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*“Everything is about sex, except sex.
Sex is about power”*

A thematic analysis of women’s submissive experiences
in the dominant-submissive dynamic.

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SIMV-2021
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Abstract

In majority of academic literature related to BDSM (bondage-discipline, dominance-submission, and sadism-masochism) the focus is often centred on men and their experiences within the community. The limited focus on women and their motivations to engage in BDSM dynamics has been a driving force in this thesis. Therefore, this research aims to address this gap and explore female BDSM practitioners' experiences with submission in the dominant-submissive dynamic. In this study, I analyse what motivates participants and the type of environment they need to engage in submission; their navigation of feminism within BDSM and their understanding of stigma as BDSM practitioners and how this can be challenged. In order to do this, semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out with nine women, aged 22-30, based in the UK with experience as a submissive in the dominant-submissive dynamic. Analysis of my respondents demonstrated that trust and negotiation were foundational factors participants needed in order to engage in submission. These elements manifest in participants' engagement in the dominant-submissive power exchange alongside feminist tension as they feel their dynamic is mutually beneficial, healthy, and consensual. Discomfort around talking about sex and more deviant forms of sex like BDSM was addressed with the suggestion community and education are key to challenging social stigma found with BDSM. The results indicate that my participants took careful consideration before engaging in submission and prefaced their play on established principles, trust and communication were two themes that arose throughout participants' reflections as well as the personal gratification and satisfaction they feel with engaging in this power dynamic. This research is not to offer generalised conclusions considering my sample size, the focus is rather to offer insight into my nine participants experiences as individuals rather than a collective.

Keywords: BDSM, dominance, submission, stigma, power, pleasure, sex

Popular science summary

There has been a growing awareness of BDSM (bondage-discipline, dominance-submission, sadism-masochism) in widespread society, the popularity of *Fifty Shades of Grey* put a spotlight on kinkier sexual practice which caught the attention of non-kinky audiences. However, this increased awareness of BDSM did not seem to come with the education and nuance of practices within it. Alongside this, academic work around BDSM tends to focus on men and their participation within BDSM and fails to focus on women and their experiences in BDSM dynamics. The growth in mainstream depictions of BDSM dynamics (the dominant-submissive exchange especially) and the lack of attention on women's experiences were the factors that motivated this thesis. The aim of this study was to address this gap and explore female BDSM practitioners' experiences with submission in the dominant-submissive dynamic. In this study, I analysed what motivates my participants and the type of environment they need to engage in submission; their navigation of feminism within BDSM and their understanding of stigma as BDSM practitioners and how this can be challenged. This was done through semi-structured interviews with nine women who have engaged in submission.

The theory was focused on Foucault's conceptualisation of strategic power, Langdrige & Butt's theory of erotic power exchange, Hopkin's concept of simulation rather than replication, Williams et al's foundational 4C's structure (care, concern, communication, and consent) and Link & Phelan's argument of stigma. They all played a vital role throughout analysing participants reflections of their experience with submission in the dominant-submissive dynamic. Analysis of my respondents demonstrated that trust and negotiation were foundational factors participants needed in order to engage in submission. These elements manifest in participants' engagement in the dominant-submissive power exchange alongside feminist tension as they feel their dynamic is mutually beneficial, healthy, and consensual. Discomfort around talking about sex and more deviant forms of sex like BDSM was addressed with the suggestion community and education are key to challenging social stigma found with BDSM. The results indicate that my participants took careful consideration before engaging in submission and prefaced their play on established principles, trust and communication were two themes that arose throughout participants' reflections as well as the personal gratification and satisfaction they feel with engaging in this power dynamic.

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Acknowledgments

First, I would like to thank the nine wonderful women who made time to share their stories with me and in turn made this research possible. Without each of you giving me your time, vulnerability and interest, my thesis would not be what it is today. Thank you all for your insight, passion, and openness with me.

To my supervisor Bo, thank you! For the constant support and guidance over the last five months. I couldn't imagine this process without your continued insight and understanding throughout. You provided encouragement whilst also keeping me grounded when I'd let myself drift into the clouds. So thank you, for making this whole process that much more manageable and enjoyable.

Thank you to the friends that took time along this journey to offer me support. Have that be sending encouraging words, checking in and letting me vent, proofreading my chapters, or providing company on days when studying alone felt too much. Each of you helped keep me going during these taxing five months.

I would also like give thanks to my parents. Without their continuous support over the last two years none of this would have come to be!

And finally, I want to thank myself. I found a piece of myself whilst writing this thesis. It's been a challenging two years and at many points I questioned if I would see it through. Getting to this stage and knowing I've created a research project I'm proud of makes it all worth it.

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1 INTRODUCTION

When you think of BDSM, what comes to mind? Whips? Handcuffs? Maybe a dark dungeon full of people dressed in leather prepared to engage in sexually deviant activity? For those who do not practice BDSM, their understanding of it is often tied to the depictions presented in mainstream media (mainly film), but this often fails to authentically reflect the practices of BDSM. This research aims to offer more insight into female practitioners and their understanding of BDSM.

BDSM is an abbreviation used to reference the activities of; bondage and discipline; dominance and submission; and sadism and masochism. BDSM can also be used through the term ‘kink’, it is used as an umbrella term and are carried out in a “safe, legal, consensual manner in order for the participants to experience erotic arousal and/or personal growth” (Wiseman, 2011; 10). Bondage and discipline refer to the practice of physical restraint using rules and punishment, dominance and submission represents customs and rituals relating to the giving and accepting of control between partners, and sadism and masochism describes sexual pleasure derived by inflicting or suffering pain and humiliation within a consensual scenario (Faccio et al, 2014; 752). Within the wide range of BDSM practices, interest can range from a one-time experience to a lifestyle, and in the context of BDSM, interactions within a specific time period are often called “scenes” or “play” (Simula, 2019; 3). It can be difficult to provide a concise definition of the BDSM subculture as there is so much variety; but the BDSM community is inherently about subcultures and countercultures (Meeker, 2013; 7).

There has been a drastic increase of BDSM representation in mainstream media in the last 20 years (Weiss, 2006; 104) and this increased exposure is not necessarily a good thing when analysing the quality of content being produced. Often BDSM and subcultures within it are othered or heavily based on stereotypes designed to captivate the interest of the audience, who usually do not practice BDSM. E. L. James’ trilogy *Fifty Shades of Grey* catapulted BDSM into the mainstream roughly ten years ago, exposing audiences to the alternative sexual practices that can occur in BDSM. Shortly after the film’s release, sales for kinkier sex toys such as ball-gags, blindfolds, handcuffs,

and paddles increased notably. While it may have caused more collective awareness of BDSM or kinkier sex, it fails to address the vital preparation before and after a scene (Downing, 2013; Weiss, 2006) which further contributed to a sensationalised depiction of BDSM and its practitioners.

Academic literature focused on BDSM has historically failed to focus on the presence of women engaged in BDSM spaces (Breslow et al, 1985; Rehor, 2015; Taylor & Ussher, 2001), with most writing focused on men and their participation. This lack of academic focus on women alongside misrepresentative depictions of women in kink motivated me to explore women's experiences engaging with submission in the dominant-submissive dynamic. With many still uncomfortable when discussing topics like sexual pleasure, power play and kink this research intends to provide insight into women that participate in BDSM as well as their motivation to do so.

1.1 AIM OF STUDY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research is aiming to contribute to the gap in literature surrounding women in BDSM spaces, to help readers gain insight of what motivates participants to engage in BDSM and their thoughts on autonomy, feminism, and stigma in the context of a power exchange. More than anything this research is to help contribute to bringing more open discussion of BDSM, sex and power exchange into academia. So therefore, the main research question will be:

How and why do women engage in submission in the dominant-submissive dynamic?

And in order to address this analytically, these sub-questions will be explored:

- How do women who engage in submission understand autonomy in their power exchange?
- How do kinky women situate feminism within BDSM?
- How do BDSM practitioners address social stigma?

1.2 DELIMITATIONS

This thesis is focused on exploring women's experiences within the BDSM dominant-submissive dynamic. It is important to note, this research is not to make generalised findings of women's submissive experiences and their thoughts on the dominant-submissive power dynamic. It would not be possible to make generalised conclusions from my empirical data, rather my nine participants represent their personal individual experiences. In addition, there may be times throughout this paper where participants are addressed as 'submissive women' for the sake of comprehensibility. However, while all participants have experience engaging with submission in dominant-submissive dynamic, not all participants would label themselves 'submissive women' they should be understood as women who engage with submission.

1.3 THESIS OUTLINE

To answer these research questions, this thesis is structured as follows: chapter one introduced the thesis, offering background, establishing the aim and research questions and research purpose. Chapter two contextualises previous research around BDSM focusing on the debate of a sociological vs pathological understanding of BDSM, power, women in BDSM and sexual pleasure. Chapter three stated the conceptual and theoretical framework of this thesis, which consists of situating power, erotic power exchange, simulation not replication, the structural approach of the 4C's and stigma. Chapter four explained the methodology of semi-structured interviews and epistemological framework used to position this study. Chapter five is dedicated to the findings of this thesis and analyses the chosen material in relation to the given theoretical and methodological framework. Chapter five is the final chapter and results of said analysis are summed up in a conclusion, specifying where further research beyond this thesis is possible.

2 PREVIOUS RESEARCH

This chapter aims to position my study in terms of existing literature on BDSM, by providing a discussion of previous academic works, illustrating how research problems similar to this thesis have been addressed before. This is done by evaluating earlier writings on the topic of power, sexual pleasure, women's participation, and a sociological vs pathological approach to BDSM, gaps and inconsistencies become apparent, justifying the approach of this research and how it will contribute to this field of study. It is important to acknowledge the vast majority of the current research on BDSM focuses on sadomasochism which is the act of consensually inflicting and receiving pain for sexual pleasure. While SM is situated within the BDSM community it is key to note "many BDSM activities and identities do not involve any form of pain or discomfort" (Simula, 2019; 2). Langdrige & Butt (2005) acknowledge the occurrence of sadomasochism often being interpreted as the default power exchange in previous research and offer a discourse of erotic power exchange. Their study was dedicated to the fact that power exchange in BDSM that is sexually gratifying does not have to explicitly involve pain and will be explored further in this thesis.

2.1 PATHOLOGY VS SOCIOLOGY

Older academic studies situated in psychological and medical discourse that researched BDSM and sadomasochism believed members that participated in said practices were perverted and pathologically inclined to do so (Krafft-Ebing, 1886; De Block & Adrianens, 2013), often bringing up the practice of sadomasochism alongside behaviours of rape and child sexual abuse. Pathologizing BDSM causes harmful stereotypes to surface of those that engage with it in a healthy consensual way. Reducing it to a mental illness or fundamental human error further stigmatises those in this marginalised community. And until recent years, there has been a lack of research analysing non-clinical and non-pathological variations of BDSM sexual expression (Pitagora, 2013). The benefits of approaching those that engage in BDSM from a sociological rather than pathological perspective has been highlighted in sociological research "sadism and masochism, traditionally studied as an individual

psychopathology, may be more fully understood as a sociological phenomenon” (Weinberg & Falk, 1980; 379). Faccio et al (2014) explored personal meanings related to the construction of sexuality and sexual pleasure by conducting semi-structured interviews with BDSM practitioners and claimed it is “a sexual interest or subculture attractive to a minority, rather than a pathological symptom that may be derived from past abuse or difficulty with ‘normal’ sex” (Faccio et al, 2014; 761). Steadily we are finding more research applying a sociological approach grounded in theory that views BDSM sexuality as a non-pathological sexual variation (Weinberg & Falk, 1980: Taylor & Ussher, 2001: Cross and Matheson, 2006: Yost & Hunter, 2012). Staying in line with this approach, a sociological rather than pathological understanding of BDSM will be carried out in this thesis. Rather than associating activity in BDSM as a pathological misalignment, my research will instead focus on BDSM as a social phenomenon.

2.2 POWER

While power exchange can touch various activities within BDSM, similar to sadomasochism it is important to remember the exchange of power is not fundamentally needed in all forms of BDSM. However, the focus of this thesis is on the exchange of power between the submissive and the dominant and various research has also explored the theme of power, and the nature and practice of a power exchange in kink. Power exchange can take place either during a time-limited scene or be an underlying aspect of a consensual power exchange relationship (Simula, 2019). Consent is a core concern that often arises when trying to understand power exchange in BDSM. Thankfully, it is a clear and common acknowledgement that consent is at the centre of it all, “explicit consent is the single most common characteristic in BDSM sexual interactions and is considered a fundamental tenet among those who practice BDSM” (Pitagora, 2013; 28). The presence of mutual consent is often the clearest clarification between BDSM and abuse (Weinberg & Falk, 1980: Langdridge & Butt, 2005: Jozifkova, 2013). The use of a safeword- either a gesture or word, signals the want to end the play or scene have it be involving a power exchange, pain, or any other form of BDSM. The safeword is an extension of establishing consent “there exists a mechanism in place that signifies the end of consent: the safeword” (Pitagora, 2013; 30). The respect of the safeword and the

ability to use it also clearly signals consensual activity (Jozifkova, 2013) their study focused on establishing differences between BDSM and abuse and establishing core themes of healthy BDSM. The use of a safeword is not exclusively used by the submissive, the dominant or top in a scene is also free and encouraged to use one if they feel they are uncomfortable with the direction of the scene or find themselves overwhelmed. It exists to benefit and protect all parties in a BDSM scene “the safeword is used not only for physical discomfort but also for psychological discomfort” (Jozifkova, 2013: 2).

