A topic like BDSM which is prone to being sensationalised is no exception, and any BDSM story that periodically drifts in and out of news coverage like an accidental death by erotic asphyxiation or the latest political, sportsperson or celebrity sex scandal inevitably generates dialogue across the nation.

Fifty Shades of Grey is the latest in a long line of many fictional narratives to have brought BDSM back to the forefront of public consciousness. While academic response to the popular and controversial franchise was largely negative, it seemed to have had a polarising effect on readers who consumed the book(s). Whether the *Fifty Shades* narrative was well or poorly written is less relevant to the third study than how the audience interpreted and reacted to the film's portrayal of the BDSM content. To this end, this final study analysed 833 user-submitted reviews posted on IMDB.com as well as 10 Auckland residents' responses to 10 questions about the *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015) film.

Previous studies involving the *Fifty Shades of Grey* books as well as other fictional BDSM narratives like the film *Secretary* (2002) suggest that various mechanisms are deployed to normalise certain, more palatable or socially acceptable aspects of BDSM whilst simultaneously reinforcing some of the stereotypes that people may have about BDSM practitioners.

The five key themes that the reviews and responses highlighted were:

1. **BDSM is incompatible with romance.** One cannot combine the ‘whips and chains’ experience with the ‘chocolate and flowers’ experience. BDSM inclinations are a hindrance or barrier that must be overcome in order to have a long-term positive and nourishing relationship.
2. **BDSM exists solely to ‘spice up one’s sex life’ and enhance (penetrative) sexual experiences.** BDSM is intrinsically sexual and there is little value of or use for BDSM outside of the privacy of a couple’s bedroom.
3. **Consent is something you can coerce, pressure or bribe someone else into giving.** The film uses consent to portray incidences which some may consider sexy while others may consider abusive. The mixed messages and ensuing confusion surrounding consent/abuse sends a dangerous message to the audience about what is permissible conduct in a relationship.
4. **Money can buy you anything.** A substantial number of reviewers perceived the film’s portrayal of Anastasia’s attraction to and wanting to please Christian as at least partly fuelled by his wealth and status. Her willingness to engage in BDSM activities with him has thus gained an additional reading as exploitation/prostitution, which has compromised the quality of her consent as being given contingent on potential monetary gain.
5. **Childhood trauma turns people into violent abusers.** Christian’s troubled past was alluded to rather than explicitly elaborated upon in the film, but the two factors of childhood trauma and wealth/status operate together to explain, vindicate and minimise the impact of Christian’s recurring boundary and consent transgressions in their relationship.

Conclusion

This dissertation contains a collection of the thoughts, beliefs and experiences of 21 BDSM practitioners, the majority of whom reside in Auckland, New Zealand; the responses from 155 New Zealand residents assessing their attitudes and opinions about BDSM, and; an analysis of 843 written responses about the *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015) movie. These three projects collectively depict a picture of BDSM in early 21st century New Zealand society that could be interpreted to be reassuring on a local level, but remains troubling on an international scale as long as BDSM continues to be conflated with interpersonal violence.

One of the most interesting findings to have arisen from these three studies is that the results from the modified ASMS and the responses to the *Fifty Shades* movie appear to be at odds with how BDSM practitioners feel that they are perceived and (mis)understood by non-practitioners. While responses to the ASMS could be taken as an encouraging sign that public perceptions of BDSM and BDSM practitioners in New Zealand are neutral if not positive, it is perhaps not surprising that BDSM practitioners feel compelled to keep their proclivities private if narratives like *Fifty Shades of Grey* are the most extensively discussed and most popular representations of BDSM.

Some of the *Fifty Shades* reviewers were acutely aware of how problematic the narrative was in terms of how quickly the relationship developed between the two characters from complete strangers to a very intimate and intense ‘romance’ with an explicitly laid out power dynamic, how consent was framed, and the issues that arose from the inclusion of various troubling narrative elements such as mental illness and wealth. That a not insignificant number of

moviegoers were cognizant that BDSM in reality bears little resemblance to what was depicted in the film might come as a surprise to some interviewees. But why is there this apparent disconnect between how BDSM practitioners feel they are perceived, and how the public purports to perceive them?

Firstly, just as social contact theory has posited that increased exposure/desensitisation to marginalised populations and practices can increase peoples' capacity for empathy (see page 185 footnote 41), the reverse might also be true. The insistence of some BDSM practitioners to remain insular and disclose as little as possible could have contributed to the distorted perception that the 'vanilla environment' is a hostile, intolerant space. Also, BDSM practitioners may believe that non-practitioners only have a passing shallow, sometimes voyeuristic interest in BDSM and would be less tolerant/accepting if confronted by an overt, visceral display of BDSM 'in the real world'. Moreover, how random respondents feel about BDSM may be less relevant to practitioners than how they think their family, friends and colleagues would feel. It may well be the case that most of the people in one's social circle are knowledgeable and open-minded, however it would only take one negative experience or one difficult/unpleasant encounter to taint one's perceptions of all non-practitioners.

As an avenue for future research, revisiting interviewees with the results from the modified ASMS and *Fifty Shades* studies could yield some insight into why some BDSM practitioners believe they would be judged negatively by their 'vanilla'-inclined peers. It is important to challenge their assumptions about the 'vanilla world' because it might make BDSM practitioners more inclined to seek assistance from sources outside of the community. Another possibility is to administer the modified ASMS or an equivalent scale, or perhaps

use qualitative research methods such as open-ended questionnaires or interviews, in departments where BDSM practitioners are more likely to seek help, such as the police and other legal institutions, healthcare providers, counsellors and therapists. If BDSM practitioners are confronted by a positive or neutral response, indicating that people are tolerant/accepting of BDSM, would be willing to provide unbiased services to anyone regardless of their inclinations, or that it is simply a non-issue, this could result in tangible changes in their help-seeking behaviours.

Another reason why BDSM practitioners seem to believe they are more poorly/negatively perceived by non-practitioners than the subsequent two studies suggested could be because, on average, the media has had a different impact on practitioners and non-practitioners. Whereas some non-practitioners might be questioning or challenging the way BDSM is portrayed on screens and in print, practitioners may be generalising media representations to be the way that everyone views them. Participants from the ethnographic interviews and modified ASMS who had indicated an interest in taking part in a follow-up study could be asked to what degree their perceptions are influenced, and by what factors. Perhaps there are sources of information that people are relying on other than the media to consider.

While it may be possible to attempt to bridge the distance between the beliefs that BDSM practitioners have about how they are perceived by non-practitioners, and how non-practitioners have actually responded to the ASMS, the challenge of addressing media (mis)representations of BDSM and bringing these representations more in line with phenomenological experiences of BDSM practitioners in reality is a far greater, more complex task to approach.

Glossary

Aftercare	Related to the concept of ‘drop’; aftercare is a preventive measure against drop that usually involves the top comforting the bottom after a play session.
BDSM	An umbrella acronym that encompasses a range of consensual erotic practices including bondage, discipline, dominance/submission and sadism/masochism or sadomasochism.
Bottom	The subservient individual in a relationship, or the person who is being beaten or tied up by a Top in a play session. A bottom is perceived to be a more temporary state compared to a submissive or slave – for example, a bottom may no longer submit to a top after an agreed-upon play session is over.
Collar	An official symbol of ownership; someone who is collared is owned by a Master and is under the Master’s protection. Often this may mean that at public BDSM events, the collared individual is not allowed to speak to others without the Master’s permission, and individuals wishing to play with the collared individual have to seek the Master’s permission first.
Dominant (Dom/me)	An individual who identifies as a Dom, Domme, Master, Mistress or Top to whom a submissive relinquishes power. Someone could be the Dominant in a single interaction or in a long-term relationship.
Drop	After experiencing the adrenaline or endorphin high from a play session, BDSM practitioners may subsequently experience a ‘drop’ that manifests as an emotional low and/or lethargy. ‘Sub drop’ would be experienced by submissives and ‘Dom/me drop’ by Dominants.
Fetlife	www.fetlife.com ; a social networking site for kinky people, including BDSM practitioners, fetishists, swingers, polyamorists, or anyone who does not adhere strictly to heteronormative ideals.
Fisting	The act of inserting a whole hand or fist into someone’s vagina or anus.
Hook suspension	A activity involving placing metal hooks through several strategic locations on an individual’s back, hoisting them several feet off the ground and leaving them to hang or swing for a fixed amount of time. For safety reasons this activity is always done supervised and in specific venues that cater for hook suspension – the ceiling has to be strong enough to support the weight of the person, the hooks have to be sterilised, the person being suspended has to be let down immediately if they want to cease the activity, and so on. Though this is not technically a BDSM activity, it is also known to have spiritual/transcendental properties and several BDSM practitioners are interested/regularly perform hook suspensions.

