

RUNNING THE YELLOW LIGHT: CONSENT NEGOTIATION STRATEGIES AMONGST  
BDSM VERSUS NON-BDSM PRACTISING INDIVIDUALS

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## **Abstract**

### **RUNNING THE YELLOW LIGHT: CONSENT NEGOTIATION STRATEGIES AMONGST BDSM VERSUS NON-BDSM PRACTISING INDIVIDUALS**

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Prevailing rates of sexual violence have necessitated research on sexual consent communication to remedy these issues. Research has found that individuals possess sophisticated knowledge of consent, and that discrepancies between people's attitudes and behaviours are resulting in sexual violence and compliance behaviours. The BDSM community—with its greater diversity and effective consent strategies—possess a model of consent that would be valuable in diminishing rates of adverse sexual outcomes. However, differences in consent between BDSM and non-BDSM individuals have not yet been quantified. 1,118 participants completed measures of consent attitudes, behaviours, and consequences. Results demonstrated negligible differences in consent parameters based on BDSM affiliation; however, BDSM role identity yielded large, significant trends. Dominant individuals were found to have less positive consent attitudes, less consent communication and more instances of sexual compliance compared to submissive or switch individuals. These results highlight the strength of cultural norms in dictating beliefs and behaviours.

Keywords: consent, BDSM, sexual scripts, power

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There have been many times throughout these past two years where I have been confronted with failure. Moments that challenged who I am and what I am worth, in both my professional and personal life. I began my career with a strong sense of who I was, how people perceived me, my goals and ambitions, the power and wisdom I carried with me in all my endeavours. How naive I was. Since then, I have experienced deep humility, shame, fear, uncertainty, embarrassment—a true upheaval of everything I thought I knew about myself. But isn't that what education is about? To learn? To grow? To fight and struggle until you emerge from the other side a better person?

I have learned. I have grown. I have accomplished so much. It is easy to let victories pass you by on your journey to something bigger and better, but I really have done a lot of great things that I feel immense pride for. I know, with great conviction, that I will become something great—that I already am something great. This victory is not mine alone; there are many people to whom I owe for the success of this project, and for the success of me.

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## **Running the Yellow Light: Consent Negotiation Strategies Amongst BDSM versus non-BDSM Practising Individuals**

Research on people's attitudes and beliefs about sexual consent supports the general mindset that obtaining consent before a sexual encounter is a good and important thing to do (e.g., Glace & Kaufman, 2020; MacDougall et al., 2022; Palermo et al., 2021). In recent years, especially following the rise of feminist social justice movements like “#MeToo”, education and conversations around sexual consent have shifted from being regarded as a courtesy to being a necessity (e.g., Beres, 2014). Fervent attempts to make sexual consent education more accessible and engaging to vulnerable youth audiences have utilized slogans and animated videos in high schools and university campuses to capture attention and make consent education fun and palatable (Beres, 2022; Bragg et al., 2021). Despite these efforts, research demonstrates that sexual consent, although well understood, remains poorly executed.

The issues underlying the execution of sexual consent has been hypothesized to be an issue of knowledge—that is, young people are not aware or understand sexual consent and communication. However, these claims have been refuted by studies demonstrating that young people do, in fact, have a high level, nuanced understanding of consent (Beres, 2022; Goodyear et al., 2023; Jeffrey & Barata, 2018; O'Byrne et al., 2006). Other scholars have suggested that it is instead a disconnect between consent attitudes and behaviours that is underlying issues with consent execution (e.g., Curtis & Burnett, 2017). In response to this disconnect, a small number of scholars have highlighted the potential of alternative models of consent behaviour to inform these issues. For instance, individuals who engage in Bondage/Discipline, Dominance/ Submission, Sadism/Masochism (BDSM) erotic practices have been documented to exhibit strong positive attitudes and demonstrate effective execution of sexual consent (Graham et al., 2016; Kaak, 2016; Pitagora, 2013; Williams, 2006), but have often been neglected within sexual

consent research at large. Consent research conducted separately within BDSM and general population samples suggest potential differences between the two groups; however, there has not yet been a direct comparison between these two populations in attitudes, behaviours, norms, or consequences. The goal of the current research is to both quantify and qualify differences and similarities in consent communication strategies between BDSM practitioners and the general population to contextualize pre-existing research on consent in the BDSM community and validate the implementation of such consent strategies into sexual education curricula.

Graham et al. (2016) found that BDSM practitioners frequently endorse their community as a crucial and effective space for education about consent, which informs their consent attitudes and behaviours. These results highlight the importance of shared community values on shaping behaviours, and as such, Graham et al. (2016) proposed applying social learning theory to consent communication within the BDSM community to ascertain how community values shape consent negotiation strategies. Through the lens of social learning theory, it can be speculated that divergence in consent beliefs and behaviours between BDSM practitioners and the general population may stem from differences in shared values, modelling, and policing of consent. While the general population reports some exposure to consent education through formal education, family, or the internet (e.g., MacDougall et al., 2020; Padilla-Walker et al., 2020; Richards et al., 2022), endurance of these ideals is often thwarted by other community or cultural values, such as rape myth acceptance (Silver & Hovick, 2018). Conversely, BDSM practitioners express that involvement in their community provides consistent, ongoing consent education through workshops and observations of consent modelled by their peers, and is reinforced by internal community policing (Graham et al., 2016, Holt, 2016). Differences in shared group values likely result in these two groups having distinct beliefs and attitudes, which

may in turn lead to differences in consent skills and behaviours. Additionally, the inter-group variability in consent that is hypothesized to exist between the general population and BDSM practitioners may also exist on the intra-group level, in that within the BDSM community, individuals who are more involved with their community events and peers are likely to experience more consent exposure and demonstrate more behavioural imitation than those who practise mainly in private settings. Therefore, utilizing the principles of social learning theory, the current study aims to investigate whether differences exist in consent exposure, attitudes, beliefs, behaviours, and consequences between individuals of the general population in comparison to those who engage in BDSM erotic practices, and to determine the extent to which community norms affect learning and motivation to enact consent communication strategies. The findings from this research may speak to the strength of community norms in regulating behaviour, which may aid in the de-stigmatization of the BDSM community, and provide substantial solutions for relevant, meaningful educational tools that promote effective, verbal, direct consent communication in the general population.

### **Current Understandings of Sexual Consent Communication**

Sexual consent has been defined as the “freely given verbal or non-verbal communication of a feeling of willingness [to engage in a sexual act with another]” (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999, p. 259). The communicative process of consent involves the exchange, interpretation, and comprehension of consent signals, thus making it a dynamic process between individuals. Rather than being a discrete event, sexual consent is often a fluid, ongoing process influenced by sociocultural norms and perceptions (Willis & Jozkowski, 2021). The way individuals communicate and interpret consent is influenced by a number of individual, dyadic, and contextual factors, including gender, length of relationship, personality, and the presence of

substances (e.g., alcohol/drugs) (e.g., Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Darden et al., 2019; Palermo et al., 2021; Willis & Jozkowski, 2018). Ignorance of these cultural nuances may be resulting in discordance between emphasized consent behaviours and the reality of how consent is communicated between sexual partners (Curtis & Burnett, 2017). For example, although the majority of participants in Palermo et al. (2021) agreed that sexual consent was necessary and important, only 39% reported having consent conversations before sexual activity. Although education initiatives emphasize direct verbal communication (Dougherty, 2015; Humphreys & Herold, 2003; Muehlenhard et al., 2016), in many cases, individuals are still more likely to use non-verbal, non-refusal cues to communicate consent than verbal cues (Beres, 2014; Fantasia, 2011; Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999; Richards et al., 2022; Shulich & Fisher, 2018).

Sexual script theory has often been used within sexual consent research to understand how cultural norms and expectations affect the progression of sexual interactions and communication. The theory was first developed by Simon and Gagnon (1986) as a response to an increasing atheoretical field of human sexuality. The authors wanted to develop a framework that is sensitive to both socio historical contexts and the fluid nature of individual lived experiences. Socio-constructivist script theory was thus applied to sexual interactions, describing how human sexual behaviour and interactions are entrenched in cultural norms (cultural scripts), and guided by interpersonal interactions (interpersonal scripts) and internal motivations (intrapersonal scripts). According to sexual script theory, sexual interactions progress along a standardized sequence, in which the objects, aims, times, places, gestures, utterances, feelings, and desirable qualities are collectively agreed upon, and henceforth expected, within a culture.

Certain discriminatory features of societies (e.g., gender, age, socioeconomic status) exude influence on these collectively understood scripts, and in the context of heterosexual

sexual encounters, gender and gender-roles become of great significance to the formation of sexual scripts. Simon and Gagnon (1986) argued that congruence between the intrapersonal and interpersonal sexual scripts occurs most frequently for those whose sexual arousal and pleasure are taken under greater consideration—male actors. The centralization of male sexuality within sexual scripts positions men as being more sexually motivated, dominating, and possessing in comparison to women. In contrast, women are typically regarded as an object of desire that is to be conquered. Sexual script theory describes how the current dominant gender hierarchy designating men's sexuality as more initiating and aggressive compared to women's typifies the consent communication between these two genders (Benoit & Ronis, 2018; Burkett & Hamilton; 2012; Humphreys, 2004; Simon & Gagnon, 1986). In other words, the communication of consent has often culturally been considered to be a hurdle that women establish and men need to overcome in order to be allowed access to sex with women (Beres, 2014). To substantiate this, Pazos et al. (2024) instructed participants to read vignettes of hypothetical sexual encounters between heterosexual characters; female characters were rated as more responsible for the encounter when it was consensual, and male characters were rated as more responsible for the encounter when it was non-consensual, showcasing that successful sexual encounters are attributed to women's acceptance of men's sexual advances. Numerous studies have documented women's use of feigned refusals of sexual advances in order to conform to heteronormative ideals of chastity (Shafer et al., 2018; Muehlenhard & Hollabaugh, 1988), as well as instances of women's sexual compliance due to gendered social pressure and/or lack of agency in their sexual decision-making (Benoit & Ronis, 2022; Darden et al., 2019; Fantasia, 2011; Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999; Impett & Peplau, 2002; Kennett et al., 2013; O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998). These studies highlight the strength of cultural gender norms in regulating the progression of

heterosexual sexual behaviours and communication, particularly in ways that promote men's sexual assertiveness and women's reticence, as well as discourage women's agency in sexual decision-making. For gender and sexual minorities, these cultural scripts exert lesser influence on consent communication and sexual interaction (Frank, 2019; Lamont, 2017).