Power imbalance is a core element of the dominant/submissive dynamic and it occurs after clear communication and mutual agreement. Both parties are consensually engaged in the decision to partake in a power exchange. Consent is a theme that arose in various writings to distinguish a power-exchange from abuse, (Beres & MacDonald, 2015; Ortmann & Sprott, 2012; Jozifkova, 2013; Williams et al, 2014) with consent being something that can be granted in various ways and can arise at “several points during a scene” (Ortmann & Sprott, 2012; 76). While studying the use of power in sadomasochist relationships, Cross & Matheson (2006) observed online scenes of sadomasochists and interviewed players after the scene and found rules of conduct were established explicitly through dialogue before engaging in a scene; “many of the participants considered the power exchange to be mutually constructed, maintained by tacit and explicit rules and conventions, and, ultimately illusory” (Cross & Matheson, 2006; 157). Their study was focused on exploring an alternate conceptualisation of sadomasochism from practitioners perspectives. The exchange of power comes from mutually agreed terms by both parties, power is not taken by force or without clear communication on the terms. Weinberg & Falk, (1980) summarised a common process to power exchange:

Before an actual scene occurs, the participants in it discuss their needs, fantasies, fears, and what they are and are not willing to do. What ultimately occurs during a scene is the outcome of this discussion, in which the original thoughts are somewhat modified, then subjected to a bargaining process by which the verbalized desires of the partner are accommodated (Weinberg & Falk, 1980; 388).

Therefore, it is apparent power exchanges in BDSM are mutually constructed with clearly negotiated boundaries to protect all parties involved (Cross & Matheson, 2006; Langdrige & Butt, 2005). This falls in line with Simmel's (1896) theorising themes of superiority and subordination, that it may occur that both parties are equally subject to an objective purpose. In this context that would be the dominant-submissive dynamic, both parties enter roles taking a superior or subordinate role in relation to a shared principle which would likely be mutual satisfaction have it be sexually or emotionally. This understanding of power exchange and approach to the principles of power exchange being mutually sought after and negotiated with clear communication and consent will be explored with participants sharing their experience as a submissive in a power exchange.

2.3 WOMEN IN BDSM

While there has been sizable research on sadomasochism and BDSM, fewer researchers have considered women's participation in BDSM. Historically many studies have focused on homosexual men and sometimes heterosexual men and their involvement in sadomasochism, but older research expresses that women were hard to find in these scenes. "Kink was believed to be a male-only phenomenon with little to no intrinsic interest for women" (Rehor, 2015; 826). This was mainly due to the fact many women that seemed to be involved in sadomasochism or BDSM were prostitutes (Weinberg & Falk, 1980). However, this was challenged by Breslow et al (1985) their study found a sample of women that engage in sadomasochism and not involved in prostitution or paid sex work- they engage in the lifestyle because of personal gratification. There is a gap in research focused on exploring women and their involvement in BDSM and this thesis aims to contribute to filling that gap; by highlighting the experiences of submissive women and their attraction to power exchange in BDSM. While there are notably fewer academic studies focusing on women, there have been researchers that have noticed this gap and attempted to contribute to addressing women's engagement (Breslow et al, 1985; Taylor & Ussher, 2001; Faccio et al, 2014; Rehor, 2015). Women do take up space in sadomasochism, with studies finding "a large number of women in the S&M subculture" (Moser & Levitt, 1987; 332). It is again important to note the heavy focus

of academic research on sadomasochism means there is still growing research on women who engage in BDSM dynamics that do not involve pain explicitly. Nonetheless, it is important to note the lack of presence women seem to take in research into subcultures in the BDSM community and highlights the gap my thesis can contribute to filling in elevating the voices of kinky women who are part of this subculture.

2.4 SEXUAL PLEASURE

In line with the presence of women in BDSM, the topic of sexual pleasure is essential to note when considering previous research and what knowledge has been constructed around said theme. Those that practise BDSM are deemed a marginalised community, and often face stereotypes and assumptions on what they do and why they do it (which links to the history of research analysing BDSM through a pathological lens). There has been research exploring themes of sexual submission in women as a subconscious act which has been theories to lead to lower levels of autonomy and sexual satisfaction (Sanchez et al, 2006). Outside of the context of BDSM, it is important to acknowledge women may find themselves negotiating power in sex subconsciously or passively. However, it can be harmful in reproducing stereotypes of consensually submissive women in BDSM. When sexual submission is an autonomous choice there is great room for sexual arousal. It is important to present willing sexually submissive women as what they tend to be, empowered, autonomous and proactively engaged.

While still considered somewhat taboo, the exploration of women proactively seeking and engaging in BDSM due to their sexual gratification is important to establish. The presence of sexual gratification is not denied but often not deeply explored, but when it is touched on it becomes clear it is a big factor; the study by Faccio et al (2014) states that “women tended to use more positive adjectives to define their sexual practices. Specifically, 32% of them used the terms ‘intense’ and ‘gratifying’ and 26% used the term ‘exciting’” (Faccio et al, 2014; 757). Sexual arousal is a key theme that arose in various studies when exploring women’s involvement in BDSM (Taylor & Ussher, 2001; Langdrige & Butt 2005; Rehor 2 015:). Foucault has also written on themes of pleasure within BDSM, arguing against the notion that BDSM is a form of violence and instead grounding its activities in the exploration of pleasure saying “the idea that S&M

is related to a deep violence is stupid. We know very well what all those people are doing is not aggressive; they are inventing new possibilities of pleasure... It's a kind of creation, a creative enterprise" (Foucault, 1997:165). The exploration and natural allure to seek out pleasure are themes Foucault has referenced to resulting in some exploration in kink, and he has praised S&M for opening the possibilities of "producing pleasure with very odd things, very strange parts of our bodies, in very unusual situations" (Foucault, 1997:165). He describes sadomasochism as giving practitioners the chance to make use of every part of the body as a sexual instrument. However, I challenge Foucault's idea that pleasure is mostly tied with the physical, emotional, and psychological elements are also likely to play a part in practitioners' appeal to BDSM, and for some hold more significance over possible physical pleasures. With all of this in mind, the element of sexual pleasure will be explored with participants on if and how it may play a part in their engagement with submissiveness in BDSM.

2.5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Overall, it is clear that academic research in BDSM is ever-growing, with more academics moving away from a pathological understanding of BDSM to a social approach. Consent is a clear and constant topic that is present across the decades of research and will also make an appearance in this thesis. Also, the nature of power exchange, that being the intention between parties with established boundaries and negotiated roles is important to acknowledge, all parties involved are equals agreeing to step into a power exchange will be further explored through interviews. The lack of specific focus on women within BDSM subcultures is an issue that has been pointed out and is gradually starting to be addressed, and this is explicitly where this thesis will aim to situate itself. Aiming to contribute academic study that focuses on the opinions of women that engage in BDSM, there are still academic and social assumptions tied to sexual submission, with few conceptualising it in the context of BDSM. This is summarised well by Pitagora (2013) and serves as the clearest justification for this thesis being carried out:

Without an understanding of how participants are motivated or what they are trying to accomplish in such scenes, these types of interactions might seem

deviant from an outsider's perspective. Understanding the context of BDSM interactions is crucial if one is to find meaning in them (Pitagora, 2013; 33).

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter several concepts will be drawn upon to construct the theoretical framework to later use in my analysis. The interaction of these concepts will be based around contextualising power (Foucault, 1978/1982/1996/1997) as being ‘strategic’ within the context of BDSM rather than oppressive and what that entails. Erotic power exchange (Langdrige & Butt, 2005) offers a more diverse approach to understanding the appeal in engaging in a power exchange, challenging the assumption that the infliction of pain and the sadomasochistic dynamic is the default of power exchange dynamic. The argument of simulation not replication (Hopkins, 1994) challenges the radical feminist understanding of power exchange being harmful to women. The 4C’s (Williams et al, 2014), while more empirical than theoretical, is established as a framework within BDSM practices, looking at the concept of care, communication, consent, and concern. Stigma (Link & Phelan, 2001) will be defined and conceptualised, establishing the factors present when stigmatising someone. All five concepts, along with work shared in my previous research chapter will be used to analyse with my empirical data

3.1 POWER

Foucault’s work on power will be used as a concept to analyse participants’ interviews exploring their thoughts on submission and BDSM. He argues power is not a fixed institution, structure or something carried out by powerful individuals, but rather a force that is relational and everywhere. He theorised power as being exercised in all relations, and that power is inherent in everything, making all relations power relations (Foucault 1978, 94), arguing that power is not repressive but instead productive (Foucault 1978, 86). He has various writings on BDSM and sadomasochism, and his work around conceptualising power as strategic in the context of BDSM is a variation of his general discussion on power and will be focused on for this thesis. Foucault suggests that sadomasochism (SM) is the eroticisation of power or better yet, the eroticisation of strategic relations. Arguing the power that comes into play in the context of BDSM is different to social power, stating:

The SM game is very interesting because it is a strategic relation, but it is always fluid. Of course, there are roles, but everybody knows very well that those roles can be reversed. Sometimes the scene begins with the master and slave, and at the end, the slave has become the master, or even when the roles are stabilized, you know very well that it is always a game. Either the rules are transgressed, or there is an agreement, either explicit or tacit, that makes them aware of certain boundaries. This strategic game as a source of bodily pleasure is very interesting (Foucault, 1996; 387-388).

The key point here according to Foucault is that for power to be strategic it must be open to the possibility of reversal. Only when such reversal is blocked or when the rules of the game become static would we find ourselves in a position of mere domination or oppression. When roles are fixed throughout the scene (such as a submissive and dominant) the clear establishment of boundaries and understanding that the act itself is a game or performance again creates space for power to be strategic rather than oppressive. He argues the pleasure for those engaging in a power exchange is derived from the use of this strategic game, claiming “I wouldn’t say that it is a reproduction of the structures of power, it is an acting-out of power structures by a strategic game that is able to give sexual pleasure or bodily pleasure” (Foucault, 1982; 225). The concept of strategic power will be applied to my understanding and analysis of participants’ experiences within the dominant-submissive dynamic. As within this context, power is not understood to be oppressive but structured through clearly established frameworks, the mutual understanding of a game, play or with the freedom to fluidly move between roles. Foucault also offers a deeper analysis of his thoughts on the inner workings within the roles of the master (dominant) and slave (submissive) in a sadomasochist power exchange, arguing that both participants have a duty to each other within the structure of their roles:

S&M is not a relationship between he (or she) who suffers and he (or she) who inflicts suffering, but between the master and the one on whom he exercises his mastery. What interests the practitioners of S&M is that the relationship is at the same time regulated and open... The master can lose in the S&M game if he finds he is unable to respond to the needs and trials of his victim. Conversely,

the servant can lose if he fails to meet or can't stand meeting the challenge thrown at him by the master (Foucault, 1997; 151-152).

Foucault theorises that both parties can 'fail' within the practice of sadomasochism even though one party holds the power to strategically dominate in this scenario. The submissive is expected to meet the expectations set by their dominant but equally the dominant is expected to respond and adapt to the needs of their submissive, there is a two-sided give and take within the dynamic. It is important to consider the responsibility the dominant has to fulfil their submissive's needs and with caring for their wellbeing even while dominating the context of the scene. Trust is a core element that is paramount to any form of power exchange dynamic, without it the power in question does not fulfil Foucault's description of it being strategic. This understanding of both parties working to serve each other will be applied to analysing the role of my participants' submission and their understanding of their engagement in the dominant-submissive dynamic. Power was explored within my previous research and is a key component of my theoretical framework. I found Foucault's conceptualisation of strategic power best embodied the collective outlook of power argued in previous research. His concept stands alone in this chapter as it offers a concise conceptualisation of power for the reader. This understanding of strategic power, which can be constructed from establishing set roles with clear boundaries or the mutual understanding of their participation being part of a scene or game will be applied to the analysis of my participants' discussion around power exchange in the dominant-submissive dynamic.