Impact play	A session that involves one person hitting another with any implement(s) such as a whip, paddle, flogger, cane
Kink	A kink could denote an activity that is not encompassed within conventional ‘vanilla’ sexual practices or a singular fetish, but kink is also a term used interchangeably with the term BDSM.
Kinkster	A term used interchangeably with BDSM practitioners. BDSM practitioners tend to refer to themselves and their community members as ‘kinksters’ rather than ‘practitioners’.
Master	See ‘dominant’. Also a common title for professional male dominants.
Mentor	An experienced BDSM practitioner who offers guidance, training and general assistance to a less experienced BDSM practitioner.
Mistress	See ‘dominant’. Also a common title for professional dominatrices. Bottoms, pets, slaves and submissives may also refer to their female Master, Dominant or top as Mistress.
Munch	An informal social gathering at a public venue such as a pub, café or restaurant where those curious about BDSM meet with BDSM practitioners and are able to ask questions about play parties, workshops, toys and any other topic they are interested in. People generally find out attend munches first to attain more information before attending a public play party.
Pet	Either an individual collared by a Master who roleplays as an animal, or a term of endearment used for submissives/slaves.
Play	Play is used to describe the activities that BDSM practitioners do.
Play Partner	A relationship status that denotes the relationship status of individuals who engage in BDSM activities together. They are not necessarily a spouse or romantic partner.
Play Party	A public BDSM event held at a venue which has various equipment such as cages, suspension hooks/pulleys, St. Andrew’s crosses, etc. for play and provides a safe space for playing.
Play Session	A single scripted or partially-scripted consensual interaction between BDSM practitioners.
Player	A BDSM practitioner.
Predicament bondage	Predicament bondage puts the person being tied up in a situation where they are in an uncomfortable position and will eventually have to move (e.g. standing on tiptoes), but moving puts them in another uncomfortable position or causes them pain due to the setup of the weights or ropes (e.g. standing with feet flat on the ground will tighten a noose and restrict breathing).
Rigger	Someone who does ropework.

Rope Bottom/Bunny	Someone who is tied up either for personal enjoyment or to demonstrate ropework.
Scene	Could refer to either the BDSM subculture as a whole ('the kink scene') or a single play session.
Single-tail whip	A single-tail whip is a long, slender whip ('the Indiana Jones whip' is a common descriptor) which cracks loudly when it is snapped in the air. When used on a person's upper back (it is rarely ever used anywhere else due to safety concerns) it is known to produce an intense stinging sensation and while it may not cause permanent scarring, it often will split skin and draw blood.
Sir	How bottoms, pets, slaves and submissives refer to their male Master, Dominant or top.
Slave	The subservient individual in a relationship. A slave is perceived to be committed to the role full-time. S/he has completely relinquished autonomy to a Master who controls many if not all the aspects of the slave's life.
St. Andrew's Cross	BDSM furniture that is X-shaped made out of two sturdy wooden bars, usually mounted or leaning backwards at a small angle against a wall. Most St. Andrew's Crosses have padded cuffs hanging off the four corners to secure someone's wrists and ankles. It is most commonly used to restrain someone who is about to be flogged/whipped.
Submissive/Sub	The subservient individual in a relationship. A submissive is perceived to be willing to commit to a greater level of submission than a bottom – an individual could submit to the same Dominant for every play session, or could be a 24/7 submissive in a relationship with a Dominant.
Subspace	An altered state of consciousness or type of 'blissful space' that submissives can enter during an intense play session where submissives could, for example, have a higher tolerance for pain or become less aware of their surroundings.
Top	See 'dominant'. A Top could simply denote the person who is beating or tying up the bottom in a play session.
Vanilla	An adjective sometimes used pejoratively to describe something that is non-kinky or conforms to mainstream ideas about sex and sexuality (vanilla is perceived to be boring, flavourless or plain). As a noun it is used to describe a person who is uninterested or not involved in BDSM.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Schedule

The interview is semi-structured. Not all points may be covered and interviewees may raise their own topics of discussion.

1. Introductions

- Tell me a bit about yourself and your journey over the months/years
- How important is this part of your life to your identity?
 - Integral part of your identity or just play/fantasy?
 - Is identity something you are or something you do/perform?
- What would you identify yourself as?
 - How would you define (how you identify as)?
 - How fixed is that identity? Across time? With different people?
 - How do you perceive/understand other identities?
- What are your preferences?

2. The First Time

- Where did you learn about the scene?
- Have you engaged in professional services before (e.g. dominatrix)? What was that like?
- How did you find out what your preferences are?
 - How did you determine what your limits are? Did you try pushing those limits?
 - Did you learn about aftercare or 'Dom/sub drop'? How did you deal with this emotional low the morning after such an intense experience?
- Do you have a play partner? Where and how do you find a play partner?

3. Relationships

- Tell me about your partner(s)
- Are you in an open relationship?
 - What does an open relationship mean to you?
 - What do you think open relationships mean to people who are not in open relationships?
 - How do you think trust operates differently in an open versus a traditional monogamous relationship?
- Are you in/In the past have you had play and non-play relationships?
 - Does your spouse/partner know about your play relationships?
 - (if yes) How do you think your spouse/partner feels about your play relationships? Is s/he comfortable?
 - (if no) What are the implications of lying to your vanilla spouse/partner?
- Would you discuss kink with your children?
 - Would you want your children to be comfortable discussing kink with you (or anyone else)?
 - How would you bring up the topic of kink around your children (or anyone else)?
- Have you been in a play relationship that has since dissolved?
 - Do you perceive there to be an added risk if a relationship involves BDSM?
 - Do you fear being outed or blackmailed by an ex-partner?

- Do you fear potential legal ramifications (e.g. ex-partner reporting assault to police even though s/he had consented before)?

4. Consent

- Would you feel comfortable reporting an incident to police/family/friends if a play session went too far?
- How do you negotiate limits with your play partner?
 - What is your experience with safewords?
- How do you perceive the psychological impact of Domination/submission?
 - (for submissives) Would you not use safewords even if you wanted to stop?
 - What would count as non-consensual?
 - Are you capable of rescinding consent in 'sub space'?
 - (for Dominants) Have you ever felt compelled to carry on even after a safeword was used?
 - Have you collared someone/been collared? What does collaring mean?

5. Safety

- Do you feel safe at BDSM events (compared to ordinary nightclubs)?
- Do you feel safe with your play partner(s) (compared to vanilla girl/boyfriend/partner)?
- What's it like playing with strangers? How do you approach someone and ask to play?
- Have you ever participated in unsafe play? What was that experience like?
- Have you ever participated in edge play? What was that experience like?

6. Privacy

- How do you feel about people disclosing their own real names, phone numbers, putting their kink photos up online, etc?
 - How would you feel about this if someone else put your own information up online without your consent?
- Are you closeted?
 - Who would you feel comfortable telling about your BDSM lifestyle?
 - Who would you seek counsel from if you needed help with kink-related troubles?
- What do you think the consequences might be if you were 'outed' to your colleagues, friends and/or family?
 - How do you perceive vanilla people?
 - How do you think vanilla people perceive kinksters?
- What are some of the assumptions that you think vanillas have about kinksters?
 - Have you had any of those stereotyped experiences? (failed relationships, abuse history, violence, feeling like a social outcast in mainstream society)

7. FetLife

- Do you have a FetLife account? What do you use it for?
 - Is all the information on your account accurate?
- Have you gotten any unwanted attention on FetLife? How did you deal with it?

- How do you think the internet (or FetLife itself) has changed the scene?
- What do you like/dislike about FetLife (or other online avenues)?

8. Public/media representations & (mis)understandings

- What are the implications of public representations of BDSM on yourself, on your associates and on the BDSM scene as a whole?
 - Do you think the emergence of BDSM in the public arena is beneficial or harmful?
 - How accurate do you feel public representations of BDSM are?
- Do you think BDSM is socially accepted?
 - More so now than ever before?
 - What do you think public perceptions of 'sexual deviance' are like? Would it be different to how you perceive 'deviance'?
- Do you feel that public attitudes should change or are you happy with things as they stand now?

Appendix B: Sample Interview Transcript (Margaret)

(Interviewer responses are bolded, interviewee responses are in normal text.)

Okay, so... yeah. I guess, we should start with, an introduction about. Yourself.

Uhm, okay. So... I've been... uhm... active with BDSM for over, I think it's about 12 years. Uhm, it was something that I discovered on the internet when I first discovered computers. [laughter] Which was about, yeah, so about the same time. And I was randomly chatting to someone back- back in the days when we had Yahoo Groups. And... got talking to someone who was telling me about, uhm... yeah, this thing called BDSM and, using all kinds of terms that I've never heard of before and something really resonated with me. I had- little lightbulbs were going off in my head and I thought, "Well, I really wanna find out more about this." So I started researching uhm, different sites, online. And... as a result of that, I became more and more interested. And then I started meeting people. And so... Yeah. I- I've realised pretty early on that that was absolutely a part of- a very important part of my sexuality. Uhm... I'd always felt very different from my friends. But I didn't know why.

Mmhmm.

But I also instinctively knew that it wasn't something that you talked about? Uhm, so... yeah. It was like, such an amazing thing to discover there were lots and lots of people who, uhm... you know, had the same kinds of interests?

Mmhmm.

Or, you know, to varying degrees, but. Yeah. That was- that was pretty- pretty liberating and fantastic. Not- not to feel, uhm, odd.

Yeah.

Yeah.

So... this is all- obviously before FetLife. Was it-

Yeah.

-difficult to... hook up with people here, or?

Uhm, so... I didn't start- I'm not sort of in- a native Aucklander, if you like, so I was from- from a small town.

Okay.

Uhm, a little bit further- further south. And, I was very very cautious because a small town uhm, had a reasonably public job. Uhm, a lot of people knew me and like I was, yeah. I was very very cagey. So the concept of even going to- a public event or a munch or something like that was just, "No way." Just- just wouldn't happen, so. I was just very selective about the people that I- you know, chose to have my first experiences with? And uh, yeah, I was just also really lucky [laughter]

Mmhmm.

Really lucky that, uhm, yeah I've- I think it was really more good luck than good management that the people that I, found and had my early experiences with were just really awesome people.

Mmm.

Yeah. And really safe and, you know, considerate and... sensible.

Yeap.

Yeah.

So what were your first experiences like?

Uhm... so my very first one ever, I talked to a man online for about... somewhere between 3 and 4 months? Uhm we got-

Okay.