Gender differences regarding the communication and interpretation of consent signals emerge in complex and idiosyncratic ways. For example, women have been found to have more positive attitudes about establishing consent, more perceived behavioural control for communication consent, and greater perceived salience of sexual violence (Silver & Hovick, 2018). In many studies, men were more likely to use explicit verbal consent cues than women, regardless of their relationship status or orientation (Beres et al., 2004; Marcantonio et al., 2022; Shumlich & Fisher, 2018, Willis, Hunt et al., 2019). However, in other studies, men were sometimes more likely to use more indirect, non-verbal, and non-refusal cues to communicate consent compared to women, and believed that subsequent non-verbal consent cues were indicative of increased desire (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999; King et al., 2021). In contrast, women are sometimes more likely to use verbal consent cues versus nonverbal cues to communicate both internal consent willingness and consent refusal (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999; Willis et al., 2019). A number of studies have also demonstrated that women are more likely to prefer, give, and expect verbal consent cues, whereas men are more likely to give and expect non-verbal and non-refusal consent cues (Humphreys & Herold, 2007; Jozkowski, Peterson et al., 2014; Newstrom et al., 2020; Richards et al., 2022; Willis et al., 2021). There are also instances in which the communication of consent is deemed completely unnecessary; Kanga (2015) found that 45% of individuals reported that assuming a man's sexual consent was acceptable, and Richards et al. (2022, p. 918) found that both male and female participants felt

that signalling consent refusal wasn't necessary because "[their refusal] would be obvious to their partner", and therefore only 1.7% of participants reported using direct verbal cues to refuse sexual advances. There also seems to be a disconnect between initiations and responses to consent signals; Hickman and Muehlenhard (1999) reported that verbal invitations are most often responded to with nonverbal responses, and nonverbal invitations are most often responded to with verbal responses. These discrepancies in dyadic consent communication across genders can lead to mismatched communication and misunderstandings of consent signalling, which has been coined the "miscommunication hypothesis" (Frith & Kitzinger, 1997; Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999; Newstrom et al., 2020).

Burkett and Hamilton (2012) addressed the discord in gendered communication using feminist and sexual script theoretical lenses. In their arguments, they asserted that increases in women's sexual agency are not adequate to dismantle the dominant heteronormative gender hierarchy that permits and encourages men's sexual aggression and necessitates women's explicit sexual refusal. Participants in their study described experiences in which their partner's assumptions of sexual consent required them to unilaterally assert boundaries of what was *not* acceptable, rather than dynamically negotiate what *was* acceptable. In many cases, women in this study reported engaging in sexual compliance due to cultural script pressure (e.g., engaging in casual sex because they "have to keep [their] word", p. 823), or fear of retaliation. This phenomenon is illustrated by Kazula and Conry-Murray (2021), who found that participants rated hypothetical vignettes of sexual encounters as less indicative of sexual assault when the female characters exhibited a "freezing" response as compared to an explicit verbal refusal, showcasing that women's displays of discomfort are not adequate to discourage continued sexual behaviours. However, O'Byrne et al. (2006) and Wilson (2022) demonstrated that in contrast to

the miscommunication hypothesis, men are able to comprehend subtle body language and other non-direct forms of sexual refusal. Therefore, it is perhaps not the emergence of gendered patterns of communication that is resulting in persistent adverse sexual outcomes, but more general gendered power dynamics that is the critical influence on sexual consent.

Research has also supported the notion that relationship status and length also impact consent communication. The notion of a “sexual precedent”, or the idea that past experiences increase intimacy, appears to affect perceptions and execution of sexual consent (Willis & Jozkowski, 2019). Palermo et al. (2021) noted that the length of a relationship can change the nature of consent in a variety of ways, including increasing comfort levels leading to honest communication, more reliance on non-verbal cues as a sign of consent, less time and effort needed to obtain consent, and implied consent unless the partner specifies otherwise. Indeed, increased length of relationship is associated with greater perceived knowledge of a partner’s consent cues and lowered necessity of communication (Foubert et al., 2006; Humphreys, 2007; Shumlich & Fisher, 2018). Individuals who are in committed romantic relationships report using more non-verbal and non-refusal cues compared to those in casual sexual relationships (Beres, 2014; Jozkowski & Wiersma, 2015; Marcantonio et al., 2018; Willis et al., 2021). Perceptions of the acceptability of sexual encounters are also affected by relationships length; Humphreys (2007), Kaluza and Conry-Murray (2021) and Pazos et al. (2024) found that participants rated vignettes of sexual activity as more consensual if the characters were described as dating compared to a casual relationship or friendship. Notably, Pazos et al. (2024) also found that vignettes depicting non-consensual sexual encounters were rated as less indicative of sexual assault when the characters were in a committed dating relationship.

Individual characteristics like sexual assertiveness, attachment, pornography viewership, and alcohol consumption also exert influence over the communication and interpretation of consent signals. For example, low assertiveness, low resourcefulness, or anxious attachment have been associated with more sexual compliance behaviours, i.e. these individuals are more likely to consent to sexual activity they do not want (Darden et al., 2019; Drouin & Tobin, 2014; Impett & Peplau, 2002; Kennett et al., 2013; Shi & Zheng, 2022; Quinn-Nilas et al., 2013). In adolescents, sexual assertiveness is indirectly associated with self-efficacy to ask for sexual consent through relationship communication (Javidi et al., 2024). Sexual assertiveness has been found to be a strong predictor of positive consent attitudes and direct verbal consent behaviours, especially among gender and sexual minorities (McKenna et al., 2021a; McKenna et al., 2021b; Shafer et al., 2018). For women in particular, explicit consent negotiation resolves feelings of sexual ambivalence and increases sexual satisfaction (Beres et al., 2013; Beres & MacDonald, 2015; Marcantonio et al., 2020). Conversely, Teran and Dajches (2020) found that compulsive pornography consumption was negatively related to sexual assertiveness, in particular for those who considered sexual consent to be unimportant. Gronert (2022) conducted a study in which young university students were instructed to watch a variety of television and pornographic videos and give ratings of consent; ratings were nearly unanimous for clearly consensual and non-consensual scenes, however, the inclusion of alcohol resulted in greater contestation in responses. Across the sample, on average, participants who frequently viewed pornography interpreted situations as being more consensual compared to moderate viewers or those who never viewed pornography at all (Gronert, 2022). Frequent pornography consumption has been found to be associated with greater awareness of consent; however, it is also associated with

greater discomfort in communicating consent and more negative attitudes towards establishing sexual consent (Dawson et al., 2020; Marques et al., 2024).

Although there are concerns about alcohol consumption and the validity of sexual consent, many studies have found that intoxication is a common occurrence during sexual intercourse and that it is often used to downplay or justify sexual assault or coercion. For example, 31% of participants in Marcantonio & Jozkowski (2023) endorsed that alcohol does not affect consent due to the belief that intoxication does not hinder decision-making skills or internal motivations. However, the disinhibitory effects of alcohol have been found to diminish the perceived severity of sexual risk cues, artificially inflate perceptions of sexual desire, increase instances of sexual compliance, and diminish the seriousness of refusal cues (Herbenick et al., 2019; Jozkowski et al., 2024; Maurer & Robinson, 2007; Muehlenhard et al., 2016). The inclusion of alcohol has also been implicated in lower self-efficacy to communicate consent and increases in implied consent among adolescents (Fantasia, 2011). Additionally, the belief that alcohol does not negatively impact sexual consent was associated with lower intentions to communicate sexual consent (Li et al., 2024). A notable finding across multiple studies is that the most salient factor determining whether an intoxicated encounter is sexual assault or not is whether the level of intoxication is matched for both parties; encounters in which both participants are equally intoxicated are rated as less indicative of sexual assault compared to mismatched intoxication levels (Laughlin et al., 2023; Recalde-Esnoz & Del Castillo, 2024).

Within sexual consent education, there is an emphasis on bolstering self-efficacy and self-assertiveness to improve verbal, direct consent communication (e.g., Bragg et al., 2021; Javidi et al., 2024; Padilla-Walker et al., 2020). There is considerable merit to this approach; studies have found that self-efficacy and self-assertiveness are related to positive consent

attitudes, direct verbal consent approaches, and fewer instances of sexual compliance (Darden et al., 2019; Javidi et al., 2024; McKenna et al., 2021b; Shafer et al., 2018; Kennett et al., 2013; Shi & Zheng, 2022). Improved consent communication has positive outcomes for both sexual and relationship satisfaction (Marcantonio et al., 2020). However, persistently high prevalence of sexual compliance among young women suggests that increases in self-efficacy and self-assertiveness are necessary but not sufficient skills to prevent sexual assault and compliance (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Impett & Peplau, 2002, Kennett et al., 2013; O' Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998; Quinn-Nilas et al., 2013). Sexual script adherence pressure is likely contributing to persistent rates of sexual compliance; emphasis on men's sexual pleasure and arousal may be influencing women to sacrifice their own desires to fulfill those of men. Potential negative consequences for failing to accommodate the desires of men may also be influencing rates of sexual compliance among women. Humphreys and Kennet (2010) suggested that previous exposure to sexual aggression and victimization result in decreased self-efficacy to communicate and increased likelihood of sexual compliance. Women have commonly noted that feelings of obligation, avoiding tension, fear of rejection, and feelings of guilt can be reasons for engaging in sexual compliance, suggesting that relational dynamics affect an individual's self-efficacy to communicate their consent (Impett & Peplau, 2002, Kennett et al., 2013; O' Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998; Quinn-Nilas et al., 2013).