3.2 EROTIC POWER EXCHANGE

Based within the framework of constructivism, the notion of erotic power exchange challenges the stereotypical assumption about BDSM which is that most practice occurs within the framework of sadomasochism involving some sort of infliction of pain for the sake of pleasure. There is no homogenous S&M culture, and many assume BDSM is based around pain playing a central part in these power dynamics. Langdridge & Butt's suggestion of erotic power exchange highlights the fact that not all that practice BDSM are engaging in sadomasochism. Pain does not feature in all forms of BDSM, and erotic power exchange is a discourse better positioned for this research and the approach to

BDSM practitioners understanding of kink. Their definition of erotic power exchange is “any situation where partners, of their own free will and choice, actively and wilfully incorporate the power element in their lovemaking (and usually for a great deal in their relationship)” (Langdridge & Butt, 2005; 69) the presence of pain or physical impact is not required to fit this definition, simply a consensual exchange of power between parties.

A lot of existing work around BDSM focuses on sadomasochism and the presence of pain and physical impact being used in practitioners' play. This is a valid type of practice that occurs within BDSM but does not appear in all forms of BDSM dynamics, power exchange can occur without the act of pain being inflicted. Sadomasochism (S&M) is one form of power exchange, but the dominant and submissive (D/s) dynamic is the focus of this research when considering power exchange. Not all submissive's identify with being masochists, and a dominant-submissive dynamic does not need to involve any infliction of pain. The theory of erotic power exchange essentially “attempts to recognize the plurality of practices that make up sadomasochistic play” (Langdridge & Butt, 2005; 69). There are many various elements of BDSM that attract practitioners to engage with it and acknowledging that there are factors that exist outside the element of sadism and masochism is a focus for my analysis. It acknowledges that for some, the exchange of power in and of itself is the appeal, removing the notion of pain being a factor in enticing practitioners to engage in BDSM. This is why erotic power exchange will be the lens used to analyse the dominant-submissive dynamic, it offers room for various forms of expression within the act of submitting power to someone else. Regardless of what attracts individuals to engage in a power exchange, one concept that is clear in Langdridge & Butt's theory of erotic power exchange is the presence of clear communication and consent, these will also arise throughout my analysis of data collected from interviews:

From an outsider's point of view, the family of sadomasochistic practices appears to be focused on the infliction of pain. But from participants' perspectives, of course, such practices are about many different things: For some, it is about playing with dominance and submission, others the restriction of movement through bondage, and yet others the meaning of pain. What is

important is the meaning that these practices have for the practitioners themselves. All aspects of the situation need to be exactly specified, negotiated, and framed within a consenting relationship for it to count as erotic power exchange (Langdridge & Butt, 2005; 72).

There is a range of activity that can occur under the frame of BDSM outside physical impact such as being restrained or enjoying the psychological element of subservience to a dominant. Those forms of play deserve to be acknowledged and erotic power exchange offers a more inclusive lens to explore these dynamics. This discourse understanding that not every practitioner may engage in inflicting/receiving pain in their power exchange is key for my analysis, the appeal practitioners find in the exchange of power with a partner will be explored with participants. While some will enjoy that element of pain, it does not appear in all participants' expression of this dynamic and it is important to remember the infliction of pain is not a given with the practice of power exchange.

3.3 SIMULATION NOT REPLICATION

Sadomasochism is a subject that has caused clear division within feminist ideology, it has often been considered as a behavioural structure of male dominated society's (Hopkins, 1994). With radical, separatist, and lesbian feminists working to eliminate dominant-submissive model as a fundamental step to women's liberation. However, there were women who identified as both feminists and sadomasochist to the surprise of many radical, separatist, and lesbian feminists, and this clash of position was clear during the 'sex wars' of the 1970s and 1980s. Radical feminists, and other feminists reject this concept of feminist sadomasochists, standing by the argument that BDSM is an oppressive reproduction of patriarchy, while many feminist lesbian sadomasochists argue for the nuance of BDSM. Hopkins writing focuses on the subculture of lesbians that engage in sadomasochism and challenges the argument that it replicates patriarchy and will be applied to my participants who engage in the dominant-submissive dynamic.

I will counter the argument that BDSM replicates patriarchy through the concept of simulation over replication. A clear radical feminist argument against BDSM and

sadomasochism is that it is a core structure of male-dominated culture. To many radical feminists it is understood to be a form of enacting violence against women, further perpetuating gender inequality and female subordination. Hopkins goes through the debates around BDSM between radical feminists and lesbian feminist sadomasochists, and I have taken the concept of BDSM being a form of simulation not the replication of patriarchy to counter the radical feminist argument of BDSM reproducing patriarchy.

S&M sexual activity does not replicate patriarchal sexual activity. It simulates it. Replication and simulation are very different. Replication implies that SM encounters merely reproduce patriarchal activity in a different physical area. Simulation implies that SM selectively replays surface patriarchal behaviours onto a different contextual field. That contextual field makes a profound difference (Hopkins, 1994; 123).

The element and presence of performance within BDSM is acknowledged by Hopkins, with many practitioners referring to their engagement in kink as a 'scenes' to indicate when they are in their dominant or submissive role, and it is this notion of BDSM being a performance that emphasises the simulation of certain settings or actions without necessarily wanting to do the 'real thing'.

SM participants do not rape; they do rape scenes. SMists do not enslave, they do slave scenes... The use of the term "scenes" exposes a critical, central aspect of S&M culture. SM is constructed as a performance, as a staging, a production, a simulation in which participants are writers, producers, directors, actors, and audience (Hopkins, 1994; 123).

The creation and use of scenes for BDSM activities imply that these actions do not take place in the 'real world' and instead occur in a separate location where patriarchal violence does not exist in the same way that it does in the broader social sphere. The separation between the scene and the general world reinforces BDSM as an area of fantasy, rather than reality. Califia advances this idea, arguing:

The keyword to understanding S/M is fantasy... A sadomasochist is well aware that a role adopted during a scene is not appropriate during other interactions and that a fantasy role is not the total sum of her being (Califia, 1996; 232).

While from an outsider perspective, the activities that may occur within BDSM may appear violent I support the argument that in BDSM “core features of real patriarchal violence, coercive violence, are absent” (Hopkins, 1994; 123). Limits or boundaries are established, consent is given and can be revoked at any time, ending the scene, both participants enter the roleplay as equals before and after the scene has happened. And while power exchange may occur it is important to remember, “the preliminary negotiations are conducted by equals, regardless of how the power will be distributed later on” (Truscott, 1991; 49). The contextualisation of simulation is important when considering behaviour in BDSM.

Hopkins argues SM scenes can parallel the experience of being on a roller coaster, given the presence of intense emotion such as fear, anticipation, and the general adrenaline rush. But putting yourself in this situation of riding a roller coaster does not therefore imply you would wish to plummet to your death or fall from high heights as that is what you would experience on a rollercoaster. Instead, she offers the possibility that the experience desired by the rider is the simulation of those lethal experiences, “not because simulation is all she can get, but because the simulation itself is thrilling and satisfying. There is no actual desire to die, or fall, or crash. The simulation itself is the goal, not a lesser copy of the goal” (Hopkins, 1994; 126). With this concept of simulation being the goal in the first place, she argues against radical feminist notions that BDSM practitioners are replicating and reproducing violence against women or patriarchy. The nuance of stimulation removes the malicious intent that is implied. “The same way the roller coaster rider may find actually falling to her death repugnant and horrible, but finds simulation of that event thrilling and exciting, the SM practitioner may find actual violence and humiliation repugnant and horrible but finds the simulation of that event thrilling and exciting-not as a stand-in but as a goal in itself” (Hopkins, 1994; 126). While there is a risk people with bad intentions may use BDSM as a guise to cause harm, to make an assumption that the majority of practitioners engage in BDSM with malicious

intent is reductive and harmful. Practising BDSM should not be understood as something people do because they actually wish to inflict harm on others.

This does not mean that simulation is the closest the SM practitioner can get to her real desires. This does not mean that the simulation of rape is a legal stand-in for the real thing. Rather, the sadomasochist can desire the simulation itself, not as an inferior copy of the real thing, not as a copy of anything at all, but as simulation qua simulation. There is a specific sexual context (Hopkins, 1994; 125).

Similarly, Truscott rejects the notion of violence in sadomasochism arguing, consensual sadomasochism has nothing to do with violence. “Consensual sadomasochism is about safely enacting sexual fantasies with a consenting partner. Violence is the epitome of non-consensuality, an act perpetrated by a predator on a victim. Despite appearances, consensual sadomasochism has nothing to do with violence” (Truscott, 1991; 50). There are elements such as safewords and limits being enforced and respected that need to be considered when looking at BDSM as a non-practitioner. The radical feminist generalisation that BDSM is used as a form of enacting violence against women is denounced in this research, as it fails to understand the nuance of actions within BDSM.

If the concept of BDSM being a simulation is applied then “one cannot claim that a sadomasochist consents to genuine powerlessness, genuine domination, or genuine submission. The SMist is instead consenting to particular simulative performances negotiated beforehand among performers with equal power and equal say” (Hopkins, 1994; 129). It is important to note BDSM exists within a patriarchal society and patriarchal structures, this is irrefutable, but to imply that therefore the act of BDSM is reproducing or validating patriarchy is reductive and ignoring the nuance of what comes into play with BDSM.

3.4 THE 4C’S

BDSM communities refer to mottos such as Safe, Sane, Consensual (SSC) then later Risk-Aware Consensual Kink (RACK) to provide foundational approaches to BDSM

practice and negotiations. SSC and RACK are understood to be pillars within the BDSM community when it comes to the practice, however though they offer a valuable deconstruction, they have their flaws and limitations. The debate around the concept of 'sane' and its ties to older pathological understandings of BDSM has been critiqued. Along with is argument that 'safe' does not encompass play that involves higher physical or psychological risk, which may be part of the motivation for participation which lead to the later development of RACK hoping to provide a more inclusive framework.

Williams et al (2014) offer a useful framework for those that do not practice BDSM to understand its foundational principles. Williams et al (2014) propose the 4C's for approaching BDSM negotiations, which consist of: care, consent, communication, and caution as they argue, "it moves beyond SSC and RACK in acknowledging the diverse ways of knowing, expressing, and relating" (Williams et al, 2014; 6). This section of my theoretical framework differs slightly from my other concepts as it is more of an empirical concept that establishes a framework used to understand the principles of BDSM, it plays a central role in contextualising my participants interactions within kink.

Care within this framework includes a level of trust and intimacy between play partners, communication is often discussed within writing on BDSM and is tied to consent as well as strongly connected to caring and caution (Williams et al, 2014; 3). And caution while also tightly interwoven with caring, communication and consent, emphasises the need to be aware of risks and possible dangers without holding as much stigma from previous pathological worries of BDSM practices. Consent is broken down into three tiers, surface-consent, which is mainstream societal understanding of yes means yes and no means no. Scene-consent, where the submissive and dominant negotiate what will occur in the scene and how either may withdraw consent during the scene, commonly done through a safeword or some form of gesture; as no does not always mean no in this context. And deep-consent where the line is harder to draw, for example "when a bottom is crying- but hasn't yet called "red" we might wonder to what extent the scene is affecting the thinking of the bottom and affecting the mental capacity to yell out "red" or to engage in cognitive consent at all?" (Williams et al; 2014; 4). It becomes very grey and can be difficult to navigate in the moment and taking time thereafter to talk and reflect is essential. While there are ambiguities when it comes to consent that does not

minimise the importance many practitioners place on checking and establishing consent before and during BDSM scenes. Rather, this acknowledgement of complexity is to open dialogue over the topic. This structural concept of the 4C's will be used when applying a foundational understanding of BDSM.

3.5 STIGMA

Social stigma is the disapproval of, or discrimination against, a person based on social characteristics that serve to distinguish them from other members of a society (Goffman; 1963). Goffman's conceptualisation of stigma offers three forms: character traits, physical stigma or stigma of group identity, and the sociological feature that runs throughout all three forms of stigmatisation is:

An individual who might have been received easily in normal social intercourse possesses a trait that can obtrude itself upon attention and turn those of us whom he meets away from him, breaking the claim that his other attributes have on us (Goffman, 1963; 5).

His use of the term "normals" (Goffman, 1963; 5) to describe those in society that are non-stigmatised will be used within my analysis. He argues stigmatised individuals live in a state questioning their acceptance on a societal community level. This notion of society determining what is normal and what is othered will be applied to practitioners of BDSM, as historically the subgroup have been othered for their kinky practices. Goffman's writing on stigmatisation motivated Link & Phelan (2001) to construct an interrelated definition of stigma that will be applied to my analysis. They argue the following components are needed to distinguish the act of stigmatising:

In the first component, people distinguish and label human differences. In the second, dominant cultural beliefs link labelled persons to undesirable characteristics—to negative stereotypes. In the third, labelled persons are placed in distinct categories so as to accomplish some degree of separation of "us" from "them." In the fourth, labelled persons experience status loss and discrimination

that lead to unequal outcomes. Finally, stigmatization is entirely contingent on access to social, economic, and political power (Link & Phelan, 2001; 367)

This concept stigma being an act of labelling with clear cultural beliefs adding an undesirable connotation that causes the distinction of 'us' and 'them' and this labelling leading to risk of status loss or discrimination fit clearly with practitioners of BDSM. And the implementation of societal stigma will fit Link & Phelan's (2001) conceptualisation.