We got to the point where we were speaking online everyday and usually with a phone call at night. And- 'cause I'd never done anything, like that before. Never met a random person off the internet. It was literally my first time, of doing anything like that, and... I decided that I really wanted to give things a try? And he seemed like a... just a solid sort of a person who would help me to have a really safe experience-

Mmm.

With something that, you know, I wanted to give- give a go.

Mmhmm.

And so, we... uhm, arranged, he was- he lived in Auckland and he- drove down. We, you know, set up a- a date and he drove down to a Hamil- a dodgy...

[laughter]

Little... hotel thing that I'd booked. And I was mortified because it was a *really* dodgy one and I didn't know. I just thought "Oh well there's a hotel, it must be alright, looks alright in the pictures." But it was pretty-

[laughter]

Pretty nasty. [laughter] Yeah, and so he arrived and uhm... you know. Yeah I did have a really good sense of who he was, so. Wasn't *really* like meeting a random stranger. Although in one aspect of course it is. [laughter]

Yeap, yeap.

Yeah. So uhm... 'cause it was my very *very* first ever experience uhm, it was quite mild, but-

Mmhmm.

For me, it was quite, you know, it was really intense and exciting and it was just really... bit of spanking and some sex play and stuff like that. And uhm, things like kneeling on the floor and you know that sort of thing.

Mmhmm.

And, yeah it was really really fun. And... yeah. That was my first ever experience. I really really enjoyed it. And we [sigh] ended up seeing each other for about 6 months, I think it was? And then sort of in that time he- he was also in a relationship so it was kind of like a- a poly, uhm, setup. So he went, then that sort of morphed into him trying to incorporate his partner into our play?

Yeap.

Which I didn't- wasn't *really* my thing?

Mmhmm.

Uhm, but. I was quite intensely involved with him emotionally by this point so. I- I gave it a go. But, yeah. It wasn't... she wasn't really very comforta- comfortable with it. And I didn't mind it, but it wasn't my ideal. And then I met someone else so. That, yeah. That- that little thing stopped.

Mmm. So... have you tried lots of different- kinks or...?

Uhm... yes? So, yes. [laughter] I guess I have. Uhm... I suppose it's a bit weird. I've become... from, when I- when I first... got into kink, I had very few kink friends? And most of my life was, you know, the- kind of, vanilla-

Yeap.

Setting and that's reversed? So... most of my friends that I spend a lot of time with are... kinky people. And so, I kinda forget that this, you know, some of this stuff that we just do and think is normal is, you know, it's probably not?

Mmm.

[laughter] Yeah, you kind of, lose a little bit of perspective, I think, sometimes. Well I- I know I have, yeah. [laughter]

Mmm. Yeah. It kind of slowly takes over your- your life.

Mmm.

Especially if you start, you know,

Yeah.

There's things on practically every weekend [laughter]

Yeah! Yeah. Absolutely. Totally. Yeah. And 'cause I've got, like I've got quite a demanding full-on job, when I get home, like I talk all day. At- at work, and when I get home, I wanna relax but I still wanna communicate?

Mmm.

With people? And that's why FetLife is so intoxicating for me at times.

[laughter]

'cause I'd, you know, I'd get that communication thing that I wanna do and I wanna be relaxed and be silly and... just, you know, be juvenile [laughter]

I have to ask- what's with the nun⁵⁹? [laughter]

Uhm... so I've got a religious fetish, actually.

Okay.

Yeah, so. One of my- one of my big fantasies is, to... have, uhm... a thing, or a scene or whatever you wanna call it, with a *real* life priest. It's gotta be a real priest.

⁵⁹ The interviewee has a nun for her Fetlife profile picture.

Okay.

Or not even practicing anymore, but he has to have been a priest.

Right.

So, yeah. I've got a- got a thing about that. Always have had.

Cool.

I love the ritual around religion, uhm, I think it's amazing.

Mmm.

Yeah.

Cool, so have you had, uhm... a lot of... play partners, or?

Uhm... yeah probably. Uhm, I've- sort of, I've had several long-term uhm, like, live-in, intense relationships

Mmm.

24/7 type relationships? And in between times I suppose I've had, you know, periods of having kind of flings here and there but. Not really... I don't really go to parties and play casually with people?

Mmm.

That's... Yeah. I like watching people doing that stuff but I don't necessarily wanna do that.

Yeap.

I think it- like I have... played with uhm, Sally, it- she would be somebody that I would play with at parties on occasion. But it's- that's an unusual thing for me to do. Yeah.

Mmm.

I don't... yeah. Go. It d- it doesn't really appeal to me.

Yeap.

'cause for me it's a very personal, uhm, thing that... yeah.

Mmm. So you've had, van- like vanilla relationships,

Mmm.

Before.

Yeap.

Uhm, like, before the 10, 12 years ago.

Yeap.

W- are they... kinda different?

Uhm...

The vanilla and the play...

[Sigh] I would never... have a relationship with a vanilla person again.

Mmm.

So... for me right now [laughter] uhm, there's a certain type of... uhm, natural, dominance that attracts me?

Mmhmm.

And... I just. In my experience, I've- I've found that people ha- either *have* that *thing* in them, and they get it, and they connect with me and we, you know, we're on the same wavelength, or they don't? I don't believe it's something that you can teach someone?

Right.

And I don't want to be with someone who's doing something just to please me. It has to be something that they genuinely enjoy.

Mmhmm.

And understand and wanna do.

Mmm.

Uhm... 'cause I've- I've tried. With people that I *knew* just weren't- they just weren't enough for what, I know I want and need. Yeah and it's just- it's just not worth it [laughter]

[laughter] Yeah.

It's just not worth it. Forget it.

Yeah.

Yeah.

So- are you, more, sub, or?

Uhm, I'm a submissive, yeah.

Yeap.

Yeah. So... I identify as a submissive masochist?

Mmhmm.

Uhm, I'm really into... uhm, impact play probably is my thing? But yeah I'm very- and I'm quite service-orientated as well.

Yeap.

Yeah. But there's- no, I'm not dominant, at all. Although I have- I do have a reasonably dominant personality in certain ways, but. I'm never gonna hit anybody [laughter]

[laughter]

It's not gonna happen, you know, it's-

Yeah.

That's not my thing. Yeah.

Have you tried though?

Uhm... no, I haven't ever tried.

Okay.

Like I think I could. I think I could, but I'd be roleplaying?

Yeah.

And I think I could roleplay it really really well, but. I don't want someone to roleplay with me,

Yeah.

So I don't wanna cheat someone else of- mind you, I- I could roleplay with a man very easily. And I don't think they'd know, that I was acting.

Mmhmm.

But I just don't see the point?

Mmm. Mmm.

Yeah.

Yeah. Yeah I've tried, like, giving impact but it wasn't...

Yeah.

I had to keep holding back the "Oh my god are you okay?" [laughter] you know.

Yeah, yeah. It's just like,

Instinctive like "aaaahhhh!"

There's just nothing in me that it- that is, yeah. It does- it just doesn't. No. I just. I don't even wanna try.

Yeah.

Don't even wanna try.

[laughter] It's like "Ahhh, I'm sorry!"

Yeah.

Yeah. So h- have you tried any like, other... like more 'edge play' type stuff like uhm... blood-

Yeah, uhm...

Bloodletting, or...

So I'm never- I'm never quite sure these days what is 'edge play' and what's not?

Me either [laughter]

'cause it kind of- what I used to think was 'edge play' now I'm not so sure?

Mmm.

If it is? Uhm... so. I don't know. I don't think needles are considered edge play anymore, but they used to be.

Mmm.

A few years back.

Mmm.

They used to be quite, you know, quite- a big thing but now I think it's really common.

Yeah.

Uhm... I've never done... I think, oh, not- not the sort of the cutting and scarification and stuff like that 'cause my skin is very sensitive and it- I'd be left with permanent scars forever.

Yeap.

And I mean I don't even have a tattoo, so.

[laughter]

I- I don't want permanent marks. Yeah, so I've not done stuff like that.

Mmm. But you've tried needles?

Yeap, yeap.

Okay.

Yeah I really *really* enjoy needles. Not done a lot of it, but uhm... Yeah. That's- that's wonderful.

Mmhmm.

Yeah. But weirdly, see, I don't... 'cause I'm actually quite interested to learn how to *do* needles on other people.

Yeap.

I don't see it as a Dominance/submission, you know, thing? At all? To me it's absolutely an energy share, and it's not something I could do with just anybody.

Mmm.

But uhm... yeah. I don't see that as submissive, having needles put in me.

Yeap.

And I don't- I wouldn't see that as a dominant act, giving needles to someone else.

Mmm.

Yeah. But I would- I would be interested to learn how to do that.

Mmm. Mmm... yeah. 'cause I think... what... I guess, what I've read counts as 'edge play' doesn't actually... you know, it's things like breath and like, a- asphyxiation and stuff? I'm like,

Yeah.

"I'm not sure that's..."

I've done some light- light stuff

Yeah.

But I don't think it's heavy enough- I've never done anything really really heavy.

Yeah. I'm not sure-

Like not to the passing out stage.

Yeah.

Or, anything like that, but I mean I quite like that sort of that sort of gentle choking

Mmm.

Type thing, but. I've never, *never* experienced it when it's been, you know, like full-on?

Yeah. Yeah if there's a- yeah 'cause it- it changes, it changes a lot.

Mmm.

I mean, things don't get so [laughter] Things aren't so edge anymore.

Yeah.

After a while [laughter]

Yeah. That's right.

Mmm.

I mean I remember when I thought caning was really hardcore.

[laughter] Yeap.