Literature on partner responsiveness (i.e., attenuation and support of the other's needs and desires; Ries & Gable, 2015) supports the notion that *positive* expectations of a romantic and sexual partner's responsiveness leads to increased sexual desire, sexual satisfaction, relationship quality, trust, and intimacy (e.g., Muise et al., 2023). It therefore follows that *negative* expectancies of a partner's responsiveness should lead to *lowered* satisfaction, trust, desire,

relationship quality, and intimacy. Indeed, many women report that they consent to sexual interactions they do not desire because they fear their partner's reaction or fear the dissolution of the relationship (Impett & Peplau, 2002; O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998). Negative reactivity to women's sexual refusals serve to reinforce traditional sexual scripts by punishing women who do not adhere to their culturally designated role, as demonstrated by men rationalizing their sexual violence against women as being a normal and natural extension of the male biological sex drive that women are expected to satisfy (Jeffrey & Barrata, 2018). However, as of yet, there are no existing measures that evaluate how relational dynamics affect communication about consent, especially in the instance where consent is withdrawn.

Existing measures of sexual communication are generally too broad in their scope of investigation, involving topics such as contraceptive use, lifetime sexual partners, sexually transmitted infections, self-disclosure to non-romantic partners, or sexual problems within the relationship (e.g., Catania, 1986; Milhausen et al., 2007), and sexual coercion questionnaires are often designed with respondents being the person who enacts the coercion (e.g., Camilleri et al., 2009; Mareliech et al., 2008), or asks respondents to identify instances of overt coercion in intimate relationships. Specifically, measures of sexual consent often evaluate the behaviours of the speaker (e.g., "I used verbal cues such as communicating my interest in sexual behaviour or asking if he/she wanted to have sex with me", Jozkowski, 2014; "Asking my partner to stimulate me during orgasm would be difficult", McIntyre-Smith & Fisher, 2011) as the primary method of evaluating typical sexual consent behaviours. However, the responsibilities and capabilities of the listener are equally, if not more, important in dyadic communication processes. Post-feminist notions of women's sexual agency would argue that following sexual liberation movements, women have been granted the freedom to communicate their desires and consent; whether this is

true or not—and, given the salience of gendered sexual scripts in current culture, it is not (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012)—psycholinguistics scholars emphasize that communicated signals and messages are meaningless without competent, willing receivers (e.g., Itzchakov et al., 2021). Sexual script theory would argue that women are likely to abstain from communicating their desires or consent based on scripts that value and emphasize men’s sexual arousal and pleasure over women’s comfort or consent. A person’s efforts to communicate their consent or refusals would be wasted on an unreceptive partner, which is evidenced by rates of sexual violence despite women’s verbal or physical refusals (Jeffrey & Barata, 2018; Ullman & Knight, 1992; Wilson, 2022). It is likely that both cultural and relational dynamics affect the frequency and efficiency of sexual consent communication, in that those who do not feel their messages will be adequately received are likely to neglect communicating it in the first place.

Therefore, it is evident that there are a number of personal, sociocultural, and dyadic factors that influence perceptions, and communication, of sexual consent. Although models of affirmative consent encouraged in sexual education campaigns and curricula are advantageous in their simplicity and discouragement of ambiguity (Muehlenhard et al., 2016), the reality is that the current dominant heteronormative socio-cultural climate renders “risk-avoidance” consent strategies inadequate for fostering efficient and valued consent communication (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Curtis & Burkett, 2017). Affirmative “yes means yes” consent models also do not account for token resistance or sexual compliance (Rocha, 2015). It can be argued that there are too many cultural and personal influences on consent communication to be fully addressed by affirmative consent initiatives (e.g., Beres, 2007). These nuances also cause great difficulties in parsing out which skills and knowledge are most beneficial to target in sexual consent education initiatives, or even determine which narrative to endorse.

## Education and Consequences

One of the more recent popular resources for sexual consent education comes from an American animated short video called “Tea Consent”, released on YouTube from *Blue Seat Studios* (2015). The video, having been viewed over 150 million times, compares sexual consent to making someone a cup of tea, along with a few factors which could affect the desire and reception of the “tea”, including change of mind, ambivalent consent, lack of consciousness, assumed consent, and forced consumption. Although some scholars critique the simplicity and lack of gender or cultural nuances of the video (Brady & Lowe, 2020), other scholars have found its use of humour and animation style to be accessible and engaging to young students, who generally find the video informative and memorable (Bragg et al., 2021). This, and other forms of digestible sexual consent education initiatives, have been used to highlight the importance of consent and attempt to instruct students on how to properly communicate and negotiate their desires. However, the success and reception of these education initiatives have been met with criticism.

Beres (2022) remarked how the current strategy of consent education positions the issue as a lack of knowledge, yet young queer adults demonstrated sophisticated knowledge of the importance and nuances of sexual consent and sexual interaction. Instead, the issue lies with discordance between consent attitudes and behaviours. Curtis and Burnett (2017) found that although young college students had favourable attitudes towards affirmative consent and endorsed its importance, many felt that implementing it was “awkward”, “too forthcoming”, “exhausting”, and set unrealistic standards for normal communication between individuals. Bragg et al. (2021) found that pilot projects that attempted to eliminate dating violence and unwanted pregnancies based on legal definitions of consent were very frequently misunderstood

by students, resulting in the perpetuation of heteronormative ideas about consent communication. For example, one student exclaimed that sex under the influence of alcohol was only wrong because of the potential legal consequences, commenting that “if the woman is drunk you might think she wants sex and then you could be sent to prison for a crime you didn’t commit” (Bragg et al., 2021, p. 274). Participants in Thiessen et al. (2021) described feeling a distinct lack of education regarding healthy sexual relationships and how to effectively communicate issues in relationships. However, the level of one’s sexuality education has been found to moderate the relationship between alcohol and perceptions of consent, in that, students who had reported greater sexuality education rated sexual activity under the influence of alcohol as somewhat less consensual (Gronert, 2022). Increased consent knowledge has also been found to be a protective factor against binge drinking, hypermasculinity, rape-supportive social norms, and peer support of sexual violence leading to its perpetration (Schipani-McLaughlin et al., 2023). Other studies have found that sexual consent education has mixed or very little bearing on students' consent attitudes and behaviours at all (MacDougall et al., 2022). The perceived lack of quality sexual consent education has negative consequences for sexual outcomes, including higher instances of non-consensual encounters (MacDougall et al., 2020).

Rather than formal education, many individuals report that their exposure to consent messaging comes from popular and social media (MacDougall et al., 2020), which has been shown to have varying effects on individual’s consent attitudes and beliefs. Popular television broadcasts rarely depict mutual verbal consent in sexual scenarios; the majority of consent communication is non-verbal, if it is present at all (Alexopoulos & Cingel, 2023; Jozkowski et al., 2019). Hust et al. (2014) found that reading men’s magazines (e.g., *Men’s Health*, *Maxim*, *Stuff*) was associated with lowered intentions to seek and adhere to consent decisions. Social

media has also been found to perpetuate harmful gendered stereotypes about healthy relationships – exposure to sexualized and party-related content on social media was related to believing harmful stereotypes about consent and lesser intentions to engage in consent communication (Baldwin-White & Gower, 2023; Smith & Ortiz, 2023). In contrast, viewing verbal consent on television was found to be related to increased intentions to seek consent through increased positive attitudes towards women (Alexopoulos & Cingel, 2023). Pulido et al. (2024) found that depictions of sexuality on television generate conversations on social media about sexual consent, in which many people declare their opposition to sexual violence and believe in their ability to recognize similar behaviours in real life. The reformation and implementation of relevant, engaging, and enduring sexuality education is crucial not only because of high rates of sexual violence on college campuses (Fantasia et al., 2015; Muehlenhard et al., 2017), but also the rising incidence of risky sexual behaviours among young adults. For example, some scholars have noted a potential shift towards an affinity for aggressive sexual interactions, including spanking, aggressive fellatio, facial slapping, hair pulling, and choking; often without prior discussion, education, or consent (Bridges et al., 2016; Herbenick et al., 2020, 2022; Ryan & Mohr, 2005) These types of sexual liberties or aggressive hook-ups are often romanticized and permitted despite safety and consent issues (Rocha, 2015).