4 METHODOLOGY

This chapter details how this research was conducted. The methods behind this qualitative research are crucial to acknowledge as they shape and create the analytical narrative. Firstly, the epistemology was established, followed by the process of recruiting participants, along with the steps taken before and after interviews, such as securing consent and how the data was handled. Thematic analysis is both defined and used to demonstrate the process behind writing the analytical narrative. Lastly, this chapter looks at reflexivity, my own positionality, and challenges of obtaining participants within the context of COVID-19.

4.1 EPISTEMOLOGY

This research is based on an understanding rooted in social constructivism, interpretivism, as discussed by Bryman (2016) and feminist standpoint theory, which provided the foundation to gain a subjective insight into the lived experiences of women that engage in a dominant-submissive power exchange. Social constructivism was applied under the notion that categories of knowledge and reality are created by social relationships and interactions. And assumed individuals had a subjective understanding of the world and the life they live, shaped by their previous experiences (Creswell, 2009). The presence and impact of social relationships and social norms creating a sense of being ‘othered’ was explored in this study. Interpretivism recognises the need to apply a different logic when studying the social world as compared to the natural order – highlighting the need to consider diverse perspectives (Bryman, 2016). Social constructivism was applied when exploring participants' understanding of their experiences as women engaging in submission, drawing on their social relationships and how that could contribute to their understanding.

Many feminist standpoint theorists have argued a structural change of scientific methodology is necessary to undo the androcentric biases within the traditional model of social science research. This standpoint serves as a critique of conventional epistemic standards, or what Haraway (1988) refers to as “the God trick” (581). The God trick

represents the idea of objectivity within research, that it is possible to observe the world from an objective point of view that is also free from bias. In opposition to this, Haraway argues for a situated knowledge, linking the researcher to the researched, as well as their location. Arguing for an embodied knowledge, situated in its cultural, historical, and social context. That the researcher should be held accountable for the research produced, and its consequences for the researched groups. Knowledge is situated, meaning the production of knowledge is intimately tied to power and must be critically examined (Stanley and Wise, 2002). Situated knowledge is acknowledging the fact that the position and experience of the researcher forms and limits the knowledge produced. Essentially stating that the position and experience of the researcher matters and should be visible in knowledge production. The researcher's perspective is always "partial, limited and located" (Haraway, 1988; 583). Reflexivity of the researcher is vital in this context, in relation to the cultural, historical, and social context as well as their relation to the participants being researched.

However, the notion of strong objectivity, which is present in feminist standpoint theory, the perceived value of a researcher from the same subjugated group or an 'insider' exploring the experiences of a group will not be applied to this study. I do not believe it is possible for a researcher to gain better objectivity even if they share experiences with the groups they are researching. The concept of one being an insider within academic research is questionable also due to the possibility that "an individual's status as an insider/outsider is fluid and can change even in the course of a single interview" (Hesse-Biber, 2014; 213). For example, a researcher may have insider status in the context of shared gender for example but may then have an outsider status in terms of class or race. Therefore, this approach of strong objectivity will not be applied from the use of feminist standpoint theory in this research. Instead, the value of situated knowledge and reflexivity of the position of the researcher will be my application of feminist standpoint theory to this research.

4.2 PRACTICALITIES

4.2.1 Sampling

Information about my study was published on a handful of social media platforms; Instagram, Facebook and FetLife, which is described as “a social networking site for kinky people” (Nichols, 2014). The published information was brief, including a short description of the aims of the research, (to explore why kinky women engage in submission), the factors participants needed to fulfil to partake (being aged 21+, from the UK and being active in BDSM in the submissive role), and my email address encouraging participants to contact me with any interest or questions on the study. Throughout the study, participants were only in contact with me to protect anonymity.

The sample consists of nine women (between the ages of 22 - 30) from England who practice BDSM, all with experience engaging in a heterosexual power exchange where they were submissive. My reasoning for seeking participants from the UK was initially due to a wider network of kinky people I was already aware of based there and already being aware of cultural community activities that can occur within BDSM spaces. Alongside the hope that not having any language barriers would make the discussion of these more sensitive topics easier for participants. Participants' involvement in BDSM varied, with some proactive in their kink communities and others simply keeping their engagement in BDSM with their partner, and they had an average of 3 years of engagement with BDSM. The sample size was guided by the aim of in-depth understanding rather than a theory-testing set of goals.

4.2.2 Interviewing

The purpose of this study was to gain more insight and understanding of women and why they engage in BDSM; making in-depth semi-structured interviews the ideal methodology to carry out. Both O'Reilly (2009) and Blommaert and Dong (2010) suggest that ethnographic interviews consist of questions with open-ended answers in order to collect information relevant to the lives of the participants. Open-ended questions tend to engage the participant to share important events in their lives and their awareness of the world around them. While an interview guide was written (appendix

2) the value of my interviews came from the fluid nature of being semi-structured, being able to probe after insightful answers provided a natural flow of conversation with participants. My ability to engage and seek further explanation on topics raised helped overall engagement and encouraged them to share anecdotes they felt were relevant to the questions asked. Letting participants explore themes they felt were important was of more value than strictly sticking to the interview guide. While probing, it was equally important to make sure not to probe too deep into sensitive areas. All participants were informed prior to, as well as during interviews, that participation is entirely voluntary and that the interview can be stopped at any time. Ultimately, in-depth semi-structured interviews were the most effective method for me to truly explore participants' understanding of their involvement in BDSM and to explore the reasons they provided.

Nine interviews were conducted in English, ranging from 45 minutes to 70 minutes. All participants signed an informed consent form before carrying out interviews and they were conducted online due to the current pandemic (COVID-19), the United Kingdom was still under lockdown at the time this study was conducted. All interviews were conducted over Zoom which came with some benefits as well as limitations. Chiumento et al (2018) highlight the issue of the researcher's inability to provide a safe space when the interview is conducted online, as well as lack of rapport in the form of misinterpreting visual cues and no eye contact (2018; 4). With this in mind, time was taken before carrying out interviews to chat with participants and provided insight into my reasoning for carrying out the research in hopes of building rapport. Due to the lockdown restricting participants to their homes, securing privacy was an issue for some participants. The topics of kink, BDSM and one's sex life are sensitive topics that are still fairly taboo to discuss. Not all participants lived alone and therefore needed to work around finding time they could have privacy to explore these topics with me. I attempted to be as flexible as possible with interview times to accommodate their living situations. Because of COVID-19 participants were familiar and comfortable with the online setting. Conducting interviews online proved to be somewhat restrictive but there were also notable benefits of utilising an online platform. I was not limited by time or costs to reach various locations within the UK due to interviews not being carried out in person which widened my sample possibilities geographically. Though it is important to

acknowledge that I may have missed out on participants that were not supplied with the technological equipment or space to carry out interviews.

4.2.3 Confidentiality & data handling

I was overt about the research, open and forthcoming about the aim of the study and what would happen to the findings and analysis (O'Reilly, 2009). It was crucial participants understood the research purpose and content before consenting. Before scheduling a time to carry out interviews all participants read and signed an informed consent form (appendix 1). These interviews explored themes of sexual pleasure, power exchange, BDSM and autonomy, many are still considered taboo topics and due to the nature of in-depth interviews participants shared fairly personal information with me. With this in mind, content from interviews were not shared with anyone else, the handling of data was carried out in a way that best-protected participants' privacy. Making this clear in the consent form and through brief discussion before the interview meant participants felt more comfortable before exploring these themes with me.

All interviews were carried out on zoom (participants had the option to have their camera on or off based on their preference)¹ and an audio recording was collected from each interview to transcribe from. All participants were aware of this and agreed to their interview being recorded, once transcribed all audio files were deleted. All of the transcripts were made anonymous besides the age of the participants, all personal information (such as race, hometown, and names) were removed, again all participants were aware and had agreed to these terms. Alias names were provided for all nine participants in their transcripts to guarantee anonymity².

4.3 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

In order to craft a narrative from the data, thematic analysis was applied. This method identifies, organises, and offers “insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2012; 57).

¹ Eight participants carried out the interview with their camera on, one participant felt more comfortable with their camera off.

² April, Brooke, Chloe, Dawn, Eve, Fae, Gwen, Hope and Ila

This first step was transcribing interviews into detailed scripts. All interviews were audio-recorded, then transcribed orthographically, reproducing all spoken words and sounds, including hesitations, long pauses- indicated by (pause) and strong emphasis- indicated by italicising words or phrases, edits made to the transcript by me were indicated by the use of an ellipsis (...). As well as the many phrases of “you know”, “like”, and “urm”. Thus, the “messiness of everyday talk” (Devault, 1990; 109) and the rawness of participants’ spoken language was preserved. This was done due to the argument from Braun & Clarke (2012) that having an expressive, mostly unedited transcript can make room for deeper analysis and interpretation when applying thematic analysis.

The approach to analysing the data was both inductive and deductive, certain theories were established before carrying out interviews and were used to structure the focus of the interview guide and interviews that followed. The research was based on exploring the opinions and experiences of submissive women around these topics such as the concept of power and autonomy within a dominant-submissive dynamic. However, while coding the interviews, some codes were established by my participants’ language and concepts; others invoked conceptual and theoretical frameworks I had established before carrying out interviews (Braun & Clark, 2012). These codes were collected and reviewed to create themes that have been explored in the analysis chapter.

4.4 REFLEXIVITY

Due to the nature of my research, constant awareness, and reflection on my position as a researcher exploring the topics of sexuality and kink was vital, “research concerned with subjectivities requires a great deal of self-awareness on the part of researchers, including an awareness of the limits to self-knowledge” (Gorman-Murray et al, 2016; 111). Situated knowledge is a core concept that was applied throughout this study. In order to situate the knowledge created through this research, there needs to be transparency and reflexivity on my position as a cis, queer, middle-class, British, kinky woman currently involved in higher education conducting this research. My experience and position that comes from these intersections of said social groups naturally impacted the way I perceived the data and interpretations I carried out. With this awareness, I

attempted to stay reflexive on my position in relation to previous research, my interviews and analysing of my empirical data.

Going back to the insider/outsider debate, I do not believe I had any heightened sense of objectivity with my exposure and experience in kink. Rather than trying to find assurance that I could rely on an insider status, I focused on building rapport with participants, being aware of the inevitable power dynamic of the interviews and focusing on the content presented in each interview. I was transparent with all participants of my motivations and interest in exploring this topic academically, due to the problematic research conducted in the past and the kink communities overall marginalised status in society. Said transparency was within my informed consent form as well as a brief discussion that occurred before interviews. With hopes this transparency would ease possible worries or hesitation to be up-front and open with their experiences as submissive women in kink.

4.5 LIMITATIONS

There are forums and platforms online that accommodate space for BDSM practitioners to go to and establish a sort of online community, these spaces were my first approach to find participants, but I quickly found many platforms curated for kinky people are very apprehensive to academic research or researchers trying to find participants through them. This complicated my search for participants as many people keep their activity in kink private. Also due to COVID-19, I lost the possibility of attending events in person to network and meet other active members in the kink community. In the end, I found nine participants that fit my requirements, but it was a more complicated process having to go to more ‘vanilla’ spaces to promote my study.

My participants were all from the UK, while having interviews online benefited me to speak to a wider range of women from various parts of England, conducting online interviews also restricted my ability to build rapport. And the online element left me at the mercy of Wi-Fi connections which occasionally required me to ask participants to repeat their answers which interrupted the flow of conversation.

5 ANALYSIS

This chapter details the findings from the nine interviews carried out. The analysis consists of three subsections, reflecting the three research questions formulated in the introduction. The first explores participants' justification for exploring BDSM, how they feel when in a submissive role and the principles they frame their engagement on. This leads to participants reflection of exploring BDSM while navigating feminist dispositions and the nuance that comes with that, touching on autonomy and the difference between BDSM and abuse. The third analytical section is followed by an exploration of social stigma and its impact on participants and how they believe it should be challenged.

5.1 WHY DO YOU SUBMIT?

The analysis begins focusing on the motivation participants found to engage in BDSM, exploring how they feel when in the dominant-submissive dynamic, the principles they base their play on and how negotiation is a pillar for many of them when interacting within BDSM.

5.1.1 Feelings

There is a lot of value to be found from exploring the emotions felt by practitioners when engaging in the dominant-submissive dynamic. Erotic power exchange is defined by a situation where partners from their own free will and choice, incorporate a power exchange element to their lovemaking or wider relationship (Langdridge & Butt, 2005; 69). This analytical lens was applied to all participants sharing their experience in the dominant-submissive dynamic.