It's just like...

It *feels* hardcore at the time!

It- yeah.

[laughter]

That's so true. That's so true.

It's like "ooowwww!" [laughter] "Stahp!" [laughter]

Yeah, yeah.

So d- y- do you- do you like... the pain, or- or is it kind of a... as [sigh] you know, there are people who like the pain for the pain itself

Yeah

And then there are people who like the pain as an assertion of- of... Dominance kind of... thing.

Uhm... I don't really like the pain?

Mmhmm.

I like... after the pain. I like the- the after result. I don't like it when it's just happening right at that time.

Yeap.

But I like the results, of it afterwards, so like the sort of after burn and, you know, that- those sort of feelings.

Mmhmm.

Uhm... I like... submitting and being hurt, when it makes someone else happy?

Yeah.

Or, you know, when they get a real buzz out of it? That's- that's really nice. Uhm... and... I find it like a fantastic stress relief?

Mmhmm.

When I'm, you know, particularly when, like, things are crazy at work and, I spend all day having, you know, telling people what to do and... you know. Being the- the bad guy and stuff which I don't wanna do. I- that's- I hate that.

Mmm.

I absolutely don't want to be doing that in my- in my daily role but, for some reason... I'm in that situation all the time?

Yeah.

And I have to make decisions about thing- 'cause other people just aren't doing it?

Mmhmm.

And that- yeah. So... I find it really quite therapeutic?

Mmhmm.

Uhm, to have... quite a- a hard, sort of, SM session I suppose. And, uhm... I really enjoy, uh, crying as well? As... a type of stress relief.

Yeah.

Yeah. And it just- makes everything balance out for me [laughter]

[laughter]

Now I can just, yeah. I just...

Cool. Do you get sub drop?

Uhm I- sometimes? Yeah and I- uhm... sometimes quite badly?

Mmhmm.

Definitely not every time. Part of it for me is... uhm... having contact with, you know, my partner-

Mmhmm.

Afterwards that makes the critical difference.

Mmhmm.

Uhm... but I- there's- definitely a physical sub drop,

Mmhmm.

For me. Uhm, which is just, I feel like- I've got weights. I'm walking around and I feel like, you know, I've got magnets

Mmm.

On my shoes, and there are weights that are dragging me down and I'm just like physically kind of s-dragging myself about the place. Uhm, and that's okay. That's just kind of like a form of extreme tiredness?

Mmm.

But emotional sub drop, that- that's awful. Yeah.

Mmm.

But I don't- *really* get that anymore? Uhm... Not like I used to. Yeah.

Mmm. Okay so you used to get a lot worse? Or...

Yeah, uhm... but I think part of that was just not understanding... how to, look after myself?

Yeah.

As well? Like I was fully expecting, you know, my partners to make it all better for me. I wasn't taking any responsibility for my own wellbeing.

Mmm.

Uhm, which I think is important.

Mmm.

And yes, I mean, aftercare is- that's a really important, you know, component but there's also other things like making sure that you eat well and... you know, get some sleep and drink lots of fluids and just some really basic things that you can do.

Mmm.

Uhm... that- that... well for me, they make a difference. Yeah.

Mmm. It- do you have a partner now, or?

Uhm, yeah I do have a partner now.

Okay.

Uhm, we have a, uhm, unusual relationship.

Mmhmm.

But [laughter] But we have a very intense relationship.

Okay.

Uhm... I don't have him on my profile?

Mmhmm.

'cause he's just awful online. Oh his profile's *horrific* and just- oh, his fetish interests are gross and...

[laughter]

It's [laughter] so it's just- no. I'm just embarrassed. [laughter]

[laughter] Yeah.

Not embarrassed for him in person but, yeah. [laughter]

Yeah.

No. [laughter] Yeah.

So do you guys do a lot of, like impact, together?

Uhm actually, he's- so I've been seeing him off and on and we- it's quite- it's been quite volatile actually.

Mmhmm.

It's very very passionate but [laughter] we're also both quite passionate people so we have flare-ups all the time.

Mmm.

Uhm, certainly not a normal stable relationship. [laughter]

I can tell you right now nobody has one of those [laughter] so it's okay!

Oh right, okay. [laughter]

It's a lie!

Yeah.

The cake *and* this 'normal relationship' thing. [laughter]

Yeah, yeah. So, uhm, and he's... not into your s- you know, what people normally are into in terms of impact?

Mmhmm.

So he'll... like, pick up- one of my canes and... just randomly sort of like *really* go hard out, but he's got no finesse, he's not like this, you know, this- an- an *artiste* who

Mmm.

Some people are super into that. Uhm... and he, really enjoys on occasion like slapping my face.

Mmhmm.

Things like that, and really quite hard and, like, he will leave marks at times. But it's- none of it's ever consistent. It's always a surprise. Uhm, he's not into spanking. Uhm... yeah so it's kinda yes and no?

Mmm.

It's- yeah.

Do you tend to be like, monogamous in that sense? Like have one... play partner at a time or do you

Yeah.

Kinda have- okay.

Yeah. I don't, uhm, that's- I prefer-

Yeah.

To be, uhm, monogamous. I don't... there's an important dynamic for me is like the power exchange with someone?

Mmm.

And when I've invested, and had you know sort of had some bonding experiences and things like that, I just- I don't want that to go- that energy to go to anybody else?

Yeah, yeah.

But weirdly I don't mind if they do?

Mmm.

But for me it's just- just not my thing.

Yeah.

I'd rather just have one partner.

Mmm. So I guess kink is... for some people it's quite, you know, take it or leave it kinda, "I don't have to have a- it's, you know, it- does- doesn't have to be in my life" but for you it's quite...

Uh it's- yeah. It's a critical part of my life, yeah.

Yeah [laughter]

Uhm, I'd be very unhappy with... if it wasn't-

Yeah, yeah.

If I didn't have that outlet. Uhm... yeah. It's- it's a really- it's an integral part of my sexuality.

Mmm, mmm.

And how I, you know, I... understand myself and what I enjoy, so.

Mmm. Cool. So... not just with, like, your current partner but just across...

Mm?

The whole time, have you had any... bad experiences?

Uhm... [sigh] Yeah, so. One time when I'd... just, quite recently broken up with my... first, uhm, person that you know, we'd lived together,

Mmhmm.

For 2 years. And the relationship ended very suddenly.

Mmm.

And it *really* sort of took the wind out of myself because I didn't know what was going on and I went through a phase of doing some pretty crazy things with random people, and one time... I'd met someone very quickly off the internet. We went out somewhere, went for dinner, kept- you know, giving me lots of wine, took me back to his place somewhere out in the wops and... *pretty much* non-consensually beat me all night.

Mmm.

Uhm... so, and yeah, that was- you know, I was sort of going through a bit of a- a frenzy I suppose? And I was 10 foot tall and bulletproof. Didn't take any precautions that it- I *knew* that you should take.

Mmm.

Uhm... but I'd never *ever*- I've- I've told people about the bad experience that I had just as I have now, but I've never ever said who it was.

Mmm.

Uhm... it's a weird thing because I feel I- I made so many mistakes of things that I knew full well. I should have done.

Mmm.

And... alcohol definitely was a factor. I know he kept plying it- me with it, but I kept drinking it.

Yeap.

Uhm, so, I can't- yeah. It's not something I could ever publicly point the finger and say, "You did this to me."

Mmm.

It's just... there's enough- yeah, there's enough doubt for me that I didn't do what I... *could* have done or should have done or whatever.

Yeah.

But I mean that was a long time ago.

Mmm.

And, you know, I learnt- I learnt a good lesson from it.

Mmm.

And there's no permanent harm done.

Would you... in that situation, feel comfortable telling... people or like, calling the police or anything, or?

No. No. Definitely not. So, I told... one of my friends, my- my kink friends. And he was just- really concerned. Wanted to come around, take photos, uhm, go to the police and stuff like that and it's just like, I just... no. I di- I just couldn't. I couldn't- ha- having, you know, experience of... vanilla friends uhm who had rape experiences uhm in the past, it's a really really unpleasant process? And... it's just you know, I could just think of all about online interactions being used as evidence against me that "Yes this was consensual and blah blah blah blah," it was just- just in the too hard basket.

Mmm.

I, I just wouldn't want to put myself through it.

Mmm.

If it was a vastly more serious? I mean it- it was pretty horrible, but it wasn't... you know. I was okay.

Mmm.

Vastly more horrible, then it- then I think I would have approached it differently, but. I just took-took it as a learning- learning curve. Mmm.

Mmm. Do- do you think that... maybe the, you know, law enforcement or whatever just... don't understand enough about kink to- to look at it, the way we would've, or is it... something else?

Possibly *now*, I mean [sigh] this w- this was years ago and it... you know, I've just... I'm a lot more articulate and, you know, free- I'm free to talk about stuff like that, and.

Mmm.

Possibly now, I'd be able to... you know... be strong enough to say no, you know, no that was wrong and you know, really stand up... about it. But yeah back then I didn't- I didn't have the emotional tools to- to deal with it.

Mmm. Okay. Cool. How about, uhm... have you had other, experiences like... where... you know, you've said a safeword and someone's ignored it or... something like that?

Uhm, I've... that's, that's, well apart from that *one* situation where I didn't have a safeword anyway,

Mmm.

Uhm, but I was saying to him "no", you know, "please stop" and that was ignored. But that's my own experience of that. Uhm... in my relationships, we don't use safewords anyway?

Mmhmm.

Uhm... so... yeah.

Y- you kinda trust... people to- to be able to see that, you've had enough? Or...

Uhm, yeah. Yeah. I do.

Okay.