Some scholars have proposed the potential success of utilizing alternative models of consent education to improve consent outcomes – for example, building an epistemology of consent to encourage sensitivity to a partners mental and emotional states and non-verbal cues (Beres, 2022), or modelling consent behaviours from the BDSM community (e.g., Easton-Mueller et al., 2021; Rocha, 2015). The latter would be particularly pertinent given the increase in BDSM interest and experimentation among college students (Boyd-Rogers et al., 2021;

Bridges et al., 2016; Easton-Mueller et al., 2023; Herbenick et al., 2020). Easton-Mueller et al. (2023) discussed how in traditional heterosexual interactions, consent is often implicit and framed around the question of “what *can* I do?” (emphasis added, p. 661), which centralizes the permission of the act and not the pleasure of it. In comparison, the explicit consent communication documented within the BDSM community encompasses both safety and pleasure parameters (“what do you *want* to do?”, emphasis added, p.661), creating a culture of mutuality and collaboration in sexual consent. Easton-Mueller et al. (2023) argued that these principles can and should be used to guide sexuality education. Additionally, Rocha (2015) argued that the current proclivity towards aggressive, passionate hook-ups can be made morally permissible by utilizing the BDSM model of consent. In his arguments, he defended that prior discussions about desires, intentions, plans, limits, and safewords before the initiation of sexual activity, much like that of BDSM practitioners, eliminates ambiguity and assumptions from aggressive sexual encounters and establishes informed consent in a way that does not “interrupt” the interaction (Rocha, 2015). The ways in which BDSM practitioners understand and negotiate consent have been the topic of investigation and discussion in recent years (e.g., Beres & MacDonald, 2015; Dunkley & Brotto, 2019; Holt, 2016; Williams et al., 2014). Reforming and implementing sexual consent education initiatives based on the attitudes, behaviours, norms, and standards of the BDSM community may in fact yield favourable outcomes, such as decreasing sexual violence and increasing interpersonal communication skills; however, specific differences in consent communication between BDSM practitioners and the general population are not yet well understood.

## **Consent within BDSM Communities**

Bondage/Discipline, Dominance/Submission, and Sadism/Masochism (BDSM) is loosely defined as “[erotic] behaviours that involve power exchanges between two or more partners and/or the use of pain to elicit sexual pleasure” (Brown et al., 2020, p. 781). It may include the use of paraphernalia like handcuffs or floggers, fantasy role play, exploration of power dynamics, and consensual physical violence in controlled environments (i.e., “scenes”) for the purpose of sexual arousal and satisfaction (Cross & Matheson, 2006; Labrecque et al., 2020). The practice of BDSM itself is not of concern - researchers have failed to find reliable evidence to support that BDSM is a maladaptive trauma response or symptom of psychopathy (e.g., Brown et al., 2020; Richters et al., 2008). Indeed, practitioners of BDSM demonstrate normal population levels of mental distress, honesty-humility, agreeableness, extraversion, emotionality, and conscientiousness, and reported less sexual distress, less endorsement of rape beliefs and less discriminatory attitudes compared to non-practitioners (Brown et al., 2020; Klement et al., 2017). Modern BDSM culture is heavily influenced by the “gay men’s leather culture” – a collective of socially rebellious gay men known for their distinctive leather attire dissatisfied with the emerging cultural climate following World War II (Weiss, 2015). Leather culture quickly became a symbol of sexual and sadomasochistic exploration, and the inclusion of other sexually minoritized individuals into these communities contributed to the evolution of leather culture into what is now generally labelled BDSM/kink (Weiss, 2015). However, historical depictions of ritualistic flagellation and aggressive, atypical sexual practices have been observed across centuries (Weiss, 2015, White, 2016).

The consideration of BDSM as a leisure activity versus a unique sexual identity and orientation has been a contentious subject (e.g., Cascalheira et al., 2022; Labrecque et al., 2020;

Walker & Kuperberg, 2022; Sprott & Williams, 2019; Williams et al., 2016). This debate is fuelled by the myriad ways individuals come to discover their interest in BDSM/kink.

Individuals who report that their dominant, submissive, or switch (i.e., dynamically fluid) identity “was always inside of them” are considered to have intrinsic or essentialist origins of interest, lending support to the idea that BDSM is a unique sexual orientation (Labrecque et al., 2021; van Anders, 2015; Walker & Kuperberg, 2022). For example, a BDSM practitioner in Walker & Kuperberg’s (2022) qualitative study described having an inherently dominant disposition: “I have been dominant with boys since at least age four (my preschool report card said I needed to be “less bossy with the boys” - no joke). I have always taken the lead/ dominant role in romantic relationships and often in platonic ones. It is my default mode” (p. 1055).

Another BDSM participant in Labrecque et al.’s. (2021) study stated that “when I was a kid I tied myself up and blindfolded myself - I just don’t know the reasons” (p. 414). Many practitioners report identifying certain play behaviours in childhood that were later eroticized in adulthood to become their specific kink. For example, a childhood game of “cops and robbers” developing into an affinity for bondage and roleplay (Carlström, 2019). A review conducted by Sprott & Williams (2019) demonstrated that 7-12% of BDSM practitioners exhibit interest before the age of 10, providing evidence that some individuals develop an affinity towards BDSM alongside other aspects of sexual orientation. Many practitioners report that their participation in, and affiliation with, BDSM is integral to both their holistic and sexual identities (Coppens et al., 2020; Goerlich, 2020).

Conversely, individuals who report that their interest in BDSM/kink resulted from introduction from an outside source are considered to have extrinsic or constructionist origins of interest, lending support to the idea that BDSM is a leisure recreation activity (Labrecque et al.,

2021, Sprott & Williams, 2019; Walker & Kuperberg, 2022). The majority of participants in Walker & Kuperberg (2022) attributed their interest in BDSM/kink to exposure through media, including pornography, romance novels or vampire television shows, social media, and sex education reference materials. Other extrinsic origins include being introduced by a romantic partner, childhood abuse, parental discipline, or positive experiences in childhood (Labrecque et al., 2021). The argument for BDSM as a leisure recreation is further supported by literature demonstrating non-sexual motivations, benefits received by practitioners through engagement, and the salience of recreational and play theories in BDSM practice (e.g., Ambler et al., 2016; Graham et al., 2016; Hebert & Weaver, 2015; Labrecque et al., 2021; Sloan, 2015; Sprott, 2020; Sprott et al., 2021; Wignall et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2016). Many scholars have proposed that BDSM is a form of eroticized play, which is reflected in the way practitioners describe their experiences. Turley et al. (2017) noted how words such as “players”, “toys”, “parties”, and the addition of the word “play” to descriptions of the activities (e.g., “puppy play”, “role play”) are common in BDSM vernacular. The non-sexual aspects of BDSM are highlighted by practitioners in Faccio et al. (2014), who described BDSM as a “game between adults, an end in itself without explicit references to sexual intercourse” (p. 758). Many practitioners assert that spontaneity, silliness, play, and imagination are essential aspects of their own BDSM experience (e.g., Faccio et al., 2014; Prior & Williams, 2015; Turley et al., 2017). Turley et al. (2017) argued that imagination is necessary for the implementation of a BDSM scene; the construction of the erotic fantasy and maintaining the “unspoken pretence” of the scene and roles of the participants becomes the framework for BDSM practitioners to achieve total immersion and experience erotic pleasure. This is echoed in a review by Meeker et al. (2019), who found that submissive women often “suspend their disbelief” or engage in imaginative simulation to reconcile their

desire for domination and their feminist ideals. Additionally, BDSM practitioners typically score higher on multiple measures of trait playfulness compared to non-practitioners (Brauer et al., 2023). Williams et al. (2016) concluded that BDSM is a serious leisure activity that requires continual effort, is associated with a specific personal and cultural identity, and provides rewards.

Those who practise BDSM report numerous physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual benefits to engaging in their chosen activities, which constitute significant motivating factors for continued engagement (Graham et al., 2016; Hebert & Weaver, 2015; Wignall et al., 2022). Indeed, participants in Hebert & Weaver (2015) discussed how participation in BDSM not only provided physical and sexual benefits, but also resulted in significant life improvements, including better eating habits, improved sleep quality, new skill/hobby acquisition, and increased introspection. BDSM has also been associated with increased relationship satisfaction and emotional closeness (Rogak & Connor, 2018; Sagarin et al., 2009; Strizzi et al., 2021). Practitioners identify ecstasy and euphoria, altered states of consciousness, and increased mindfulness as benefits of participating in BDSM (Ambler et al., 2016; Labrecque et al., 2021; Pitagora, 2017). BDSM practitioners reported using more active coping mechanisms for dealing with stressors compared to non-practitioners, with 40% of practitioners stating that BDSM was in and of itself a coping mechanism for them (Schuerwegen et al., 2021). Crane and Ireland (2023) demonstrated that BDSM practitioners constructed more visceral, physical, and mindful erotic fantasy narratives (e.g., “beautiful”, “feel”, “warm”) compared to non-practitioners, who often shied away from explicit terminology and used more tentative terminology in their erotic fantasies (e.g., “maybe”, “perhaps”, “get down to business”). A few studies have also discovered analgesic benefits from practising BDSM (Sagarin et al., 2009; Sheppard, 2019; Wuyts et al.,

2020). Additionally, male BDSM practitioners report lower instances of sexual functioning distress compared to non-practitioners (Pascoal et al., 2015). In interviews with individuals experiencing chronic pain, interviewees shared that BDSM offers them a safe space to process, play with, and manipulate pain with a modicum of control not afforded in daily living (Sheppard; 2019, Tellier, 2017).