For many participants, April, Brooke, and Chloe especially, the opportunity to let go and temporarily relinquish control was deeply appealing as they felt they were 'control freaks' in their day-to-day life. They enjoy having space to dominate and take charge in aspects of their life, such as work or even just their day to day, this concept of feeling very in control and in charge of how they carry themselves is important to them.

However, having this clear feeling of control and responsibility meant when in the dominant-submissive dynamic they felt they then had space to finally let go and relax in a safe way. Part of the appeal in engaging in a power exchange comes from knowing they have the power to temporarily hand over:

That's the one place where I do allow myself to let go entirely. And I think for that reason that's the appeal in it for me... I enjoy being able to take a step back, I enjoy having, even if it's 5 minutes, even if it's 20 minutes, even if it's an hour in a week where I get to just take a back seat from that, and instead let myself be the one who has things done to them rather than taking lead. (April)

April shared this idea of feeling free and safe to temporarily let someone else guide the scene. There was a clear association with pleasure and excitement when various participants shared how they felt when in a submissive role. This feeling of safety ties into the foundational understanding of BDSM which is the 4C's (Williams et al, 2014) which consist of care, communication, concern, and consent. All four intersect and play a role to facilitate this feeling for April to be able to "let go entirely" as there have likely been steps to communicate, consent is present, and care and concern are active factors her partner has in mind while she is in this submissive role. This idea of 'letting go' was also brought up by Brooke, Eve, Gwen, and Ila, sharing the notion that they were temporarily letting go of responsibility, worry, the need to perform and could just be present in that moment of submission knowing someone else was calling the shots and leading the scene. Ila reflected on the way she would feel when taking on a submissive role in a power exchange and pleasure and intimacy were at the core of it for her:

You almost feel like you're being worshipped, like, they're just focused on you and your pleasure and what your body is doing and that's all that matters in that moment. (Ila)

All participants made some reference to pleasure serving as a motivator to engage in the dominant-submissive dynamic. Be it from the satisfaction of serving their partner or being the sole focus of their partner's attention; the element of pleasure was a foundational factor occurring in their power exchange. This reflects conclusions made from Rehor's (2015) study exploring sexual behaviours of women in kink, arguing these

women engaged in kink behaviours for their own enjoyment (Rehor, 2015; 833). Fae touched on her exploration in BDSM being motivated from wanting to reclaim and repair her sexuality and understanding of herself after facing personal hardships. For her, creating a space where she could establish her pleasure and explore on her terms left her quite fulfilled:

It got me through a very dark place because I was being pleased. And I was bringing pleasure to other people. And I was doing it on my terms, in my way, in a way that excited me. And I don't know what more you could want than that, really. (Fae)

Excited, enthralled, lively, purposeful... as a submissive, it's just very empowering. Like, often people wouldn't think that. But for me, it was the most sort of enriching, empowering thing. (Fae)

The use of terms such as “satisfying”, “empowering”, “gratifying” and “exciting” which were found in various interviews, reflect findings from Faccio et al (2014) study exploring sexual pleasure with BDSM players. Through their interviews, they found women were more likely to use similar positive adjectives to describe their sexual practices within kink (Faccio et al, 2014; 757). While Fae engaged in relinquishing control to her partner, she made no reference to it feeling oppressive or belittling to her personhood, “*I was doing it on my terms in a way that excited me*”. This idea of strategic power (Foucault, 1996) is relevant here, as Fae had entered her submissive role aware that it was a temporary exchange of power and was a mutually motivated decision. Chloe expressed the range of feelings she experiences when in a power exchange:

I think it's really beautiful to do that, and then within that, there's growth and sensuality and pleasure and pain, and it's kind of, it's almost like this little microcosm of the whole human experience. It's really lovely. (Chloe)

“*Growth and sensuality and pleasure and pain*” covers the breadth of experiences one may have when in a dominant-submissive dynamic. Due to the wide range of activity that can occur within BDSM, depending on your interests there is room to experience all said emotions. Ila and Hope both commented on a clear feeling of anticipation and

excitement when being submissive in a scene. Both wanted to be clear that said anticipation was not a negative emotion, but instead almost a gleeful nervousness for what a scene with their dominant may involve.

It's a kind of like an anticipated excitement... like how you feel before you get on a rollercoaster. You want to do it and you get that nervous excitement. (Ila)

She explained the feelings came from not knowing what the scene would consist of (within her established boundaries) and knowing it was not up to her to dictate the direction of the scene, and that causing anticipation, rather it being “*anticipated excitement*” because she knew her dominant knows her wants and limits and would work within those guidelines to create a pleasurable experience for both of them. Ila’s linking of her excited anticipation feeling similar to how one may feel riding a rollercoaster echoes the example used by Hopkins (1994) when she argues the concept of BDSM practitioners seeking the simulation and the thrill that can come with such activities like surrendering control and temporarily giving your power over to someone else rather than simply replicating oppressive dynamics.

Through exploring participants' involvement in the dominant-submissive dynamic many reflected on the activities within BDSM they found appealing. This next section is dedicated to providing insight into an appeal that does not involve masochism- receiving pain for sexual pleasure. As a lot of academic writing focuses on sadomasochism, often forgetting to mention that many forms of practising BDSM does not need to involve the infliction of pain. Ila’s reflection of what BDSM means to her sums it up well:

It is a consensual power exchange, it doesn't always have to involve physical impact, your play could be based on being restrained and tickled. (Ila)

This notion that BDSM is about sexual arousal in direct response to pain, suffering and humiliation is “a common oversimplification” (Kleinplatz & Diamond, 2014; 248). There are many different forms of play that can occur within the frame of BDSM such as “bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadism and masochism” (Faccio et al, 2014; 752), none of these elements, outside of sadism and masochism need to have pain present. While a lot of research tends to focus on sadomasochism, it is

important to remember different forms of power exchange occur in BDSM. Some will not involve any physical pain at all, and this is why erotic power exchange (Langdridge & Butt, 2005) is the approach taken for conceptualising the dominant-submissive dynamic. A consensual exchange of power has occurred in all participants' experience, pain however does not need to serve as a key factor in their power exchange. Chloe and Hope did not feel as if pain was a present factor in their dominant-submissive dynamic.

It's not really about pain or impact for me, it's more restraint that appeals to me. (Hope)

Hope explained the use of restraints and bondage can still evoke a power imbalance and have one feeling submissive and at the will of their partner, but this does not need to be done in a way that causes her pain. Equally not everyone is interested in the sensations that can come from physical impact. The presence of physical impact is not referenced with erotic power exchange (Langdridge & Butt, 2005), the power exchange itself is the appeal, and the way said power exchange may manifest will vary from couple to couple. While April, Brooke, Eve, Gwen, and Ila made comments on enjoying the act of impact, choking, or spanking for example, it is equally important to provide cases where masochism does not play a part in all practitioners' appeal to be submissive. Chloe also expressed into her appeal when it comes to BDSM, mentioning the psychological element of submission is more appealing than the pain side of things:

I think there's a psychological element... I'm not super into the pain side of things. I don't mind a bit of it. But that's not how I like things as much. And so for me, the mental headspace of it is really lovely... I think it's the psychological experience or the mental experience, rather than the physical experience for me. (Chloe)

There is no one way to practice BDSM, outside of the framework of the 4C's (Williams et al, 2014) while pain or physical impact is a valid practice within BDSM, it is not the only one. There is a range of appeal within BDSM that submissive's may seek when engaging in the dominant-submissive dynamic.

5.1.2 Principles

While there are a range of personal principles or values one may hold when engaging in BDSM, interviews revealed a pattern of themes of trust, respect, communication, and comfort. Without certain principles being present, participants argued they would not want to partake in the dominant-submissive dynamic. By exploring the principles participants need it offers some insight on how these women can engage in the dominant-submissive power exchange. Dawn best expressed the values shared by many participants:

Trust and communication. I think that they're, they're really the key things in any relationship, kinky or vanilla. And I think that they should be reflected in sex all the time. And I think BDSM is a really good way of proving that. I think, you know, you can't really have good BDSM sex, if you don't have that trust and that communication. (Dawn)

Trust was a principle that was shared in every single interview in some capacity, it was paramount to all participants that they had a secure sense of trust in their partner in order to then submit to them. The presence of trust and communication is not exclusive to BDSM sex, as Dawn mentions both trust and communication are “*key things in any relationship, kinky or vanilla*”. Rather than those being factors that only appear in BDSM, it is more that the context of BDSM and the vulnerability that comes from surrendering control or being in control of someone else requires open communication and trust in all parties to effectively be carried out. Alongside trust and communication, the principle of respect was a clear consistency throughout interviews. Fae contextualised it concisely:

All of my partners were feminists; respect is a big factor. You know, I was never going into it with someone who I knew was mistreating my submission or viewing it in a way that they shouldn't have been, that was very important to me. For them to understand that we were still equals. (Fae)

The most important aspect of this quote is “*for them to understand that we are still equals*”. It embodies a fundamental approach to BDSM, that even though there is an

exchange of power in a scene, “the preliminary negotiations are conducted by equals, regardless of how the power will be distributed later on” (Truscott, 1991; 49). Both the dominant and submissive negotiate the scene and leave the scene as equals, and this is present in Foucault’s (1996) argument of strategic power within the context of BDSM. In a setting like this where the roles of dominant and submissive are fixed throughout the scene, it is vital that all parties are aware that they are playing a role as part of a scene or game. Both parties are equals and temporarily engage in the subversion of power “either the rules are transgressed, or there is an agreement, either explicit or tacit, that makes them aware of certain boundaries” (Foucault, 1996; 388). It is this shared understanding that changes the context of power from being oppressive to being strategic. And the way Fae establishes this confidence in her partner(s) is by taking the time to communicate and build trust before exploring this dynamic. Eve also offered insight into her approach to making sure her values are upheld when participating in a dominant-submissive dynamic:

I have certain morals with things. And so, I make sure that any BDSM acts I engage in don't compromise those morals... to make sure that I don't feel demoralised. Make sure that I don't feel like someone's taking advantage of me or forcing me to try something that I wouldn't agree with or that I don't feel comfortable doing. Make sure that they're also getting pleasure and that they're enjoying what we've agreed to. (Eve)

There are various factors touched on here, Eve’s awareness of comfort and need to personally be interested and motivated to engage is important. Her participation in BDSM is firstly motivated by her wants and is wary of those that may try and push her into activities that do not appeal to her, personal comfort is key. Alongside this need to feel in control of her decisions on what to engage with, along with consideration that her partner also enjoys what they do. Erotic power exchange again fits this approach well, as it is made clear that “as long as it is informed consensual, safe, sane and voluntary it is called erotic power exchange. If any or all of these four elements are missing, it is called abuse” (Langdrige & Butt, 2005; 70). Eve is careful, along with other participants, to be aware of her motivations to engage in BDSM, making sure her motivations are established in her best interest.

5.1.3 Negotiation

Cross & Matheson (2006) argue that a power imbalance is a core element of the dominant-submissive dynamic and it occurs “after clear communication and mutually approved agreement” (Cross & Matheson, 2006; 157). The importance of negotiation was apparent from all interviews, as having trust in their partner was fundamental before exploring BDSM with them. The need to communicate prior, during and after the scene was a common theme. Brooke claimed she does not find value in being vague when it comes to sex, especially when engaging in BDSM:

I have very point-blank conversations about sex and what we like that we don't like, what you want to try what you don't want to try, what you've done before what you haven't done before, as well as what they need... I think it's very important to have an open dialogue. (Brooke)

She went on to explain that being open in these discussions was vital due to wanting and needing to be aware of what their partner wanted, if they were compatible and if they would be someone, she could be comfortable enough to submit to. Without that “open dialogue” there would leave room to doubt and worry which would weaken Brooke’s sense of trust in her partner. Chloe echoed these sentiments on how often her and her partner communicate:

We talk about things extensively after every scene. We then go and have dinner, usually. And then after we've eaten, we then talk about what we've done that time. What worked, what didn't work, what things that he did kind of off the cuff, but still within our framework of things that we do. How did that feel? How did that not feel, you know, things like that. And that kind of then informs what happens next time... we just talk about shit all the time. We just never stop really. (Chloe)

It is valuable to note that communication is in constant flow, it can occur before, during or after a scene. The nature of conversation does not have to be serious and heavy all of the time, but the need to check in and reflect on a scene holds significant value to Brooke and Chloe. Again, having this environment that encourages communication and reflection is key for establishing an erotic power exchange as “there is wide recognition

of the importance of clearly negotiated boundaries to protect both parties” (Langdridge & Butt, 2005; 71) which all participants addressed in some capacity. Other participants such as Hope, and Dawn emphasised that establishing a space that encouraged open communication was vital.