And... I think that, you know, in intense play, you can tell when... when no really does mean no [laughter]

Mmm, yeah.

It doesn't mean, "Oh we can still go for a little bit longer."

Yeah.

Uhm, but. Yeah. Maybe I've just been really lucky. I don't know.

[laughter] Mmhhh.

Yeah.

So are you... does, you know, do you- are your parents still alive? Are they...

Uhm, so my dad's passed on, but-

Okay.

-my mum's alive, yeap.

Does she know that you're- kinky?

Oh hell no! No.

[laughter]

That's not something I would ever- I don't share it with- anyone who- I don't- know already is kinky.

Right. Okay.

So it's on a need-to-know basis?

Yeah.

And my vanilla friends and family do not need to know.

Mmm.

There would have to be a really good reason for me to explain something like that. I- I don't like to explain *why*, you know, to someone who doesn't already have the level of understanding?

Yeah.

That just does my head in. I can't be bothered.

[laughter] Yeap.

Yeah.

Yeap. D- is it, do you think it'd be like a huge problem if you got- outed with... your vanilla friends and family or?

Probably not *now*, in the past it would have been? Maybe I think- probably in the last 2 years, I've just got to a point of thinking, "Oh fuck it."

[laughter] Yeah.

"Oh, whatever." Uhm, but- and this could partially be because I spend so much time with kinky people that it- it just doesn't seem that big a deal. But I also feel... once again, this might be, you know, sort of a- false feeling of se- sec- security but it doesn't seem as big a deal as it was a few years back, as well?

Mmm.

I mean, people are a lot more relaxed about all kinds of things. It's, you know. Like homosexuality has, you know, views on that has relaxed so much in- in- in the last 5 years. You know there's a lot more tolerance?

Mmm.

To, you know, different, you know, people with different sexualities? I mean this- yeah. I mean I wouldn't want it, I- I certainly wouldn't welcome it. I wouldn't like people at work knowing.

Yeap.

Stuff about me to- to that level. But if it happened, it wouldn't be the end of the world.

Mmm.

I'd probably I think I'm... old enough and secure enough now to adopt a 'fuck you' attitude.

Yeap.

You know? And... if it came to that and I was publicly outed, I think I'd probably start being really really out [laughter]

[laughter]

Like, yes. But, you know, I'd rather not. [laughter]

Mmm, mmm. But I s- so in that regard I guess privacy is still very important for you?

Uhm, yeah. It's- I don't... uhm, yeah. I would *prefer* to keep, you know, my vanilla life very separate from my real life [laughter]

Yeap, yeap.

Yeah.

Do you- do you- do you see them as very... separate? It's-

Yeah.

Okay.

Yeah. Absolutely I do. Uhm, yeah. It's different worlds, so. I think I- just compartmentalise very well?

Yeah.

So I keep things very distinct and, yeah. Very separate.

Mmm. 'cause I think sometimes it- it's hard... obviously for some of us like for me or for, you know, people like John, it- it's very... you know, our 'real'- what we do in the 'real world' and what we do in the 'kink' is very intertwined.

Yeah, yeah.

But, you know, I always wonder how people... go to... go to parties and stuff and then maybe they get... drop and then it's Monday morning.

Mmm.

And they go to work and I guess there is a bit of a... an overlap there.

Yeah. Yeah.

Have you had that? Have you-

Yeah, definitely, absolutely. Uhm... so... one of the... so... my *role* is, you know, it's- ov- I'm interacting with people. I'm- I'm a trainer, you know, I- I teach people stuff.

Mmhmm.

And... I'm just lucky that I've got the ability just, you know, over the years, to just- it's, you know, I put an act on?

Mmhmm.

And so I step into a persona. And I can just, like carry it off?

Mmm.

Uhm... so. That's what gets me through [laughter]

Okay.

Yeah. It's not something that happens often because I do make a conscious effort, you know, not to- to make sure that I've got time

Mmhmm.

So that my work's not impacted?

Mmm.

And if there's something really important at work then I won't, you know, I won't do stuff.

Mmm.

Because I- I just can't afford to... screw that up.

Yeah.

You know, just for a night of fun. It's- it's- like I can't do that.

Mmm. I was thinking about what you said about Sally – uhm, would you- are you, would you consider yourself straight, or?

Uhm... I do consider myself straight? So like I've... I've had sex with women and, you know, I'm sure I will again, but. It's not... I wouldn't go out of my way, like I- it's always been... part of something with a- a man? You know, it's been- like a threesome type-

Right, right.

-thing? So I can't imagine myself, like, just having, you know, a sexual thing with a female, without my male partner kind of being part of it?

Yeap, yeap.

Yeah. But, yeah. So...

But you'll- you'll still play with women though?

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

So it's... I don't know. [laughter]

Yeah...

Is kink sexual? I don't know. [laughter]

Well, for me, for me it is a sexual thing.

Yeap.

And I enjoy like a bit of a sexual element with it? So... uhm... Sally's one of the people that I'm, you know, I've- I've played with her a few times. Uhm... I think, actually I think we- we have had sexual elements as that but... that's kind of, I don't know. [laughter]

[laughter] Yeah. I- I guess... there's...

But I don't- yeah.

If people say that they've, like you know, if a guy plays with another man I wouldn't go "Oh well he's gay" you know like,

Yeah

Or, bisexual or whatever.

But I definitely d- like I don't- I don't- I definitely- I don't consider myself bisexual

Mmm.

Although. I do, and you know, I have and will again have sex with women. It's not- it's not a- it's not an urge for me, it's just something that kinda happens as part of something else.

Yeap.

Yeah.

Yeah. So I guess play relationships are... sexual but not [laughter] sexual.

Yeah. Not really. Not really-

Mmm. Mmm.

-sexual like it would be with a- a- male partner.

Yeap.

Yeah. Not even close.

Mmm.

Yeah.

Mmm. So, what do you do on... FetLife? Anyway? [laughter]

Uhm, so, as far as [laughter] I just muck around really [laughter]

[laughter]

Have fun, be silly.

Mmhmm.

Uhm, it's... like I don't see FetLife as being a pick-up site. I don't find that a place that's appropriate to, be trying to pick up, you know, play partners.

Mmm.

But that's, just me. I suppose it's my version of Facebook. It's what, you know, normal people do on Facebook. So.

Have you had... have you been inundated with... men of a certain age group [laughter] asking you to be their [laughter] sub or slave or something?

Yeah... weirdly I- I- like I don't get the sort of, I don't get the s- I get different types of messages, like unsolicited messages than other people do. I suppose because of my profile?

Mmhmm.

And definitely the nun picture changes things.

Mmm. [laughter]

Like people really think that that's me?

Right.

And, you know, I get quite a lot of men saying "Is that really you?" and I say "No, it's Audrey Hepburn." [laughter]

[laughter]

'cause it is, you know? I just- to me it's glaringly obvious that that's, you know, yeah. Anyway but uhm, yeah I- I get- I- like I think at the moment I've got about 50 pending friend requests? Like I just get- and like men, women, you know, all ages, uhm, nationalities, countries, uhm, yeah. If I write something on some, you know, random site that I've just joined and I'll find I get 10 friend requests.

Right.

You know, no message or anything like that. It's- so. I- I generally leave them for a couple of weeks and then I just delete them [laughter]

[laughter]

Get rid of them. 'cause, yeah.

Cool.

I just don't get that whole purpose [laughter]

Yeah.

Of why you do that.

Do you- [sigh] Do you manage... your unsolicited messages somehow? Like do you have something, a blurb on your profile that's like, "Do not add me without messaging me!"

No, I've thought about it sometimes and I just think Oh, look it's- what the hell, you know, there's- there's an etiquette there and there are a lot of people who just don't know. And... yeah I have thought about it, saying "please don't" and it's like, mmm. Does it matter? No. [laughter] I don't have to accept it.

Mmhmm.

Yeah. Wouldn't wanna turn into one of the profiles that's laying out all these rules about "Do this, don't do this," type of thing. It's not really me.

Mmm. 'cause I tend to see it on-

Yeah.

-women's profiles, around my age group a lot, like.

Yeah, they get so hung up on it and it's like "It's the internet man. Just don't accept it or delete-delete the message."

Yeah.

Yeah.

So- do you use FetLife for... posting things or reading, like getting information and stuff? Or...

Uhm... not really for getting information? Although every now and again I do, you know, it just, you know, might stumble across something that is really interesting and helpful? Uhm, I'm interested in... peoples' thoughts and feelings?

Mmhmm.

Uhm... and... yeah it- it's people and they're articulating sort of, you know, some deep feelings or s- an experience that they've gone through and stuff like that, I find that really interesting.

Mmm. Mmhmm.

I don't tend to... I don't go looking actively at photos? I just look at- photos that friends of mine have commented on.

Mmm.

'cause uhm, if something pops up, you know, someone's made a comment I'll go and have a look at it then but I don't go trawling through the photos. I don't even know how [laughter] I don't even know where you go and do that.

[laughter]

Yeah.

I don't know, but. Certain...

Yeah.

You know like all the uhm, the Basement boys are- constantly... [laughter]

I love the- I love the pictures that they, oh! Yeah!

Yeah.

Yeah I quite often comment in the ones that they find.

[laughter]

They find really, like, weird freaky funny,

Yeah.

-pictures. Yeah I like those. But uhm... also I'll, you know, if I see things that people have commented on and, uhm. There's someone that I really enjoy, you know, things that they say and if they've made a comment or written something I'll definitely go and read it. But other times... I'll wait until, you know, maybe 3 or 4 people have loved something or, uhm, have made comments. I'll go and check it out.

Mmm.