The experience of BDSM can be likened to that of playing contact sports; BDSM and sport both involve a heightened emotional, physical, and hormonal experience that one actively chooses to engage, or cease to engage with, at any time (Labrecque et al., 2021; Tellier, 2017). Experiences of fear and pain are inextricably intertwined with both activities – individuals wrestle, push each other, scream, feel anticipation, experience tension, and in all cases, feel a resolution - whether that be the end of a game or scene. The increase in adrenaline, endorphins, and endocannabinoids following participation in sport have been implicated in the experience of “runner’s high”, and associated with feelings of euphoria, decreased anxiety, and temporary pain relief (Labrecque et al., 2021). The experience of BDSM follows an identical pattern of excitation-release, even with the same hormonal response – Sagarin et al. (2009) observed fluctuations in cortisol and testosterone levels during and following BDSM play, and Wuyts et al. (2020, 2022) found an increase in endocannabinoids associated with decreased anxiety and euphoria following the completion of a scene. These experiences resemble each other further in that they all follow basic principles of consent in their operation – individuals are informed of, and develop expectations for, the experiences they are going to have, and are given agency and opportunity to leave such experiences if they desire to do so. However, while sport is normalized and even regarded positively in the general population, the practice of BDSM remains heavily stigmatized.

Knowledge of BDSM within the general public predominantly comes from the recent popularity of the romance novel series, and subsequent film franchise, *Fifty Shades of Grey* (James, 2011; Sprott & Berkey, 2015), in which a wealthy, powerful, dominant man begins a kink-oriented sexual relationship with a young, unsuspecting woman. Despite growing awareness, public opinion of BDSM/kink practices remains unfavourable and dubious (e.g., Ayunda, 2015; Barker, 2013; Bezreh et al., 2012; Goerlich, 2020; Hebert & Weaver, 2015; Sprott & Berkey, 2015). Many scholars disparage the *Fifty Shades of Grey* franchise for perpetuating these attitudes, citing incorrect and stigmatizing demonstrations of safety, consent, and sexuality within the series (Barker 2013; Drdová & Saxonberg, 2020; Reyes et al., 2021; Sprott & Berkey, 2015; Tripodi, 2017). As a result, the realities of engaging in BDSM/kink play are very poorly understood. Some feminist activists outright reject the practices of BDSM, suggesting that power exchange relationships are, in actuality, a form of socially-sanctioned violence against women (Marion, 2016). Others extend the feminist philosophy further, arguing that, in a patriarchal society that reinforces the dominant positions of men and the subjugation of women, women do not actually possess the agency necessary to consent to the voluntary abdication of power (Meeker et al., 2019). Stigmatization of BDSM practitioners is further perpetuated in part due to the historical classification of sadomasochism as a sexual disorder/paraphilia in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), and literature that confounds BDSM and paraphilic disorders (e.g., Abrams et al., 2022; Connolly, 20016; Dunkley & Brotto, 2019; Mahmoud, 2015; Simula, 2019; Tellier, 2017). Turner-Moore and Waterman (2023) note how the DSM has historically defined sexual deviance or paraphilias in relation to “normative” sexual behaviour, which positions sadomasochistic sexual interests as abnormal and deserving of pathologization; however, research has found that up to 50% of the

population has had BDSM-related fantasies (Holvoet et al., 2017). De Neef et al. (2019) argued that classification of BDSM erotic interests as paraphilic disorders likely stemmed from public opinions and conservative views on sexuality, rather than scientific evidence. In fact, multiple studies have found normative levels of numerous psychological and personality measures amongst practitioners, including psychological sadism and masochism, rape myth acceptance, psychological distress, honesty-humility, agreeableness, extraversion, emotionality, and conscientiousness (Brown et al., 2020; Connolly, 2006; Klement et al., 2017; Mahmoud, 2015; Richters et al., 2008; Rogak & Connor, 2018; Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013).

Turner-Moore and Waterman (2023) argue against many of the underlying assumptions governing the classification of sexual deviance, namely that sexual offenders exclusively prefer deviant sex, sexual offenders share no fantasies with non-offenders, and “deviant” and “non-deviant” fantasies are mutually exclusive of each other. Their study of sexual fantasies among sexual offenders and non-offenders revealed that the most common type of fantasy across the whole sample was penile-vaginal penetration with a romantic/sexual partner or fantasies including *consensual* BDSM-related sexual interactions. Although there were some individuals who reported deviant sexual fantasies, they were often in conjunction with non-deviant elements. Perhaps the most important conclusion to draw from this study is that there is a distinction between sexual interests that are atypical and those that are criminal (e.g., Joyal, 2015). Individuals who are interested in BDSM/kink engage in activities that may resemble sexual deviance, but the inclusion of safety and consent parameters, and the lack of sexual or mental distress involved in BDSM, differentiates it from a sexual disorder (Connolly, 2006; Dunkley & Brotto, 2019; Pitagora, 2013; Mahmoud, 2015). Due in large part to the efforts of the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom (2013), changes to the DSM-V have specified that paraphilias (i.e.,

atypical sexual interests) are distinct from paraphilic disorders, in that an individual may have a paraphilia, but it does not constitute a significant threat to themselves or others, and does not result in persistent mental distress (American Psychological Association, 2013). The specific address of sexual sadism, masochism, fetishism, and transvestism in the DSM-V as being healthy sexual interests in the absence of distress has resulted in decreased negative outcomes for BDSM practitioners and increased positive regard for the practice as a whole (National Coalition for Sexual Freedom, 2013). However, attitude change in the general population is slow to change and stigmatization, both external and internal to the BDSM community, is still pervasive and presents significant challenges to practitioners.

The stigmatization of BDSM has serious implications for the safety and liberation of those who practise; individuals report losing job opportunities, experiencing threats to the custody of their children (Klien & Moser, 2006), and increased feelings of shame for their interests (Bezreh et al., 2012; Goerlich, 2020; Hansen-Brown & Jefferson, 2022; Hébert & Weaver, 2015; Labrecque et al., 2020; Meeker et al., 2020; Wright, 2006). As such, many practitioners feel a compulsion to remain private and insular with their social community (Holt, 2016). BDSM has a wide-reaching international community presence with varying levels of notoriety, including national conventions (e.g., Dark Odyssey, Cleveland Leather Annual Weekend - CLAW, Kinky Kollege), educational workshops, competitions, local/regional social gatherings (colloquially known as “munches” or “sloshes”), private parties, social clubs, and online forums (e.g., Reddit, Fetlife) (Graham et al., 2016; Webster & Ivanov, 2019; Weiss, 2015). Being involved in a community is crucial for remedying personal stigma and bolstering well-being through feelings of acceptance, sexual freedom, emotional support, personal growth, and philosophical enlightenment, and sense of belonging (Bauer, 2021; Bezreh et al., 2012;

Boyd-Rogers & Maddox, 2022; Graham et al., 2016; Kaak, 2016; Pitagora, 2013; Wignall et al., 2022). Indeed, Graham et al. (2016) demonstrated that inclusion in a community offers space for personal growth and development, self-expression, and “a place to embrace and release psychological baggage” (p. 902). Disclosure of BDSM identity is indirectly related to decreased suicidal ideation through increased feelings of belongingness for minority individuals (Brown et al., 2022). Additionally, Johnson et al. (2024) found that BDSM fosters well-being directly and indirectly through feelings of ingroup inclusion and attending in-person events. Most importantly, the BDSM community has been documented as a safe, protective, educational environment that promotes the expression of diverse, healthy sexuality with a heavy emphasis on effective, enthusiastic consent communication.

### **The Role of Community in Consent**

The literature on BDSM practice is notably preoccupied with consent communication within the community. As such, members of the BDSM community are well-documented to be champions and enforcers of effective sexual consent communication (Bauer, 2021; Dunkley & Brotto, 2019; Graham et al., 2015; Kaak, 2016; Pitagora, 2013; Williams, 2006). Individuals who practise BDSM have a strong moral and ethical code regarding consent within their community, including their own internal methods of policing and enforcement (Fulkerson, 2010; Graham et al., 2016; Holt, 2016). Self-generated definitions of consent demonstrate that BDSM practitioners have acute knowledge of the risks involved and the nuances of consent communication, such that their understandings of consent include aspects like mutual benefit, collaborative agreement, sound mind, absence of coercion, voluntary engagement, lack of substance use, and freedom to withdraw consent at any time (Cross & Matheson, 2006; Fulkerson, 2010). Because of the potential risks incurred through their participation, BDSM

practitioners report that thorough, efficient communication and negotiation is necessary for any pleasure to be experienced at all (Williams et al., 2014). Williams et al. (2014) argued that consent within BDSM operates on three levels: surface consent, scene consent, and deep consent. Surface consent and scene consent involve active communication of desire and boundaries of touch and activity within each scene, whereas deep consent depicts continued monitoring and awareness of the other's mental state during a scene and making judgements regarding cessation or continuation of play. This deep consent considers the impermanent nature of consent and the influence that intense sensation and emotion may have on an individual's capacity to consent or communicate. Kaak (2016) further argued that within scene consent, negotiations seem to have four distinct phases: style, body, limits, and safewords, in which the type of play, corporeal location of play, limitations of play, and signals for cessation are discussed.