Keeping up that communication before, during and after is definitely something that reassures me, and makes me feel comfortable and at ease. And that's super important. Because if I wasn't comfortable with them, I just wouldn't be enjoying it. And there's absolutely no point. I wouldn't do it. (Hope)

Hope made it clear, knowing there is open communication between their interactions helps her feel “*comfortable and at ease*” there would be a large lack of assurance without being able to check in regularly with her partner, and without that level of comfort, there is no point engaging in the dominant-submissive dynamic. She needs to get to a stage where she feels comfortable enough to let go and relinquish control, the right work needs to be done before, during and after to assure her that her partner will honour the power being given within the scene. Dawn touched on the need to feel safe, and to understand the approach her partner would want to take within the structure of BDSM before beginning to engage in it with them:

Setting guidelines on our comfort levels. And also talking about what level of pain to the restriction that you want, like, there's things that I want to define first, because BDSM can be about being restrained, or it can be about being pain, about lots of different things. And I think discussing that beforehand, is very, like, I need that. Otherwise, I will not feel safe. And if I'm not being safe, then actually can't enjoy it. (Dawn)

The point that BDSM can be about “*lots of different things*” is an important one to make. Be it bondage, discipline, dominance-submission, or sadomasochism, and assumptions should not be made when exploring them, open upfront communication on expectations and wants are factors that establish a feeling of safety for Dawn. Due to the wide scope that can be explored within BDSM it is essential for all practitioners involved to negotiate about the processes involved in this exchange so that BDSM experience is mutually pleasurable and safe (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006). Gwen offers another

perspective highlighting why being comfortable with communicating is important within a scene:

Your boundaries might change during a scene; you might find that you're not enjoying it. So always talking and always making sure your partner feels that they can talk to you about it is so important. (Gwen)

While work is often done before a scene to establish one's limits and wants, Gwen's point of limits possibly changing or shifting during a scene is a valid one. The right environment needs to be established to guarantee both parties would feel heard if they spoke up on changes during a scene. April and Dawn also reflected on this and gave examples of their comfort shifting unexpectedly during a scene and having their partner react instantly, stopping or adjusting the scene to cater to their needs. This references Foucault's (1997) argument that both the dominant and submissive can "fail" the game by not being able to meet the needs of their partner. This is an example of a dominant winning said game by adjusting their activity to suit the needs of their submissive during the scene.

5.2 NAVIGATING FEMINISM AND BDSM

There are factions of feminist ideology that hold polarising opinions over the topic of BDSM. Among them are two positions, BDSM-critical (radical) feminists and sex-positive (liberal) feminists. Analytically, a critical sex-positive approach will be taken, focusing on exploring the opinions my participants hold. I will not be arguing that engaging in BDSM is a feminist act, but rather offer counterarguments to the idea that BDSM is inherently harmful or oppressive towards women, through the opinions of the women I interviewed. This will be done by discussing the topics of patriarchy, autonomy, controlled powerlessness and BDSM vs abuse.

5.2.1 Patriarchy

The presence of patriarchy was raised in multiple interviews. When participants were asked how they felt they navigated patriarchy alongside their interest in submission,

Dawn provided insight into what she feels is the biggest difference between patriarchal values within traditional sex and BDSM sex:

Patriarchal values towards sex are not the same as BDSM at all. Patriarchal values about sex is thinking sex is about the man. I think having a submissive role where it's very, very clear that it's about your pleasure, and as someone who's dominating you, because they want to have control over your pleasure, rather than because they want to do whatever they want without any regard for your bodily autonomy is a different thing. So that distinction is very important.
(Dawn)

There is a common societal assumption that being submissive is equivalent to being passive or weak, but this does not necessarily apply in the context of BDSM. From an outside perspective, the activities within the dominant-submissive dynamic with a male dominant and female submissive may look oppressive, but this is not the case in most practices. Referring back to the 4Cs (Williams et al, 2014), consent and communication specifically challenge this notion of oppression. For some submissive's, service to their dominant is a big part of their attraction to the role, while there are other submissive's that have their pleasure centred in all that is done within this dynamic. *"It is very, very clear it's about your pleasure"* and having *"someone who's dominating you because they want to have control over your pleasure"* are the key points here. Relinquishing control does not mean that it is oppressive by default; for some, it is very liberating to have someone solely invested and focused on providing you pleasure. While patriarchal values do not need to exist within BDSM sex, the argument that patriarchy is present structurally is raised by Chloe:

Kink doesn't happen in a vacuum from everything else. So you can't just go, 'oh, there's absolutely no patriarchy in our play'. I mean, I kneel in front of a man, you know, I do things that he tells me to do. And on the surface of it, you'd think it's like, really patriarchal, but it is not. We are aware of it and we're critical. There is mutual respect, it isn't coming from an oppressive place... I think you need everyone to be aware of it, or you need to talk about it if it's a thing that

pops up... As soon as it starts becoming unpleasant, or it makes you feel icky, then that's wrong, and you need to, you know, address it. (Chloe)

This notion that “*kink doesn't happen in a vacuum*” is a valid point. It would be unrealistic to claim that there is absolutely no patriarchal presence in BDSM, as patriarchy overlaps with countless areas of life. To acknowledge that BDSM exists within, and is touched by, the same patriarchal culture as everything else is not to claim that ethically practised BDSM is the same phenomenon as abuse (Downing, 2013; 95). To simply imply that female submission is patriarchal is reductive and simplistic. Hopkins's (1994) concept of simulation not replication is relevant here. While the acts may appear to be oppressive and patriarchal on the surface, there is nuance that needs to be applied when viewing these acts through the lens of simulation. “Simulation implies that SM selectively replays surface patriarchal behaviours onto a different contextual field. That contextual field makes a profound difference” (Hopkins, 1994; 123). Chloe is aware that she is taking on a role within a scene, in a space of fantasy rather than reality, and she clarifies this: “*it isn't coming from an oppressive approach*”. Again, Foucault's theorisation of strategic power resurfaces here. Oppressive, patriarchal forces are not present or applied to this context, rather patriarchal ideas are simulated, and that is indicated through the fact that “core features of real patriarchal violence, coercive violence, are absent” (Hopkins, 1994; 123). Furthermore, Chloe and her partner are critical of and communicate about these elements; her point on addressing it if you ever find yourself feeling uncomfortable, or the experience becomes unpleasant, is essential to maintaining a dynamic that is mutually beneficial for all parties. Oppression is again referenced by Brooke when reflecting on her thoughts of patriarchy and her interest in submission:

To me, it's not oppression, I'm not being forced to do it, I've chosen to engage in this act, and I know at the same time I know that I don't have to engage in that. I choose to because I enjoy it and it is pleasurable to me, but I can live without it. (Brooke)

Brooke is confident in her active decision to engage in BDSM, as it benefits her and gives her pleasure, but she would feel fine leaving it if she found that it no longer

fulfilled her. Again, the idea of not feeling oppressed arises; there is a clear element of choice for Brooke, which offers satisfaction within her participation in the dominant-submissive dynamic. Fae also noted that she no longer engages in BDSM as she no longer feels the need to, but while she did, it served a great purpose for her.

5.2.2 Controlled powerlessness

The phrase ‘controlled powerlessness’ arose from April’s interview when she was describing her understanding and engagement with autonomy in the context of a power exchange. She controlled her powerless position as a submissive, as she was the one to establish the framework that the scene was based upon.

I am dictating what I will engage in and what I won’t engage in. So there is still a great deal of sexual autonomy there. Negotiated sexual powerlessness doesn’t mean you haven’t got the autonomy. (April)

“Negotiated sexual powerlessness” is the key here, showing that there is an element of losing power sexually by handing dominance over to her partner, but it is consensual; it is mutually approached and determined. In this case, surface-consent (Williams et al, 2014) is being exercised; it is very black and white in establishing what she will and won’t do. April argued that her autonomy was present in her decision making, in establishing her boundaries, describing this as controlled powerlessness.

The link between consent and autonomy was present in various interviews. Hope felt that autonomy in BDSM was a given due to the foundational element of consent:

I think consent is the pillar of BDSM. Without it, nothing happens... I know if I would ever want things to stop, I have the power to decide that, even at my most submissive. I don’t actually lose my power. (Hope)

Hope touches on scene-consent (Williams et al, 2014). Typically, play partners will establish a safeword or gesture to indicate withdrawal of consent during a scene, whereas she explains that “*even at my most submissive*”, she still has the right to withdraw consent and regain control of the situation. Knowing that she has power to end a scene and, in turn, step away from her submissive role, reflects Foucault’s argument of

strategic power (1996). Both parties are aware that their exchange of power is contextual to the scene and establish boundaries to indicate the end of said power dynamic. It comes across as if it were a game or illusion; the power being exchanged is negotiated and temporary (Foucault, 1997), it occurs in a space unique from other forms of power exchange. Ila echoes the sentiments shared by April and Hope when considering how her autonomy plays a part in her power exchange:

I am the one establishing how far we go and how much I can take. (Ila)

Linking back to the principle of trust, Ila notes her confidence in her partner respecting her word and adjusting or ending a scene entirely if she were to ask. She is the one determining what she will and will not engage in and she gives her partner freedom to explore and dominate the situation within said guidelines.

Chloe shared the internal conflict she sometimes feels when navigating her autonomy in the context of the dominant-submissive power exchange:

Sometimes, my desire to kind of push back on the patriarchy and, and stuff like that, like every now and again, there's this thing that goes off in my brain that goes, 'hey, what, what the hell are you doing?'... And I always land on the conclusion that actually my autonomy and my expression is my choice, and mine alone. And so if this is how I have my autonomy in this aspect of things, and this is my choice, and it always is, if there's ever anything I don't like, it stops, and that's that and the same for him too. And so he has autonomy, and I have autonomy. (Chloe)

Chloe shares her struggles with balancing her feminist standpoint alongside her interests in being submissive within the context of BDSM. She concludes that she holds autonomy within a power exchange, as her expression is “*my choice, and mine alone*”. Weiss (2011) explored the difficulty that some women face reconciling their feminism and BDSM practices and found that they often rely on liberal political components to justify their positions: “the majority of my interviewees resolved any potential conflict between feminism and BDSM with a liberal analysis, arguing SM is consensual, that SM practices and roles are freely chosen, and that SM is empowering and thus

compatible with feminism” (Weiss, 2011; 164). The balance between holding a feminist standpoint and engaging in BDSM is not unusual. It is an assumption that those who practice BDSM are somehow anti-feminist or do not subscribe to feminist beliefs, but Cross & Matheson’s (2006) study found that BDSM participants are no more likely than the general population to hold anti-feminist beliefs and/or to support conservative gender ideology.

5.2.3 BDSM vs abuse

It is important to state that, in this thesis, BDSM is expressed and understood as a practice that is based on the 4C’s (Williams et al, 2014): communication, care, consent and caution. Activity that occurs outside of this framework is not considered BDSM, but abuse.

There's a huge difference between abuse and BDSM. Absolutely huge difference. BDSM is something you do willingly (pause) with genuine want. It's something that you benefit from, for me, it was hugely empowering and liberating... it's willing, it's cooperative. You know, just because there's power-play involved, and sometimes there's pain, or there's control or bondage involved doesn't mean that it's not permitted doesn't mean that it's not willing. (Fae)

The voluntary factor is highlighted by Jozifkova (2013), who has written on contextualising BDSM and abuse. Fae has found engaging with submission to be empowering and liberating; while experiences may not be universal, her argument that BDSM is something you do “willingly” is valuable to emphasis. For her, the distinguishing factor between BDSM and abuse is one's personal motivations, which are then explored with partners in a “cooperative” way. Brooke clearly differentiates abuse from BDSM:

The big difference to me regarding BDSM and abuse is in the difference of expressing what you would like to explore versus being told what will happen without your consideration in mind. One is wanted, the other is forced. (Brooke)

The idea that “*one is wanted, the other is forced*” is a clear distinction for Brooke in regard to abuse and BDSM. There is also nuance within a power dynamic which is important to consider; sometimes, a submissive may be more open to exploring activities that their dominant wants to try. However, this should never be forced or coerced by either party. The presence of hard and soft limits offers a clear framework for what may and may not be explored, which supports Foucault’s (1996) conceptualisation of strategic power. A soft limit indicates an activity that may need to be explored more slowly, but is something one is open to trying, such as anal. A hard limit is something that is never to be considered or explored, such as whipping. Every individual, dominant and submissive, will have their own set of hard and soft limits. Play partners will know to respect hard limits and explore soft limits at their partner’s pace. Even when soft limits are explored, it is through mutual negotiation and agreement. To return to the 4C’s (Williams et al, 2014), all four are applicable here; communication between partners, care and caution when exploring soft limits, and consent to anchor the whole interaction. Eve referenced the importance of personal limits when engaging in a power exchange:

I think there do need to be personal limits within how you do BDSM to also protect yourself from something going too far or you possibly being coerced.
(Eve)