But yeah. And other times I just... think, don't read anything that anybody's done.

Mmm.

Just post my own inane drivel

[laughter]

And my fun sites that I go to [laughter]

Yeap.

Yeah.

How- how is FetLife different from the... old Yahoo groups?

Uhm... so... back when I first discovered the internet there were like these chatrooms that you used to go into and... they were all k- they were basically like, groups there that they would, you know, like live chat things?

Mmhmm.

You just go into the room and, people would talk to you and, you could go into the, you know, BDSM Domination room or submissive-only rooms and things like that so, that was just my first experience of, finding places like that.

Mmm.

That were full of people who, most of them were really bizarre, but.

[laughter]

Still fun. [laughter]

Oh, it's the internet. Where you'd find bizarre people.

Yeah, exactly. Yeah.

So- but then you wouldn't know much... about them. Like you couldn't read a profile and go like "Oh they're like this."

No.

Okay.

No, there weren't... were there? There wasn't profiles like these profiles.

Mmhmm.

I think you could maybe like write a couple of sentences.

Right.

Yeah. But then they banned them in New Zealand, after- after a- couple of years.

Yahoo groups or?

They just locked- well these- these Yahoo chatrooms.

Okay.

Somehow they stopped us being able to access them.

Mmhmm.

And uhm, there's probably ways you could get around it but I didn't know what they were [laughter]

Mmm, mmm.

Yeah.

So did you join FetLife, like, back in... '08 when it first started up or whenever it was?

Uhm, w- it can't have been too long after it first started? 'cause I think I'm like member number 4000 and something.

Okay, yeah.

So, it was pretty early on. Uhm, it was actually Chris, uhm who told me about it.

Mmhmm.

And I left it for about 6 months after 'cause I just never got around to it.

Mmhmm.

And then one day, I started looking at it. I think he reminded me again.

Mmm.

And uhm... yeah. And then I sort of, yeah. Just got kinda hooked [laughter]

[laughter] Mmm. So how do you get to know... like, people in real life. Do you get them- do you get to know them through FetLife first or do you meet them and then kinda add them later or?

Uhm... so, it- it's a weird thing, because I've been so fiercely private, when I moved to Auckland uhm, I was still fiercely private. Didn't want to do anything public. Uhm... my first major relationship

ended. And then I... went into a second, uhm, you know, big relationship and he used to travel for work quite a bit? And, like, going overseas for, you know, 2 month at a time.

Right.

And sometimes 3 months, and. Things like that. And that's when I made a conscious decision that I was going to, uhm... have real life, you know. I wanted to go- I wanted to meet real life kink friends, that I could spend time with and, you know, talk about, stuff. Because I- it was still just very very hidden from any of my, vanilla, normal friends. It's definitely not something that I would ever, you know, wanna talk to them about.

Mmm.

So I started, just making a bit of an effort? And uhm... met a couple of key people, who knew lots of people but also coincidentally I'd sort of, met individuals randomly over the years myself.

Mmm.

And then I discovered, "Oh, these people are all actually part of one scene. They all know each other."

Mmm.

And so they kind of already knew me, and... I don't know. It's just really easy and natural and... so yeah I tend to meet people in person uhm, first.

Mmm.

Yeah.

So this is a difficult question to answer, 'cause I ask lots of people [laughter] but.

Yeap.

It's to do with like, the scene overall?

Yeap.

And... what you think, the scene is like?

Mmhmm.

So... it's probably difficult to just be like "everyone is like this" but just...

Yeah.

A general idea?

Oh, look, it's just, I think it's- it's like anything anywhere, any group of people that have a strong, shared interest.

Mmhmm.

We're still just random people, you know, and just because we're into the same... kinds of things, doesn't mean we're gonna get along?

Mmhmm.

You know? We'd- especially, you know, *strong* personalities.

Mmm.

And, you know. People who... you know, I think there's- is a reasonable amount of people who have... you know, all kinds of, uhm... depressive, uhm, conditions? Things like that. It's just really prevalent. I don't know why. Uhm... but- and that's hard to manage, as well. And people, you know, flare up and fly off the handle and factions form and, big poly groups congregate and then they all implode and,

Mmm.

Yeah I think it's just... it's just the way it is. It's just people being people. And uhm, you know, it's a shame that we can't all get along, but. It happens. I- I've tried to stay out of- uhm, things like that?

Mmhmm.

Uhm... but yeah.

Do you have quite a... positive, impression of the scene overall or is it quite... negative?

[sigh] I've a positive impression of the individuals in the scene.

Mmm.

I just think collectively we're really dysfunctional [laughter]

[laughter]

But it's the individual people are awesome.

Yeah.

You know? But it's just- it's- it's difficult to... keep communities together.

Mmm. Mmm.

You know. And uhm... generally the people who've got the drive and the passion to want to do it. Don't necessarily have the people skills?

Mmhmm.

To kind of manage, the issues as they come up and things like that and, yeah.

Mmm. Cool. So, I guess... I was gonna ask about like, public, or media representations,

Mmm.

Of kink and how you... you feel whether they've sort of, helped improve the image of kink, or whether it's... made it worse or... You know like things like 50 Shades and...

Yeah...

I don't know what else is out there.

I guess I kind of think that that sort of stuff, although it's appalling, uhm...

Mmhmm.

Oh, it's really appalling. I suppose if it gets people thinking about it, uhm... and probably titi- titillated by it? Uhm... in some weird way? That's possibly a positive thing?

Mmhmm.

And it's... yeah. I'm not really sure. I think in general, I mean people talk about movies like the *Secretary* thing, you know, a- a great movie, and I just think it was an awful- it was an *awful* movie. It was entertaining, but to me it was... kind of... like I- I watched it and I thought, well they're, you know, could it not have been... if it was something I- supposed to be- be *positive*, about... about kink, well she was self-harming? You know? Which I've always seen as a very negative thing.

Right.

I don't think that's a healthy thing, to do. Uhm, perhaps it can be in some circumstances but in general? It's... you know, there's an emotional disturbance that's... going on and- and inner turmoil and unhappiness.

Mmm.

So... that kind of took the shine off it for me. It's not- yeah. I didn't really like that.

Mmm.

Like to me it was kind of reinforcing that to be into this kind of thing, you've probably got something wrong with you, in, you know, emotionally, so. Yeah. So I didn't think that was at all positive.

Mmhmm. Do you... have something wrong with you? [laughter]

Oh probably! [laughter] I'm certain I do! [laughter]

[laughter]

But I'm not- like I don't have, like, I don't have- I'm not bipolar or depressive or anything like that. I've certainly had, like, uhm, you know, had times in my life when I was depressed, but. It was a- that was a really bloody awful thing had happened [laughter]

Mmm, mmm.

That's- that's kind of normal? So I know a lot of people just have, they wake up one day and they've got this big cloud of depression over them and they can't do anything about it? So I'm really lucky that I don't have that.

Mmm.

Kind of stuff.

'cause I wonder, 'cause there's a lot of assumptions about like, you know, oh, childhood sex abu- uh, sex- sexual abuse,

Yeap.

And uhm... yeah, like, emotional disturbances and...

Yeah.

These assumptions that I...

Mmm.

I see s- certain people *do* have these, like, you know, do tick these boxes?

Yeah.

But I think for the most part, the scene seems... fairly... boring. [laughter]

Yeah.

Like people are fairly normal.

[laughter] Yeah.

In that respect, yeah.

Yeah. I think it's sort of- that's one of the weird things, when people meet who've, like come to- or seen me online and stuff a lot, I mean, they always feel underwhelmed when they meet me in person, you know, 'cause they expect me to be this larger-than-life person and I'm just like a normal person.

Mmm.

You know. Got a normal job. [laughter] Got responsibilities. Yeah and I'm really quite boring [laughter]

Mmm.

Yeah.

Yeah. But somehow the- the vanilla perception is very, you know

[laughter]

Makes us- makes us all very...

Yeah.

Sort of mysterious and...

Yeah.

Damaged somehow [laughter]

Yeah.

Maybe we are, but I don't think...

Yeah.

Not worse than average [laughter] I would say.

No I don't think so.

Mmm.

I mean I think there are some people that are, but, I think there's, well no I mean that's- that's true all over the show, isn't there?

Mmm.

Yeah. I do think that – and it could just be the people that I hang out with – I think we're a lot better at, talking? Communicating?

Mmhmm.

Uhm... negotiating? You know? 'cause that's kind of like *part of- part of the whole D/s thing is you, I mean you have to learn to communicate and... work out what's okay and what's not okay, so. I do think that we have some advantages, you know? Got some- we're a little bit ahead of the game. In that respect. Because that's encouraged, that's normal, that's what you're supposed to do.*

Mmm.

It's expected, that you will, you know, talk about things up front before you start getting into... I don't know. Maybe it's just my circles. I don't know.

Yeap, yeap. ...so I suppose do you feel... safer with a kinky partner than a...

Uhm... [sigh] I- wouldn't be with a non-kinky person again?

Mmhmm, mmhmm.

Literally wouldn't, so... basically also like I've-... you know, I'm older, I've had a lot of experience, I'm not, you know, I'm not gonna put myself in, stupid situations [laughter] Touch wood. [laughter]

[laughter]

God. [laughter] Yeah. So I don't know that I- I'd feel 'safer'. I think it would just be the same.

Mmm. Do you feel- speaking of safety, do you feel play- parties are safe, or?

Uhm... [sigh] ...I think for the main part, they are? Uhm...

This is nothing to do with the-

Yeah, yeah.

The DM thing⁶⁰ that blew up [laughter] It's just- a general- question.