Consent within BDSM is considered a core element of the practice, and comprises a multitude of precautionary measures and communication norms, including extensive play negotiations, mutually defining terms, protection through competence and skill, ethics of care, and safewords (Cascalheira et al., 2022; Dunkley & Brotto, 2019, Holt, 2016). In particular, BDSM practitioners demonstrate an awareness of how gender can affect communication, and actively work to reject heteronormative understandings of consent communication (Simula & Sumerau, 2019). Some practitioners go so far as to draft contracts determining specific details of a BDSM scene or relationship, although the utility of these contracts has been debated (White, 2016). To simplify these customs and regulations and to establish a code of ethics for the practice as a whole, BDSM practitioners endorse acronym mottos, such as RACK (risk aware consensual kink), SSC (safe, sane, and consensual), and 4C's (caring, consent, communication, and caution) (Beres, & MacDonald, 2015; Dunkley & Brotto; 2019, Nielsen, 2010; Williams, et

al., 2014). Certain types of BDSM scenes or interactions include physical (e.g., the use of a ball-gag) or mental (e.g., consensual non-consent, 24/7 dynamics) attributes that prohibit traditional methods of communicating consent, which necessitate the establishment of safewords or signals to indicate withdrawal of consent at any moment. For example, a commonly used safeword system is the “traffic light” system, in which calling out “green” signals continuation, “yellow” signals discomfort/readjustment, and “red” signals immediate cessation of all activities (Kaak, 2016). Above and beyond communication and consent, the ethics of care are heavily considered in BDSM practice. For example, unique limits, preferences, boundaries, and interests endorsed by individuals are regarded positively by practitioners, and taken into account during consent negotiation (Williams et al., 2014). Following the completion of a scene, a period of calm, connectedness, and collaboration, commonly referred to as “aftercare”, functions to assess and soothe the physical, mental, and emotional state of each participant, demonstrating adurance about care and consideration for others within the BDSM community (Pitagora, 2013; Sagarin et al., 2009; Williams et al., 2014). As a result of these stringent measures, practitioners of BDSM report experiencing fewer consent violations compared to “vanilla” (i.e., non-BDSM) sexual interactions (Beres & MacDonald, 2015), however, the results from this study were based on qualitative interviews with only 5 heterosexual women.

Much like consent negotiation in “vanilla” contexts, power dynamics are a critical influence on the communication of consent in BDSM communities. Although the gender and sexual diversity within BDSM may diminish the power of heteronormative gender roles in influencing consent negotiation, other power structures may replace or supersede it. Even in fantasy or fiction contexts, Popova (2018) discussed how gender dynamics can be replaced by other power structures that influence the communication of consent. In particular, Popova (2018)

noted how Alpha/Beta/Omega (ABO) queer fanfiction should, in theory, remove or expand upon dichotomous gendered power structures; however, it often replicates gender dynamics in the form of prolific Alpha (i.e., dominant) and Omega (i.e., submissive) relationship narratives. Bauer (2021) discussed power being transferred between top and bottom roles at various points of the negotiation process. In particular, participants described how because the dominant partner retains more power and control during a scene itself, the submissive should have more negotiating power prior to scene initiation. This transference of power is a precautionary measure to ensure equality in communication and protect against blaming the submissive individual for lack of assertiveness during a scene. The results of these precautionary measures are evident in Klement et al. (2017) who found that BDSM practitioners demonstrated lower rape myth acceptance, victim blaming, and benevolent sexism attitudes compared to non-BDSM samples. Many scholars have echoed the sentiments of Bauer (2021) and agree that in BDSM consent negotiation, it is really the submissive who retains control over the scene, rather than the dominant (e.g., Kaak, 2016). Other power differentials affect the communication of consent amongst BDSM practitioners, including role identity, gender, age, race, ability, and experience (Bauer, 2021). However, in some ways, sex within the BDSM context does supersede gendered power dynamics, evidenced by accounts from heterosexual female practitioners reporting more agency and equality in their consent negotiations and pleasure with their male partners (Beres & MacDonald, 2015).

Consent violations do occur within the BDSM community (e.g., Bowling et al., 2024; Fanghanell, 2020; Ling et al., 2022). However, data from the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom suggests that these violations occur more frequently for newer members within the first five years of their kink exploration (National Coalition for Sexual Freedom, 2013), which

suggests that experience is a protective factor against consent violations. Consent violations are considered an egregious offence, which are typically handled internally by the community rather than with the assistance of law enforcement. This is partly due to apprehension regarding formal legal institutions, but also due to the frequent use of aliases in BDSM communities making it difficult to press charges (Holt, 2016; Mechelke, 2019; Taylor & Ussher, 2001). Participants in Holt (2016) described methods of internal policing (within private party settings) as the appointment of “dungeon master(s)”. These individuals are given authority over the physical space and attendees, and are permitted to stop a scene at any point should things seem suspicious. Another method of internal policing is ostracism; serious or repeated offenders are considered “blacklisted” – uninvited and condemned among community members. An uncommon form of internal policing is the use of retaliatory physical violence, which serves to both punish the perpetrator and act as a warning to others. All forms of internal policing are considered effective means of maintaining safety within the community.

A small literature does support the idea that community norms, standards, and teachings directly and indirectly influence consent attitudes and behaviours within BDSM (e.g., Beres & MacDonald, 2015; Graham et al., 2016; Bauer, 2021), however, all of these studies are qualitative in nature, and contain small sample sizes. In community settings, BDSM practitioners often discuss feelings of collective responsibility, in that everyone is vigilant and proactive about potential consent violations (Bauer, 2021). There is also an aspect of mentoring or direct “hands on” teaching of consent from veteran members to new members (Bauer, 2021). Additionally, participants in Graham et al. (2016) reported that the BDSM community provides ample opportunity for education on consent and safety, both in online and in-person spaces. Participants in Bauer (2021) described how, in order to be granted access to a certain private club, individuals

had to obtain a ribbon around their wrist to signify they had read and understood the guidelines around consent.

To that extent, it is evident that there are social pressures within the BDSM community that may account for differences in consent communication between BDSM practitioners and the general population. Nevertheless, it is also true that there are individuals who engage in BDSM activities without participating in or considering themselves a member of the community. Although many BDSM practitioners consider community engagement a crucial part of their sexual identity and leisure (Coppens et al., 2020; Goerlich, 2020), there are many others who do not disclose their identities with other practitioners or become involved with a community at all. This divergence would perhaps suggest that consent communication behaviours may differ between those who are involved in a BDSM community and those who are not. It may be the case that observations, discussions, and regulations of consent communication within community settings significantly influence the behaviours of those who participate, in comparison to those who may not receive the same exposure. Utilizing social learning theory, the current study aims to investigate the extent to which social norms influence consent communication attitudes, behaviours, and consequences among the general population and BDSM practitioners in both community and private capacities.

### **Social Learning Theory**

Social learning theory posits that an individual will pattern their behaviour after another who serves as a role model – based on actual or perceived similarity – which requires both the acquisition of and performance of idealized behaviours (Bandura, 1969). Social learning theory is based on the principles of operant conditioning (Bandura, 1969), in which behaviour modification occurs through reinforcement or punishment. Social learning theory expands on

operant conditioning by asserting that behaviour modification can occur indirectly by observing the actions and subsequent consequences of others, noting that modelling occurs not just for the behaviour itself, but the consequences of such behaviour as well (Liu et al., 2020). For social learning to occur, there must be evidence of purposeful attention to, and retention of, idealized behaviours, followed by successful reproduction of those behaviours and motivation for continued repetition (Bandura, 1969). Many scholars have noted that social learning is most salient in times of uncertainty (e.g., onboarding of new employees to a company) (Liu et al., 2020). In such cases, individuals seek guidance from their peers in the form of observation and imitation of behaviours that are reinforced as positive.

Social learning theory has been applied to a number of different contexts, such as the adoption of drinking with professional clients to secure a deal (Liu et al., 2020), improving online education experiences (Reed et al., 2023), social media influencer advertising (Chia et al., 2021), parent-child relationships and peer acceptance (Matias et al., 2014), and ableism in higher education (Kattari, 2015). In all such cases, social learning occurred through exposure, observation, and reinforcement from a respected, trusted model (veteran employees, Liu et al., 2020; teachers, Reed et al., 2023; influencers, Chia et al., 2021; parent caregivers, Matias et al., 2014; able-bodied allies, Kattari, 2015). Within the context of BDSM, community members may either directly or indirectly be exposed to discussions or demonstrations of consent communication at community events by veteran members and, in turn, may be motivated to reproduce those behaviours within their own sexual interactions (e.g., Bauer, 2021; Beres & MacDonald, 2015; Graham et al., 2016; Holt, 2016). Graham et al. (2016) directly proposed that social learning theory be applied to the BDSM community as a framework for investigating consent norms; in this case, endorsing consent as a shared value serves as a model of behaviour

for newer members and shapes the way BDSM practitioners navigate consent negotiation. Social learning theory will therefore be used to analyze the extent to which observations and internalizations of consent communication behaviours influence members of the BDSM community to engage in specific forms of consent communication with others.

### **The Current Study**

The communication of consent has been found to be heavily dependent on cultural norms, which often manifest as heteronormative gendered scripts exerting influence on the progression of sexual interactions and consent communication. These scripts result in persistent rates of sexual violence and compliance despite widespread knowledge and positive attitudes about consent. The increased representation of gender and sexual minorities in the BDSM community suggests that these gendered pressures exert lesser influence on the communication of consent, which may result in more effective consent behaviours and less incidence of adverse sexual outcomes among practitioners. Literature on consent modelling and policing within the BDSM community supports these assertions; however, similarities and differences in consent communication between BDSM and non-BDSM practitioners have yet to be quantified. The aim of the current study is to determine whether differences exist in consent negotiation strategies across these two demographics, and analyze the influencing power of relationships, community, and culture on consent. Understanding when and how cultural norms influence consent will provide insight on skills, knowledge, and attitudes to target in sexual education initiatives to improve sexual experiences for all.

The current project consisted of two separate studies: the first being the modification and validation of a measure of relational dynamics affecting sexual communication. Considering evidence that relationship status affects sexual communication (e.g., relationship length, level of

intimacy; Willis & Jozkowski, 2019), there is a need to understand how relationship dynamics affect the communication of consent specifically. Existing measures of dyadic sexual communication are often too broad in their scope of investigation, including topics such as sexually transmitted infections, pregnancy, or condom use, or focus primarily on self-efficacy of the respondent in communication (e.g., Jozkowski, 2014; McIntyre-Smith & Fisher, 2011). There are few, if any, scales that seek to assess the respondent's perception of their partner's beliefs and behaviours. Therefore, a new scale assessing how perceived partner responsiveness affects consent communication was created and validated in the first study.