This returns to the theme of negotiation, as both parties will likely have both soft and hard limits. Before engaging in play, Eve argues that making such limits clear beforehand is important, while respecting said limits helps to establish a difference between abuse and BDSM. Foucault (1996) emphasises the need for boundaries to create a force of power that is strategic, rather than oppressive. There must be clear guidelines and understanding from both parties concerning what the power exchange can consist of before moving forward. A mutual understanding of the power exchange as ‘play’ which can also be ended by either party at any time establishes a space for power to be more fluid. While an exchange of power is occurring, it is under a clearly contextualised framework, where both parties still have equal power to end the exchange. Hope argues that there is a need for nuance to be applied to understanding activity within BDSM that involves more controversial elements, like pain:

Even if it is like physical, and if there's pain being inflicted, and stuff like that, I don't think it's right to generalise that as violence against women. I think with BDSM, nuance is so central. (Hope)

This argument that “*nuance is so central*” reflects Hopkins' suggestion of simulation rather than replication. The actions may display patriarchal or violent behaviour, but it is not as simple as replicating said behaviours. Many practitioners refer to their engagement in kink as ‘scenes’ when in their roles, and this notion of BDSM being a performance with its own contextual background. There may be physical pain or activity that is seen as abusive from the outside, but Hopkins argues that these activities are not a ‘stand in’ for the real thing (Hopkins, 1994); it is the simulation in and of itself that is appealing to the practitioner and suggesting that they engage in it as a ‘second best’ to the ‘real thing’ (abuse) is reductive and fails to consider the specific sexual context. When considering the concern that BDSM could be used as a form of violence, Truscott (1991) argues that the frameworks embedded in BDSM negate abuse and coercion. This is due to the presence of safewords and limits, mutual understanding that both parties are playing a role and that “consensual sadomasochism is about safely enacting sexual fantasies with a consenting partner” (Truscott, 1991; 50). This understanding of consent applies to surface and scene consent (Williams et al) and without said mutual consent, the engagement in question no longer fulfils the framework of BDSM, it is abuse. All participants referred to abuse as separate from BDSM, as their understanding of BDSM was structured around the 4C’s (Williams et al). If any of these were lacking, the context no longer fulfilled their understanding of BDSM. Ila shared an example of an interaction she felt lacked these steps:

I've had a one-night stand just spit in my mouth out of nowhere, no conversation or check if I would actually enjoy or even consent to it, it's things like that I find messed up... it feels like some men have this idea that BDSM is something done to women without actually talking about what you're about to do. That isn't BDSM, that's abuse. (Ila)

In relation to the 4C’s, the act of spitting in Ila’s mouth was done without her consent, without regard for her care or concern, and with no prior communication. She shares

that to her, this is abuse; the clear lack of these factors put her in a situation where she did not approve the act to be carried out. The idea of BDSM as “*something done to women without actually talking about what you’re about to do*” is a misconception that Ila worries many who do not practise BDSM have. In her case, as with other participants, negotiating and establishing boundaries are fundamental steps before engaging in a power dynamic. Engaging in rougher sex or acts that are kinkier, such as choking or spanking, without prior negotiation is not classified as BDSM to Ila; it is an indication of abuse. Fundamentally, Williams et al (2014) argue that without the 4C’s being present, the act carried out would not fulfil their understanding of BDSM.

5.3 IMPACT OF SOCIAL TABOO

Misconceptions and stereotypes of BDSM practitioners arose from various interviews, along with addressing the impact felt as a result of taboo and stigma around BDSM. The impact of social taboo will be explored through the association of women and submission, men and submission, the value of education and how to challenge social stigma.

5.3.1 Association of women and submission

When considering the dominant-submissive dynamic within a heterosexual context, a default assumption may be made that the woman is the submissive and the man is the dominant, especially when considering depictions of this dynamic in popular media (mainly film and TV). While various participants touched on this topic, Dawn’s arguments were centred:

I really do think that there's a really unhealthy attitude towards female submission, which is that firstly, that it's normal, as in that how sex should be like, sex should be female submissiveness. I think that comes from pornography a lot. And secondly, that it's about the pleasure of the dom. I think that's a common, and a huge misconception. Because having sex purely for the pleasure of one person isn't my perception of what BDSM should be about. (Dawn)

Dawn touched on a lot of points here, arguing that she finds that people tend to assume female submissiveness in sex is a given, which she denounces. While some women may enjoy sexual submissiveness, it is not a default position in her opinion. She argued that patriarchy plays a part in this construction of womanhood being linked to submissiveness, but while this is an assumption, it is a “*huge misconception*”. By making this assumption of the female submissive, the woman’s space to consent or negotiate that role is removed, which fails to fulfil BDSM being structured on the 4C’s (Williams et al, 2014) of communication, care, concern, and consent. She went on to express her opinion on the topic of pleasure and how that is often misconstrued by the assumption of submission being a position that women take by default:

I think that people who think that being submissive is a female role, are used to the heteronormative stereotype of; women please the man and the man takes what they want... I think healthy BDSM relationships are a lot to do with the pleasure of being a sub, as well as being a dom. (Dawn)

Pleasure is a clear theme in Dawn’s interest in BDSM, her pleasure first and foremost. Her argument that those who assume submissiveness is inherently a female role basing it in “*heteronormative stereotypes*” is interesting, especially the point of understanding pleasure and who is expected to give and receive. While expectations and roles may vary within the dominant-submissive dynamic (depending on the people involved), the pleasure of both parties should be taken into consideration. This idea of mutual investment reflects Foucault’s (1997) argument on how the dominant and submissive can both ‘fail’ the ‘game’ of sadomasochism if they are unable to fulfil the needs or expectations of one another (Foucault, 1997; 152). In Dawn’s opinion, assuming women are inherently submissive often applies to the wider societal understanding of submission as being synonymous with weakness or passiveness, often disregarding her pursuit of pleasure. One party being submissive in this dynamic does not mean their needs are not considered.

5.3.2 Men and submission

Gwen, Ila, April, and Dawn all pointed out that there is a significant number of men who engage with submission in BDSM in a heterosexual dynamic, either from personal

experience from having partners who switched roles or having friends within BDSM spaces. Alongside challenging the assumption that submission is inherently feminine, they shared their thoughts on men who submit:

I've met plenty of men who are submissive, and I don't think they should be excluded from that general understanding of submission. (Gwen)

Gwen argued that submission should not be understood as a role dominated by one gender, because in assuming submission is inherently feminine, others are excluded from said practice. April shared her experiences with men that submit in a heterosexual relationship:

My partner also enjoys being submissive in the bedroom. This notion that submission is inherently feminine is ridiculous and ignores the many men who engage in submission. (April)

Ila also touched on occasionally switching roles with her partner and noted knowing people who identified as non-binary and who often engaged in submission. It was clear to these participants that the act of submission was not tied to one gender but was a fluid role that could be taken on by anyone. Dawn summarised best:

So many guys love being subs... if you only think that's being submissive as a female role, you're not talking to enough men about their sex lives. (Dawn)

5.3.3 Education is essential

The last few decades have shown a rise in BDSM being presented in popular media, offering greater exposure to the subcultures and practices within it. E.L James's trilogy, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, has been noted as a big social shift in bringing BDSM into the mainstream. However, there have been many critiques from kinky and non-kinky audiences on how this was done, either the more radical argument that its depiction confirms BDSM is abusive and oppressive, or practitioners arguing the trilogy's depiction was misinformed and failed to represent common practice within the community (Downing, 2013). While bringing BDSM into popular media brings more collective awareness of alternative ways to engage sexually, bringing the practices of

BDSM into mainstream spaces without offering representative insight into the practices can project a false idea of what BDSM is or comprises. Many participants were critical of more mainstream depictions of BDSM for missing structures such as the 4C's (Williams et al, 2014) and for projecting the more patriarchal ideas of a naive submissive woman and an alpha dominant man. Many refer to the fact that relying on mainstream media alone is not enough and may put newcomers to BDSM at risk.

There's a very large need for young women to be educated on BDSM. And young men, you know, vulnerable characters who may look at going into submission, there's a very, very strong need to educate them on the risks of it. (Fae)

She went on to explain that “risks” arise when those who engage in BDSM do not follow foundational practices such as Safe, Sane, Consensual. The 4C's (Williams et al, 2014) offer a useful structural approach to practicing BDSM. Fae, Ila, Eve and Dawn made comments on the growth of BDSM portrayal in popular media and said that they felt it often failed to provide a representative reflection of the more fundamental practices of BDSM. Fae also touched on noticing a growing trend in its popularity and in the pressure on women, especially to incorporate BDSM into their lifestyle:

I think there's a lot of pressure on young women to be sexual, and to engage in this sort of thing to be exciting and up to date and current. (Fae)

Fae argued that people seeking experience in BDSM as a result of feeling social pressure is very dangerous, especially considering the unreliable sources that may be advertising BDSM, which is why she advocates for better education on it. Without education or information on principles such as the 4C's (Williams et al, 2014), there is a risk that newcomers will experience abuse, not BDSM. Taking time to educate oneself and reflect on one's motivations before exploring BDSM was also mentioned by Eve and Chloe.

Educate yourself on it before you get involved in it to make sure that it is actually what you think it is. BDSM isn't for everyone and doesn't need to be done to prove anything to anyone. (Eve)

Eve stressed the importance of having people do research to make sure the reality of BDSM matches up to their ideas before they begin to physically explore it. She also

echoes Fae's worry of possible societal pressure to follow this growing 'trend' of kinkier sex and says that you don't need to engage in BDSM to "*prove anything to anyone*". The overall conclusion is brought by Chloe that one should explore BDSM due to their own curiosity, rather than possible external pressures:

No one should decide what your sex life looks like but you. It should be a discussion you are proactively getting involved in- of course with a partner who also wants to do that kind of stuff. (Chloe)

5.3.4 Let's talk about it

The topic of stigma arose from various interviews. While many participants were sure of their interest in BDSM, they understood that there is still a lot of social taboo around BDSM. Link and Phelan (2001) state that stigma marks the boundaries a society creates between 'normals' and 'outsiders' and reduces a person's social status in the eyes of society (2001; 377). BDSM has a long history of being stigmatised, and while there is a clear transition from pathologising BDSM practitioners, the effects are still felt within the community. Alongside participants stating that more individuals should carry out more research to gain a better understanding of BDSM outside of popular media depiction, many argue that society overall needs to be more open to discussing sex, intimacy, and alternative ways of exploring them.

There needs to be a safe space, where women can discuss these things and you know, learn about them without it being so taboo, because it's so taboo, it's brushed under the carpet and there's no real way for women to be educated and to ensure their own safety. (Fae)

Earlier, Fae expressed worry about more vulnerable individuals exploring BDSM without understanding the practices and having a greater risk of facing harm. Here, she expanded on this, reflecting on society collectively almost shunning more open and public discussions to better educate people on BDSM. Taboo is the focal point here; the clear stigma still applied to BDSM creates a space that does not welcome acknowledgement on the practice. Gwen touched on the impact that she felt a lack of education around BDSM causes:

I don't think BDSM encourages violence towards women. I think misunderstanding the concept of it does... If we want to sort that out, then maybe there needs to be more education, in terms of what it actually is. (Gwen)

She went on to explain that this “*misunderstanding*” often conflates patriarchal ideas of sex (which Dawn expressed earlier) and, as Ila shared previously, the idea that sex is something done to women, rather than a collaborative exploration with both parties pleasure at the forefront of it all. Focusing on Gwen’s point on what BDSM “*actually is*”, the foundational approach of the 4C’s (Williams et al, 2014) is valuable here. The practice and constant reference to communication, concern, care, and consent are pillars of BDSM practice but are often forgotten in societal understanding and popular media depictions of BDSM, which causes further stigma, misunderstanding and othering of the practice. This may then put people in danger if their understanding of BDSM is based on misrepresented ideas, alongside not feeling comfortable to openly express one's curiosity due to the stigma attached; people may enter power exchange dynamics with ill-informed understanding. Ila highlighted this issue:

There seems to be this skewed idea from some men that if you have sex with a woman, you can do what you want to her and if you slapped her round the face, if she liked it or not, it counts as BDSM and it makes the sex cooler or whatever. (Ila)

This is one of many examples of how misunderstanding BDSM can put people in harm's way. Ila previously shared an experience of non-consensual activity that occurred with a one-night stand and reflected on her experience of some men assuming that BDSM is based on the idea that “*you can do what you want with her*” and that rougher sex, regardless of mutual enjoyment, counts as BDSM. This goes against many foundational principles of BDSM and does not reflect a consensual power exchange.