Yeah. I d- I do think for the main part they are safe enough?

Mmhmm.

Uhm, but, when I first got going with kink as well, I used to spend a lot of time in Christchurch?

Mmhmm.

And they have very structured, uhm, you know, they've got a structured set up. Uhm, or they used to. I don't know what they're doing now, but. That was my first experience of play parties and DMs were always there, you know? And... before you went to an event, you went to- you did a little- went to a little briefing, and- so new people had, like, you know, a formal/informal little 'these are the dos and don'ts'

Right.

⁶⁰ There was a discussion on FetLife about having Dungeon Monitors in Auckland events (they are the norm at most events and even in other parts of NZ, but not in Auckland – the onus is on the event organisers/venue owners to keep play parties safe) that polarised the community earlier in 2014.

'These are what you're not allowed to do' and stuff like that and, uhm, it worked really well? Uhm, down there. Or it did work really well. Uhm... I don't recall it ever being anything that happened up here, but.

No,

Yeah.

I think there's an assumption here – you kinda know, or you *should* know the norms,

Yeah.

And the expectations before you go.

Yeah.

To parties, there's no real, sort of, pre-... you know, pre-meeting or briefing or anything.

Yeah.

But I think that's quite common... actually, like, overseas and stuff. Because it's done by-

Yeah.

The club? There's like a club you join which is affiliated to a-

Right.

-venue?

Yeah.

So the club organises these things.

Yeah.

Whereas here, it's quite, you know. I don't- I don't think we have a club.

Mmm. Yeah. So one of uh, I think at one of the local events when that was first starting up, it was one of my, uhm, questions in private message, it's like, you know, "Do you have first-aid kit?" You notice things like that, 'cause I'm- I'm just naturally health and safety-focused.

Mmhmm.

It's, you know. It's just in me to- check those sorts of things, 'cause I don't like it when things go bad?

Mmm.

Uhm... and I like to know that there's someone who knows how- what- what needs to be done and if there's not anyone there, then at least I know [laughter]

Yeah.

That- and I know- I know pretty much what needs to be done. I'd rather somebody else took care of it [laughter] but, uhm... yeah. I don't know, I've never seen anything really bad happen at a- at a- at a party.

Mmm.

Personally. I know things have happened, but.

Mmm. Cool. Okay. I have just one last question.

Yeap.

Uhm, so... looking at things now compared to when you first, sort of realised kink like 10, 12 years ago, have... do you feel... things have changed? Since then?

Uhm... definitely. Definitely changed, uhm, but part of that might just be my journey? You know?

Yeap, yeap.

From where I was. But yeah, things- that used to be- there's a lot more tolerance, uhm, things that used to be considered, you know, hardcore are not so hardcore anymore?

Mmhmm.

Uhm... so it's- things are relaxing? Yeah. Which, kinda makes me think also what is the- what's the next big thing? [laughter] What's the next sort of taboo thing-

[laughter]

-that's gonna become mainstream?

Mmm.

So... yeah. But also when I started out I wasn't part of the scene or anything like that.

Mmm.

I was just meeting individual people one-on-one, so I mean that's- that's a whole different ballgame as well.

Yeap.

Yeah.

Cool. Yay. We're done! [laughter]

Cool.

Appendix C: Original Attitudes about Sadomasochism Scale (Yost, 2010)

Instructions: For each of the following statements, please note whether you agree or disagree, using the following scale:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
disagree strongly	disagree moderately	disagree mildly	neither agree nor disagree	agree mildly	agree moderately	agree strongly

Use the following definitions when considering your responses:

Sadomasochism: sexual practices that involve dominance and submission (the appearance that one person has control over the other), sometimes involve role-playing (such as Master-slave or Teacher-student), are always consensual (all partners participate willingly and voluntarily).

Sadomasochist: someone who deliberately uses physical stimulation (possibly pain) and/or psychological stimulation and control to produce sexual arousal and to achieve sexual pleasure

Dominant: someone who always or mostly is the person in control during an SM sexual encounter

Submissive: someone who always or mostly is the person who does not have control during an SM sexual encounter

1. Sadomasochists just don't fit into our society.
2. Practicing sadomasochists should not be allowed to be members of churches or synagogues.
3. Sadomasochism is a perversion.
4. Sadomasochistic behavior is just plain wrong.
5. Sadomasochism is a threat to many of our basic social institutions.
6. I think sadomasochists are disgusting.
7. Sadomasochistic activity should be against the law.
8. Parents who engage in SM are more likely to physically abuse their children.
9. Sadomasochism is an inferior form of sexuality.
10. If I was alone in a room with someone I knew to be a Dominant, I would feel uncomfortable.
11. SM rarely exists in a psychologically healthy individual.
12. If I was alone in a room with someone I knew to be a Submissive, I would feel uncomfortable.
13. People who engage in SM are more likely to become involved in domestic violence.
14. A Dominant is more likely to rape a romantic partner than the average person.
15. A Dominant is more likely to rape a stranger than the average person.
16. A Dominant is more likely to sexually molest a child than the average person.
17. A variety of serious psychological disorders are associated with sadomasochism.
18. Sadomasochists are just like everybody else.
19. Sadomasochism is erotic and sexy.
20. Many sadomasochists are very moral and ethical people.
21. Sadomasochistic activity should be legal, as long as all participants are consenting adults.
22. Submissives are passive in other aspects of their lives (besides sex).
23. Dominants are aggressive and domineering in other aspects of their lives (besides sex).

Note. Items 18 through 21 should be reverse scored prior to computing subscale scores. To create the Socially Wrong subscale score, average Items 1 through 12; the Violence subscale, average items 13 through 17; the Lack of Tolerance subscale, average items 18 through 21; and the Real Life subscale, average items 22 and 23. A full scale score can be computed by averaging responses to all 23 items.

Appendix D: Modified Attitudes about Sadoomasochism Scale

These are the items as they appear in the order of the original ASMS (Yost, 2010). The item order was randomised for this study.

The following questions are a simplified version of a scale developed in 2010 in USA designed to measure opinions and attitudes about BDSM (also known as S/M, S&M, sadoomasochism or kink). There are no right or wrong answers - please answer according to how you feel about each statement.

There is no universal definition of BDSM - it includes a range of activities such as bondage e.g. using blindfolds and handcuffs during foreplay/sex, humiliation/degradation in an erotic context, pain in an erotic context e.g. flogging or dripping wax onto bare skin. All BDSM activities are consensual and must cease immediately if any involved party becomes uncomfortable and gives a signal to stop.

These are just some examples of BDSM/kink. You are encouraged to use your own definition of BDSM/kink when responding to the statements below.

Kinky people just don't fit into our society.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither nor Disagree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>						

Kinky people should not be allowed to be in religious places/organisations.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither nor Disagree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>						

Kink is a perversion.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither nor Disagree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>						

Kinky is just plain wrong.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither nor Disagree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>						

Kink is a threat to many of our basic social institutions

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither nor Disagree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>						

I think kinky people are disgusting.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither nor Disagree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Kinky activities should be against the law.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither nor Disagree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Kinky parents are more likely to abuse their children.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither nor Disagree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Kink is an inferior form of sexuality.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither nor Disagree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

If I was alone in a room with someone I knew to be kinky, I would be uncomfortable.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither nor Disagree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Kink rarely exists in a psychologically healthy individual.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither nor Disagree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Kinky people are more likely to become involved in domestic violence.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither nor Disagree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

A kinky person is more likely to sexually assault a romantic partner than the average person.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither nor Disagree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>						

A kinky person is more likely to sexually assault a stranger than the average person.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither nor Disagree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>						

A kinky person is more likely to sexually assault a minor than the average person.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither nor Disagree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>						

Kink is associated with a variety of serious psychological disorders.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither nor Disagree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>						

Kinky people are just like everybody else.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither nor Disagree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>						

Kink is erotic and sexy.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither nor Disagree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>						

Many kinky individuals are moral and ethical people.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither nor Disagree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>						

Kinky activities should be legal, as long as all participants are consenting adults.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither nor Disagree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Peoples' personalities tend to define their kink preferences - e.g. someone who prefers to tie their partner up would tend to be aggressive and domineering in other aspects of their lives, while someone who prefers to be tied up by their partner would tend to be passive and meek in other aspects of their lives.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither nor Disagree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Appendix E: Original vs. Modified ASMS

Table 5

Comparison of the changes made to the original ASMS

Original ASMS	Modified ASMS
<p>1. It is unclear if demographic questions were asked. Participants were also not asked about their perceptions of how kinky they were, how tolerant/accepting they were of kink, and how much they thought they knew about kink.</p>	<p>1. Demographic questions as well as participants' perceptions of how kinky they were, how tolerant/accepting they were of kink, and how much they thought they knew about kink were asked in the beginning of the modified ASMS. These are the first 8 questions in Appendix D.</p>
<p>2. The terms 'somasochism', 'somasochist', 'dominant' and 'submissive' were defined at the beginning of the survey.</p>	<p>2. 'BDSM/kink' was loosely defined whilst encouraging participants to respond using their own personal conceptualisations of BDSM.</p>
<p>3. BDSM is referred to as 'somasochism' or 'somasochistic activities' and BDSM practitioners as 'somasochists', 'dominants' or 'submissives'.</p>	<p>3. BDSM is referred to as 'kink' or 'kinky activities' and BDSM practitioners as 'kinky people'.</p> <p>This study rejects the label 'somasochism' due to its association with psychopathology, and because 'dominant' and 'submissive' tend to be fluid rather than stable identities for BDSM practitioners, there was no distinction made between BDSM roles to avoid giving participants an inaccurate impression about BDSM roles.</p> <p>Additionally, the definition of 'dominant' as 'someone who always or mostly is the person in control during an SM sexual encounter' and 'submissive' as 'someone who always or mostly is the person who does not have control during an SM sexual encounter' were deemed highly problematic, firstly because not all 'SM encounters' are 'sexual' in nature, but primarily because someone who does not have control can no longer be deemed to be in a consensual situation. Everyone engaged in a BDSM scene is expected to be of sound mind, able to give informed consent, and all parties involved are always completely in control of the activities that unfold over the course of a BDSM session, able to escalate any given activity's intensity, voice one's concerns or have the session immediately</p>

cease at any time. To equate submission with a lack of control further perpetuates already pervasive misconceptions about BDSM.