The second study was an exploration of the differences in consent negotiation strategies among BDSM and non-BDSM practitioners. Research on sexual consent highlights individual, dyadic, and cultural influences on communication, including gender, relationship status, and community influences. The BDSM community has been proposed to possess more effective consent communication strategies than the general population, due in part to the greater representation of gender and sexual minorities diminishing the impact of heteronormative sexual scripts, but also in part to community reinforcement of consent values and behaviours. The current study aimed to quantify these proposed differences, and ascertain what aspects of consent values, behaviours, and norms in the BDSM community lead to such differences, which could be used to inform sexual consent education more broadly. Based on previous literature that suggests that consent negotiation in the BDSM sexual interactions is superior and more effective than that of "vanilla" sexual interactions (e.g., Beres & Macdonald, 2015), and taking into consideration that community affiliation is likely to influence consent negotiation strategies, the following hypotheses were tested: (1) all BDSM-practising individuals will report more verbal, direct consent behaviours compared to non-practitioners; (2) BDSM-community members will report

more verbal, direct consent behaviours compared to non-community members; (3) more verbal, direct consent behaviours will be associated with fewer consent violations (with BDSM community affiliation resulting in comparatively fewer violations to non-community or non-BDSM practitioners); and (4) more verbal, direct consent behaviours will be associated with fewer instances of consenting to unwanted sex (with BDSM community affiliation resulting in comparatively less sexual compliance to non-community or non-BDSM practitioners).

Additionally, to understand how perceptions of risk in BDSM erotic activities affect the communication of consent, the following hypotheses were tested: (5) greater perceived severity of risk of sexual activities will be positively associated with greater perceived importance of consent communication; and (6) greater perceived likelihood of risk of sexual activities will be positively associated with greater perceived importance of consent communication. A number of exploratory analyses related to gender, BDSM power dynamic role, sexual education, and internal motivations for consent were also conducted.

## **Methods**

### **Design**

The current research was conducted utilizing principles of community-based participatory research, in which a board of volunteer experts was formed and consulted on all aspects of the research process, including hypothesis formation, survey creation, survey distribution, and diversity and equity considerations. The board consisted of BDSM-affiliated individuals in academic, research, and community realms. Additionally, the research materials and methodology were approved and endorsed by the Community-Academic Consortium for Research on Alternative Sexualities (CARAS), a United States-based diversity and equity non-profit organization that vets, monitors, and promotes research on BDSM/kink, LGBTQ+,

polyamory, and alternative sexuality research. Approval for this study came from Trent University's Human Research Ethics Board (#28346).

### **Recruitment and Participants**

Tests of power were conducted using *G\*power* statistical software, which calculates desired sample size based on test parameters, desired power, and/or critical  $\alpha$  threshold. An a priori test of power determined that a sample size of at least 615 would be necessary to detect a small effect of  $f^2 = 0.02$  at the  $\alpha = 0.05$  level for a multivariate ANCOVA with three groups ( $n = 205$  within each group) at a power of 0.95. Follow-up post hoc power analyses on the current sample size revealed a power of 0.99 to detect a small effect of  $f^2 = 0.02$  at the  $\alpha = 0.05$  level for the same analysis. Although the above analyses suggest the current study demonstrated inflated power to detect a small effect size, drastically unequal sample sizes across the three groups – including the failure of one group to reach desired sample size – negatively influenced the power to detect real effects in the current analyses.

Participants were recruited for participation using online advertisements on social media websites that cater to individuals in the BDSM community such as *Fetlife* and BDSM-related *Reddit* forums (e.g., r/bdsmcommunity), as well as through LGBTQIA+ and sexuality-based *Reddit* forums (e.g., r/sexeducation, r/lgbtq+studies, r/sex) and general population recruitment website *Amazon's Mechanical Turk*. Individuals were required to be at least 18 years of age and have had at least one partnered sexual experience (manual-genital, oral-genital, genital-genital) in order to be eligible for participation in the survey. Recruitment materials posted online provided a web link and QR code leading participants to the online consent form, questionnaire, and debriefing materials hosted on the *Qualtrics* survey platform. Following the collection of informed consent, participants completed an online questionnaire package that included

demographic information and items pertaining to attitudes, beliefs, timing and modality of consent negotiation, perceived risk of sexual behaviours, instances of consent violations, and instances of consenting to unwanted sex. Due to the sensitive nature of consent violations, participants were not asked to describe their experiences of consent violations in detail, but instead identify the nature of the relationship and perceptions of why the violation occurred using closed-ended choice questionnaire items. Participants were informed of their right to refuse this section of the questionnaire without penalty. Information regarding trauma counselling and resources was provided in the debriefing materials. The questionnaire package was expected to take no more than one hour to complete, with average completion time being approximately 45 minutes. In exchange for participation, individuals who were recruited from *Amazon's Mechanical Turk* were compensated \$2.00 USD, and those recruited from social media were entered into a lottery to win one of four \$50.00 USD or one \$100.00 USD *Amazon* gift cards. At the completion of the questionnaire, participants were redirected to the debriefing form, which reiterated the purposes of the study, included resources for counselling, and provided an email address to contact for further information or assistance.

A total of 3,155 participants were recruited. Those who withdrew consent ( $n = 214$ ), did not fulfil the inclusion criteria ( $n = 85$ ), completed less than 75% of the survey ( $n = 452$ ), registered a completion time of less than 15 minutes ( $n = 394$ ), failed attention check questions ( $n = 412$ ), or demonstrated illegitimate patterned responses ( $n = 480$ ) were removed list-wise from the analysis. Additionally, qualitative responses collected from participants were closely examined and judged based on validity and relevance to the question in order to eliminate fraudulent data. Participants whose responses were nonsensical or bore little or no relevance to the question were removed from the analysis. Therefore, a total of 1,118 participants completed

the survey and were retained for data analysis. Retained participants were used to address the research questions in both of the following two studies, i.e., the same pool of participants were used for study 1 and study 2. Participants consisted of 472 men, 533 women, and 102 gender-diverse individuals with an average age of 30.71 (SD= 8.23). The majority of the participants were Caucasian (77.5%) and heterosexual (64.3%). 933 individuals indicated that they participate in BDSM-related erotic activities (83%), with 774 individuals indicating that they are also affiliated with a BDSM community (69%). See Table 1 for more information.

**Table 1****Demographic Information**

	GEN	BDSM-PP	BDSM-CP	<i>p diff</i>
	185	159	774	
	31.30	31.65	30.38	0.117
				0.610
Man	83	66	323	
Woman	72	77	384	
Non-Binary/Queer	30	16	67	
				<0.001**
Asexual	4	5	7	
Bisexual	35	35	93	
Exploring	8	6	27	
Gay/Lesbian	9	7	28	
Heterosexual	116	77	526	
Pansexual	3	19	48	
Queer	5	6	29	
Prefer to Specify	3	3	16	
				0.002**
Asian	3	11	36	
Black	5	2	76	
Caucasian	149	125	593	

Hispanic/Latinx	6	8	24
Middle Eastern	1	1	2
Mixed Race	9	5	15
Native Indigenous	2	1	9
Prefer to Specify	7	5	19
Socioeconomic Status			0.134
Less than \$9,999	15	18	48
\$10,999-\$19,999	19	12	40
\$20,000-\$49,999	42	48	206
\$50,000-\$99,999	68	39	213
\$100,000-\$149,999	22	16	137
More than \$150,000	6	9	110
Unsure/Decline	14	19	19
Relationship Status			<0.001**
Single	41	38	96
Monogamous	98	95	448
Non-Monogamous	33	23	201
Prefer to Specify	12	1	29
BDSM Role Identity			<0.001**
Dominant		36	464
Submissive		69	214
Switch		51	93

*Note.* All values represent frequencies. Values for age represent means. \*\* indicates significance at the 0.01 level

## Study 1

### Procedure

#### *Item Development*

The pool of items in the proposed *Safety and Trust in Sexual Communication Scale* (STCS) were adapted from the *Process Based Consent Scale* by Glace et al. (PBCS; 2021), in which eight items that were discarded in the original development process due to significant skew and cross-loadings were adapted and expanded upon in the current study for revalidation. The *Process Based Consent Scale* was developed as a response to wildly varying operational definitions of sexual consent that often conflate consent comprehension versus endorsement, and conceptualize consent as a single event rather than a fluid, continuous process. The authors

predicted a six-category model of process-based consent based on previous literature, consisting of *verbal sexual communication*, *nonverbal sexual consent communication*, *sexual coercion*, *the idea of sexual consent as a process*, *respect for one's sexual partner*, and *feelings of safety in a sexual relationship with one's current partner*. A total of 52 questions were entered in the original item pool; of those 52 items, only 17 items were retained in the final scale. The results of their exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis suggested a 17-item three-factor structure of their scale, which they interpreted as being *ongoing consent* ( $n = 5, \alpha = .86$ ), *subtle coercion* ( $n = 6, \alpha = .89$ ), and *communicative sexuality* ( $n = 6, \alpha = .84$ ). Eight discarded items from the proposed *feelings of safety* subscale were determined to be relevant to the aims of the current study; these items assessed individual's perceived partner responsiveness, motivations for sexual compliance, and self-efficacy to communicate consent based on specific relational dynamics. Therefore, these eight discarded items were expanded upon and validated for use in the current study. Taking into consideration that these items were originally discarded for skew and cross-loadings, more items were developed to expand upon the constructs being examined and to provide opportunity to these items to be properly validated and used in future research. A total of 12 novel items were developed in conjunction with professional, academic, and BDSM community member consultants based on sexual script theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986) and evidence that individuals' often consent to sexual activity that they do not want due to anticipation of partners' poor reactions or internal feelings of obligation (Impett & Peplau, 2002; Kennett et al., 2013; O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998). A total of 20 items were included for consideration for the proposed scale.