There are many factors that may cause people to assume that this kind of behaviour is common in BDSM. The largest is possibly popular media poorly depicting both roles in a power exchange, and the patriarchal idea of men doing things to women with or without their expressed want for it. This is an example of Gwen’s point that

misunderstanding BDSM is a greater risk to women's wellbeing than the practice of BDSM. Eve also expressed the need for more open conversation around kink:

Not enough conversation is had on BDSM and kink. And it means that sometimes people either practice unsafe BDSM or they're not practising at all when they want to. (Eve)

“Unsafe BDSM” can quickly spill into abuse, depending on which concepts have been taken to form someone's idea of BDSM. But how can a non-practitioner be sure that they are best educated on the practices of BDSM and be able to identify misunderstood explanations of it? Alongside taking the time to do further research, Dawn and Gwen expressed the value of community in helping combat stigma:

Certainly, part of my understanding of it came from talking to friends, female friends, and sisters, taking notes and helping each other... I think sharing something with someone is really useful, because it opens the door and starts conversation... having a community where you can openly talk about it supports safety, security, and education (pause) it's so important to me. (Gwen)

Gwen's understanding of community is a direct challenge to the stigma she feels from engaging in BDSM. It offers her a space to show up and express herself authentically without fear of labelling, othering, or stereotyping (Link & Phelan, 2001; 382), which all come from the phenomenon of stigma. It also combats the negative impacts of stigma, which typically includes avoiding acknowledgment of whatever group or act that has been stigmatised. In these spaces with her friends, she is able to bring up topics and explore them in spaces where she can gain better awareness as she feels that a community encourages “safety, security and education”. Alongside forming communities, the suggestion of better, more inclusive sex and relationship education was raised to help combat society's collective discomfort around talking about sex in general:

There needs to be better visibility of what BDSM actually is and most importantly that we have conversations with young people about sex because that just doesn't happen enough... And not just about sex, education about healthy relationships

and consent in general... we need proper relationship education leading to sexual education for young people. (Ila)

Ila is suggesting that having inclusive education and addressing it at a younger age, to look at the importance of healthy relationships and consent, is a vital step in ensuring less misunderstanding around BDSM, while also addressing the stigma that many in society hold around sex. Considering that some of the most dangerous misunderstandings on BDSM is a lack of acknowledgement of the 4C's (Williams et al, 2014), providing education to young people around communication and consent will hopefully lead to more care and concern for one another when engaging in sex, kinky or not. Better education results in people being better informed and aware, hopefully leading to safer and more fulfilling sexual encounters. This is a clear example of how knowledge is power, and the most effective way to challenge stigma. Dawn summarised this best:

Our attitudes to sex as a whole, not just BDSM is incredibly conservative and prudish. And without talking about sex, and without having really open communication and shameless discussion about what we like and don't like, we can't have healthy sexual relationships. (Dawn)

6 CONCLUSION

Driven by a lack of research focused on women's engagement in BDSM, this paper has explored women's experiences and reflections regarding submission within the dominant-submissive dynamic in an attempt to open up further understanding and discussion on the phenomena.

Reflecting back to the aims and research questions of this study, a core theme was to explore women's experiences with BDSM, driven by this research question: *how and why do women engage in submission in the dominant-submissive dynamic?* As the analysis explores there are a variety of steps that can be taken to create an appropriate environment for my participants to want to engage in power exchange with a partner. The dominant-submissive dynamic was contextualised through the concept of erotic power exchange (Langdrige & Butt, 2005). Reflecting on *how* they engage with submission, all participants referenced the importance of trust in some capacity. Taking the time to build trust with their partner was a foundational step to moving onto other factors such as taking time to negotiate, fostering a feeling of safety and respect, and facilitating a space welcoming open communication. Negotiation also appeared in all interviews, establishing boundaries, safewords, being sure both parties were aware and on board for the details of the scene played a big role in how my participants engaged with submission. How these manifested and the time needed to reach them varied between participants, but collectively establishing trust was at the core of determining how they would engage in submission.

When focusing on *why* these women decided to engage in submission, again pleasure was an underlying motivator for all participants in some capacity, be it sexual or emotional, there was clear association with their personal pleasure motivating their engagement. This was echoed from April, Brooke, Eve, Hope, and Ila shared their appeal being tied to feeling they were able to finally 'let go' of everyday pressures when in a submissive role and temporarily hand power over to their partner. While Dawn, Fae and Gwen reflected on their enjoyment in being the centre of their dominants attention and desire during a scene. Chloe touched how submission for her involves growth,

sensuality, pleasure and pain and the combination of all feels “*almost like this little microcosm of the whole human experience*”. The aim of this research was to elevate the opinions of women involved in BDSM and ultimately there is no one answer as to why one may want to engage in submission as the study has shown. In fact, many of my participants' motivation to engage in a power exchange overlapped with each other and their understanding of temporarily giving power over reflected Foucault's (1997) argument of power exchange being strategic in the context of BDSM.

Navigating feminism while engaging in BDSM was focused on through the sub-question: *How do kinky women situate feminism within BDSM?* A liberal understanding of choice and assurance from confidence with their motivation arose from interviews. Chloe reflected on her internal conflict that can arise but concludes that her decision to participate in the dominant-submissive dynamic is hers and hers alone. Brooke echoed similar sentiment, understanding her motivation to engage was due to the pleasure she gets from it but is actively deciding to engage as she felt she could “*live without it*” if it no longer fulfilled her. Fae and Dawn established they felt there was a distinct difference between patriarchal values and BDSM practices and their assurance comes from taking the time to negotiate and build trust as referenced earlier. When questioning the difference between BDSM and abuse, the 4C's (Williams et al, 2014) provided the framework that distinguishes abuse to BDSM. Care, concern, communication, and consent were reflected in participants' retelling of experiences within the dominant-submissive dynamic and importantly, any examples that lacked this foundational element then fell into an abusive situation.

Controlled powerlessness was coined to express participants' experiences exchanging power, and this was explored through the sub-question: *how do women who engage in submission understand autonomy in their power exchange?* April has no doubt she still holds autonomy even when in a submissive role saying, “*negotiated sexual powerlessness doesn't mean you haven't got the autonomy*”. Once again strategic power (Foucault, 1997) plays a role here, while power is exchanged, it is under negotiated temporary circumstances where both players are aware they are engaging in a scene. And they are able to step out of these roles whenever needed, Hope made it clear even

at her most submissive she does not actually “lose her power” due to the knowledge that she is playing a role. All participants echoed understanding of still having autonomy in the dominant-submissive power exchange, mostly due to the situation being mutually negotiated.

In the final part of the analysis, the impact of social taboo was explored in an attempt to answer: *how do BDSM practitioners address social stigma?* Gwen’s emphasised to her the real danger of BDSM was misunderstanding it, which can come from inaccurate media depiction or fear of discussing topics related to BDSM out of fear of stigma. Fae also touched on the dangers of people entering BDSM subcultures without the right education prior and the need to challenge social taboo to help people feel more comfortable to educate themselves on said practices. The fear of being ‘othered’ or facing social consequences because of one’s interest in BDSM is understandable considering the history of pathologising practitioners. But many participants felt passionate on challenging social taboo around talking about sex and kink, with clear encouragement to improve the way we educate young people about sex and relationship education and by forming communities that welcome discussion on such topics.

Overall, this research aimed to contribute to the gap in academic writing centring women who participate in BDSM and provide readers with insight into what may motivate my participants to engage with submission in the dominant-submissive dynamic. Their thoughts on autonomy, social stigma and how they feel they navigate feminism was explored through in-depth semi-structured interviews; alongside highlighting the frustration participants felt over the reluctance for society to openly welcome discussions around sexual pleasure and kink. While practice will vary couple to couple, certain approaches to BDSM are more universal and many who do not engage in BDSM are not always offered representation that reflects the foundational approach of the 4C’s (Williams et al, 2014) or shown practice of BDSM that highlights the important stage of negotiation. Engaging in BDSM is not for everyone but working to challenge hesitancy to discuss such topics is beneficial for everyone.

Once again it is important to emphasise that this study is not generalisable to all women's outlook on their submissive role in the dominant-submissive dynamic. The aim was to provide space to elevate lived experiences from women who practice BDSM and to offer some insight into their individual experiences. While there were various moments of overlapping opinions, it still cannot be used to generalise all women who engage in submission. After listening to these women's experiences and sharing them here, I hope to emphasise the value in centring women's participation in BDSM and to offer some insight into the nuance that can play out when engaging with submission.

6.1 FUTURE DIRECTIONS

More and more academic literature is moving away from pathologising BDSM practitioners and instead applying a sociological approach to the practice and the various subcultures within it, alongside gradual increase in literature focusing on women's experiences. Due to the nature of this study and its smaller scale I believe there would be a lot of value in further research committed to seeking more insight on women's understanding and interaction within BDSM dynamics. Further research into women who engage in submission, who engage with domination and who switch, alongside broadening out of the heterosexual lens I carried out and possibly exploring the nuances of a queer experience within these dynamics.

Similarly due to the limited space to produce this research, I believe there would be a lot of value taking more time to analyse the relationship between feminism and BDSM, particularly practitioners who hold feminist ideology and go on to engage in BDSM, as Chloe stated, "*nothing happens in a vacuum*" and exploring the nuance within that may offer valuable findings.

It is evident that more research on BDSM outside of men's engagement is needed. And of course, this moves past just women; non-binary individuals and trans men and women offer unique experiences and insight to how power dynamics can be explored and understood. Alongside this, more academic writing actively challenging the stigma associated with 'deviant' sexualities and bringing better education on what engaging in them means would likely offer better education and liberation for all that engage in sex, kinky or not.

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8 APPENDICES

8.1 APPENDIX 1: CONSENT FORM

My name is Olawumi Ademokun, and I am a master's student in Social Studies of Gender with a major in Sociology at Lund University. You are being invited to take part in this research study. I would like to interview you on my thesis research, which explores the reasons submissive kinky women engage in BDSM. I would like to interview you regarding your lived experience as a woman who engages in submission in kink and the factors that draw you to it. I am interested in your personal views and not what others may expect you to say- there are no right or wrong answers. The interviews will take around an hour but may be shorter or longer on any suitable video calling platform (having video on will be left to your preference).

Purpose of research:

As a kinky submissive woman myself, I am aware of the stigma and stereotypes that can be associated with BDSM and female submission especially. While there is growing academic research on subgroups in BDSM, I feel many lack focus on women who engage in the lifestyle. My hopes for this study are; to elevate the voices and lived experiences of submissive women on an academic platform and offer insight into what appeals to participants to engage in BDSM and the dominant-submissive dynamic specifically.

Procedures:

Your responses are strictly confidential, I will need to record the audio of the interview in order to transcribe the content and refer back to responses. The information recorded is confidential, and no one else except me will have access to the audio recordings. You will be entirely anonymous throughout the study as your name will not appear anywhere. This is to protect your privacy and give you freedom to be vulnerable and open about your experiences as a submissive woman in kink.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw:

Your participation is voluntary. You can refuse to answer any question you are not comfortable with and you may stop taking part at any time. In addition, if uncomfortable you can decide for me to no longer have access to your audio file and I will delete it. Your responses and those of other interviewees will form the basis for my postgraduate dissertation that I will submit to Lund University. Quotes will be carefully anonymised so that nothing in the material will allow others to identify the source of any specific information used.

Key points:

- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I agree to my interview being audio recorded.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.
- I understand that I am free to contact the researcher to seek further clarification and information.
- I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in Olawumi's postgraduate thesis for Lund University.

If you have any questions or concerns about my research or your participation in it, please ask me before we proceed.

By signing below, you are acknowledging that you understand all of the above and you are willing to proceed with the interview.

Participant name:

Signature: _____ Date: _____

For any further information please contact: kinkyopinions@gmail.com

8.2 APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW GUIDE

- 1) How old are you?
- 2) How long have you been engaging in BDSM?
 - a) How did you first come to know about BDSM and kink?
 - i) What actively got you starting in kink?
- 3) Can you describe what submission means to you personally?
 - a) How do you incorporate BDSM into your lifestyle?
 - i) Why do you incorporate it in this way?
 - b) Can you describe how you feel when in the dominant-submissive dynamic?
- 4) What thoughts come to mind if submission is associated with femininity or female attributes?
 - a) Do you feel your gender plays a part in your appeal in being submissive?
 - b) Can you describe what is appealing to you about submission?
 - i) Probe
- 5) Are there any routines or rituals that occur within your power exchange?
 - a) If yes: Can you give a few examples of some?
- 6) Do you base your BDSM on any principles?
 - a) If yes: Which ones?
 - b) Why do you think __ is important?
 - i) How do you carry these principles out in your dynamic?
- 7) How would you describe autonomy?
 - a) Do you feel you have autonomy when in a power exchange?
 - b) How does your autonomy play a part in a power exchange?
 - c) Can you give an example of you exercising autonomy within a submissive role?
- 8) How do you feel when giving up power in a dominant-submissive dynamic?
 - a) Probe
- 9) Can you describe how you take on the role of a submissive?
 - a) Can you give a few examples of activity that occurs when you engage in a dominant-submissive dynamic?
 - i) Probe
- 10) Are there any stereotypes of submissive women you are aware of?
 - a) What do you think of these stereotypes?
- 11) What are your thoughts on the idea that BDSM is a form of violence against women?
- 12) Considering the concept of patriarchy and BDSM, how do you navigate the two?
- 13) Is there anything you want to share or find relevant that I have not asked you about?