4. There were separate items for BDSM practitioners who primarily identify as ‘dominant’ or ‘submissive’ such as “10. If I was alone in a room with someone I knew to be a Dominant, I would feel uncomfortable” and “12. If I was alone in a room with someone I knew to be a Submissive, I would feel uncomfortable”.

4. No distinction is made between ‘dominant’ and ‘submissive’ so the duplicates were condensed into one item such as “18. If I was alone in a room with someone I knew to be kinky, I would feel uncomfortable”

5. The wording of several items were altered. For example, ‘churches or synagogues’ was replaced with ‘religious places/organisations’ to better encompass a wider range of religions, and ‘sexually molest a child’ was reworded to ‘sexually assault a minor’ because the word ‘child’ may evoke an instinctive emotional/kneejerk response.

6. All positively-keyed items were clustered at the bottom; 4 items, #18-21 out of 23 total items would have to be reverse-scored. It was unclear whether the order of these items were randomised.

6. Item randomisation was instated in the modified ASMS to try and combat acquiescence response bias⁶¹.

7. The original ASMS was formulated through administering a large question bank to two samples. Both samples were university students, though one was in an area of the United States known to have generally more liberal values while the other was more conservative. Participants were incentivised through making participation contribute to their overall coursework.

7. The modified ASMS was advertised to a wider audience and grocery vouchers were offered as incentive. This would introduce a greater level of nonresponse bias, where certain groups of the population are less likely to participate (more conservative people may be less likely to want to fill out a survey about kink, those who do not have internet access cannot respond to an online survey and so on) and thus the results may not generalise to nonrespondents (Merkle, 2008). However it is hoped that this can be adjusted through post-stratification, and a

⁶¹ Acquiescence response bias is a term used to describe where participants may mildly agree or disagree to every item because they believe that the researcher wants to elicit a specific type of response from them, or they may wish to come across as genial, polite and/or having similar/conformist attitudes to what they perceive are the norms for the status quo (Holbrook, 2008). Having a mixture of positively- and negatively-keyed items is the standard solution used to address acquiescence bias (so you would expect someone who strongly agrees with ‘I think kink is morally questionable’ to strongly disagree with ‘I don’t think kink is morally questionable’ rather than strongly agreeing to both statements) but this results in many redundant questions, so including some reverse-scored items circumvents asking the same question that is simply negated or worded directly opposite to the original question. In terms of the original ASMS, there are too few reverse-scored items and having them clustered at the bottom means that participants who are more likely to mildly agree with every statement do not think to re-evaluate their responses until they reach the end of the scale.

general population target would reduce response biases, where students may feel compelled to respond favourably to the scale to please their lecturer, or may respond quickly choosing the same option each time without reading and giving each item ample consideration because they are more concerned with attaining the course credits (Villar, 2008).

Appendix F: Survey Advertisements

New Zealand Herald advertisement:



Study description on the University of Auckland's School of Psychology website:

Using the Attitudes about Sadomasochism Scale (ASMS) in New Zealand

Despite increased public engagement with BDSM, which could be attributed to the popularity of fictional narratives such as *Fifty Shades of Grey*, it remains a diagnosable condition in the DSM-V and continues to be conflated with mental illness, childhood trauma, sexual lasciviousness and sexual violence. In response to results from an ethnographic study in the Auckland BDSM community in 2014, where interviewees who identify as BDSM practitioners were reluctant to engage in public dialogue about BDSM due to perceived stigma and first-hand experiences of discrimination resulting in embarrassment in the workplace, marriage dissolution, losing child custody and other severe consequences, a modified version of the Attitudes about Sadomasochism Scale (ASMS) developed by Megan Yost in 2010 is being administered to people residing in New Zealand to assess public attitudes and opinions about BDSM and BDSM practitioners.

Please direct any queries to deww.zhang@auckland.ac.nz. This survey was approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee (UAHPEC) on 5 May 2015 for 3 years. Reference number 014121.

Top ▲

Facebook advertisements, appearing on the desktop and mobile versions in the newsfeed as well as the advertisement sidebar. One out of the five images below were randomly featured, but the text was identical. All images were royalty-free stock photography supplied by Facebook partner Shutterstock. It is worth noting that ‘explicit imagery’ is prohibited, so searching for stock images using terms like ‘sex’, ‘sexy’, ‘bondage’ and ‘erotic’ returned no results. These images were found using search terms like ‘corset’, ‘handcuffs’, ‘blindfolds’ and ‘tied up’. The corset image received more clicks than the other 4 images combined, with the second most popular image being the hands bound with rope, so the other images were removed from circulation within the first week of the advertisement’s month-long run:



The image shows a Facebook advertisement for an online survey. At the top left is a small profile picture of a hand. To its right is the text 'Online BDSM in New Zealand Survey' in blue, with 'Sponsored · 🌐' below it. On the far right is a 'Like Page' button with a thumbs-up icon. The main text of the ad reads: 'Participate in a PhD project about kink. Answer a 5 minute survey and win a voucher.' Below this text is a photograph of a person's hands adjusting a black corset. Underneath the photo, the text says 'Win a Countdown voucher!' followed by the URL 'GOO.GL'. At the bottom of the ad are the options 'Like · Comment · Share'.





Flyer posted around two of the University of Auckland's campuses:

FIFTY SHADES OF

What are your views on
kink and kinky people?



Are kinky people normal, everyday people who just have different kinds of relationships and do intimacy in their own ways?

Or are they violent and dangerous people in dysfunctional relationships who have some sort of psychological disturbance?

Is kink a naughty, fun way of spicing up the bedroom, or just used as an excuse used by perverts?

Should we have laws around kink?

WIN 1 OF 50 COUNTDOWN VOUCHERS!!!

Tell us what you think at goo.gl/njC9Ut

This survey was approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee (UAHPEC) on 5 May 2015 for 3 years. Reference number 014121

goo.gl/njC9Ut											
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Appendix G: Ten Questions about the Fifty Shades Movie

Please supply your ID number. If you do not have it, please close out of the questionnaire now and contact deww.zhang@auckland.ac.nz.

When did you watch the movie? It is best to respond to these questions with the movie still fresh in your mind; you may wish to rewatch it before answering if you had seen it over a month ago.

- Less than a week ago
- Between a week and a fortnight ago
- Between a fortnight and a month ago
- More than a month ago

Ten Questions about the Fifty Shades Movie

The rest of the questionnaire consists of 10 open-ended questions split up over 3 pages about the Fifty Shades of Grey movie. Please write as detailed of a response as you can. Many of the questions have suggestions listed below in case you feel like you do not know how to respond. You do not have to strictly follow these suggestions.

[Movie Overview]

1. Pretend I am a close friend of yours and I've never heard of Fifty Shades before. I ask you if you've seen the movie, to which you'd confirm that you have, and then I ask "Oh, well, what's it about? How'd you find it?" What you would say?

(Suggestions: You can write a brief plot summary with or without spoilers, if you liked/disliked the movie as a whole, was it too long or too short, how would you feel about a sequel, etc.)

2. What did you enjoy the most about the movie?
3. What did you dislike the most about the movie?
4. If there was one or several things you could change about the movie before it went on air, what would you have changed?

[Relationships]

5. Could you comment about the relationship between Christian and Anastasia?

(Suggestions: How healthy/unhealthy or functional/dysfunctional is their relationship?

Why would you say so?

Is their type of relationship quite common between real life kinky people or would you say you got the sense that this is something that would only happen in a movie? Why would you say so?)

6. What would you think about the idea of a similar movie but if the roles were reversed? So Christian was a female character and Anastasia was a male character?

(Suggestions: Would you see it differently? Why?

Would your response be different from what you wrote for #7? Would you think their relationship is more or less functional/dysfunctional with a woman being the dominant one? Why?)

[Real Life]

7. Are you familiar with kink or kinky people? What kinds of similarities and differences did you notice between what was going on in the movie and what would normally happen in 'real life'?

(Suggestions: Even if you don't know much about kink and don't know any kinky people, you could write if you had assumed kink is really like how it is in the movie)

8. What kinds of messages did you take away from the movie?

(Suggestions: What does kink involve?

How normal or abnormal are kinky people? Why would you say so?)

9. What are some of the good and bad things to have come out of this movie?

(Suggestions: A good thing could be, maybe you believe people feel less awkward about talking about kink?

A bad thing could be, maybe you believe this movie condones violence in intimate relationships?)

10. What kind of impact do you think the movie will have had on 'real life' kinky communities?

(Suggestions: How do you think the movie was received by 'real life' kinky people?

Would someone who learned more about kink through the movie be more or less inclined to seek out 'real life' kinky communities? To what extent?

If you personally were interested in kink would you be more willing to seek out 'real life' kinky communities? Why?

Have people been more or less willing to talk about kink since the movie?)

11. If there was anything that wasn't covered that you'd like to write about, please do so here.