## Scale Structure

A total of 20 items were considered for the *Safety and Trust in Sexual Communication* scale—eight of which were taken from the pool of discarded items from the original development of the *Process Based Consent Scale* by Glace et al. (2021), and twelve of which were developed in tandem with BDSM community advisory consultants. These twelve items were developed based on previous literature that suggests that individuals, particularly women, engage in sexual compliance out of fear of negative reactivity from their partner (Impett & Peplau, 2002, Kennett et al., 2013; O' Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998; Quinn-Nilas et al., 2013), and from literature in the BDSM community that suggests that submissive individuals often feel obligation to please their dominant partner and feel anxiety or guilt for not doing so (Herbert & Weaver, 2015). To determine the appropriateness of conducting factor analysis on the pool of twenty items, Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett's test of Sphericity were conducted. Following factorization, the reliability of the scale was determined using Cronbach's alpha coefficients.

## Validation

The final STCS was then correlated using Pearson's  $r$  with three previously validated measures of sexual consent: the Sexual Consent Scale - Revised (SCS-R; Humphreys & Brousseau, 2010), the Verbal and Nonverbal Sexual Communication Questionnaire (VNSCQ; Santos-Iglesias & Byers, 2018), and the Reasons for Consenting to Unwanted Sex Scale (RCUSS; Humphreys & Kennet; 2010). The SCS-R is a 39 item Likert-scale questionnaire containing 5 subscales that assess an individual's intentions to communicate consent based on their consent attitudes, norms, perceived behavioural control, awareness, and behaviours. The SCS-R will determine the validity of the STCS in capturing how relational dynamics connect to

consent beliefs and intentions. The VNSCQ is a 28 item Likert-scale questionnaire containing 3 subscales that assess individual's typical consent behaviours, that being verbal, nonverbal initiation, and nonverbal refusal—the VNSCQ will determine the validity of the STCS in capturing how relational dynamics are associated with consent behaviours. The RCUSS is an 18 item Likert-scale questionnaire that assesses the strength of a variety of reasons for individuals to engage in sexual compliance, with higher scores indicating more reasons to consent to unwanted sexual activity—the RCUSS will determine the validity of the STCS in capturing how relational dynamics predict consent consequences.

Considering literature that suggests that perceived positive partner responsiveness in sexual communication increases sexual satisfaction, relationship quality, and trust (Muisse et al., 2023), higher scores on the STCS indicating more feelings of safety in sexual communication were expected to positively correlate with more verbal and nonverbal sexual communication, fewer instances of sexual compliance, and more positive attitudes about establishing consent. Appendix B includes a full list of included items.

### **Scale Response Mode and Scoring**

The STSC was designed to be a 7-point Likert-type scale questionnaire that asks respondents to indicate their agreement to proposed statements (e.g., “Once I begin having sex with my partner, I know that they will be upset if I want to stop”) on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Items 1, 2, 5, 6, 8, 9, 11, 16 and 19 are reverse-coded.

Participants were given the following set of instructions before completing the questionnaire:

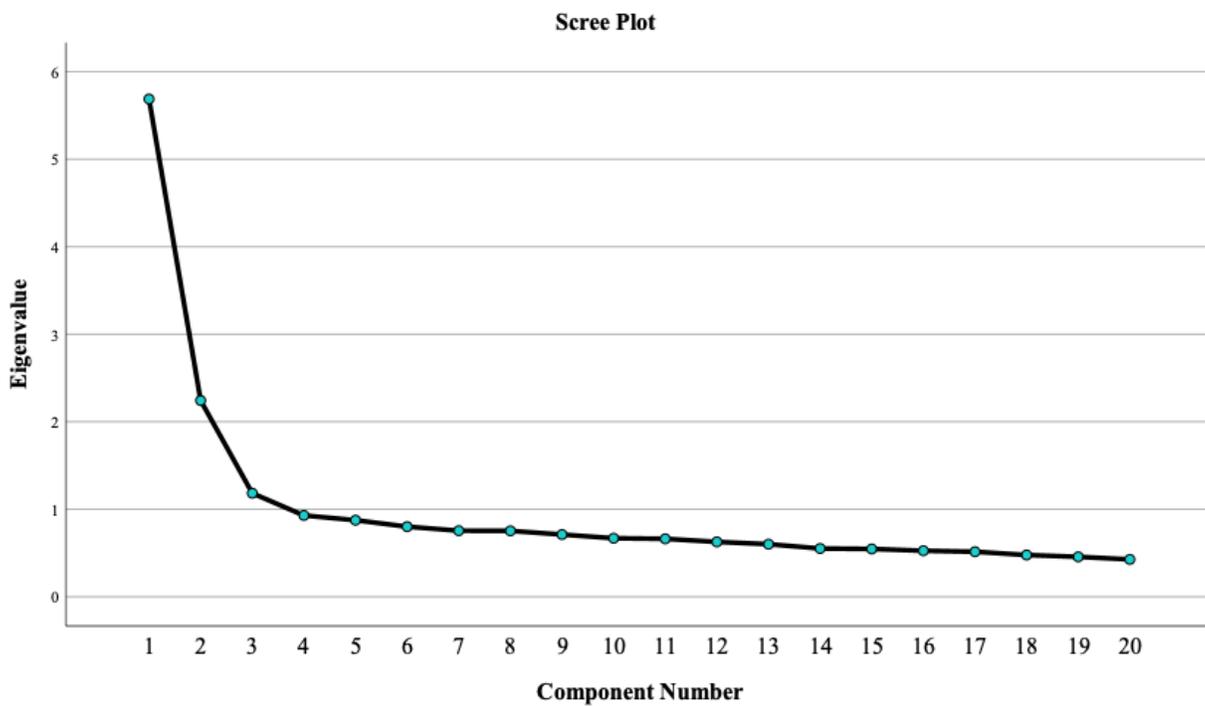
*Using the following scale, please select the response that best describes how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement in regards to your*

*current or most recent sexual relationship. There are no right or wrong answers, just your opinions.* [emphasis in original]

## Results

### Factor Creation and Interpretation

A principal component analysis with a Kaiser normalized varimax rotation revealed a three-factor structure model that explained 45.6% of the total variance. The scree plot supported a three-factor solution (Figure 1). Both the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy (KMO = 0.92) and Bartlett's test ( $\chi^2(1,190) = 5,295, p < .001$ ) indicated good factorability. Communalities ranged from 0.327 to 0.592. Inclusion criteria for individual items included a main factor loading with an absolute value of at least 0.50 and no cross loadings with an absolute value above 0.40, as per the criteria of Glace et al. (2021) in the development of their scale. Main factor loadings ranged from 0.544 to 0.692 for the first subscale, 0.516 to 0.692 for the second subscale, and 0.523 to 0.646 for the third subscale (see Table 2 for details).

**Figure 1****Scree Plot of PCA demonstrating Three-Factor Structure**

Items from the three subscales were assessed for thematic cohesion and it was determined that the STCS does indeed capture three distinct aspects of relational sexual communication. All three subscales were adequately reliable as assessed by Cronbach's alpha. The first factor, entitled "sexual trust" ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ), contains 10 items and accounts for 28.4% of the variance. This subscale represents high levels of trust, safety, and anticipated responsiveness from a sexual partner. An example item from this subscale is "*If I indicate to my partner that I am uncomfortable, they will be responsive to my concerns*". Many of the items in this subscale indicate a high degree of anticipated responsiveness and high degree of predictability of partner's positive response. The second factor, entitled "fear of retaliation" ( $\alpha = 0.76$ ), contains 5 items and accounts for 11.2% of the variance. This subscale represents high levels of anticipated negative reactivity, and subsequent fear of communicating with a sexual partner. An example

item from this subscale is “*I feel that it is easier to have sex when I don’t want to than to deal with my partner’s bad reaction*”. Many of the items in this subscale allude to sexual violence or coercion or suggest unilateral sexual pleasure or communication. The third factor, entitled “feelings of guilt” ( $\alpha = 0.61$ ), contains 5 items and accounts for 5.9% of the variance. This subscale represents high levels of internal guilt, obligations to please, and potentially low self-efficacy to assert internal desires. An example item in this subscale is “*I’m worried about disappointing my partner if I tell them that I am not enjoying myself*”. Many of the items in this subscale allude to feelings of anxiety about relationship dissolution or lack of self-efficacy to communicate based on internal assumptions or feelings of obligation.

**Table 2**

**Factor Loadings of the PCA demonstrating Three-Factor Structure**

	Component		
	1	2	3
STCS_1	-.045	.234	.559*
STCS_2	.195	-.222	.610*
STCS_3	.547*	-.161	.041
STCS_4	-.316	.607*	.241
STCS_5	-.027	.259	.579*
STCS_6	-.041	.088	.646*
STCS_7	.643*	-.34	.061
STCS_8	-.126	.257	.523*
STCS_9	-.183	.516*	.384
STCS_10	.580*	-.381	.162
STCS_11	-.242	.539*	.360
STCS_12	.692*	-.188	-.045
STCS_13	.631*	-.313	.008
STCS_14	.631*	.011	-.072
STCS_15	.656*	-.058	-.046
STCS_16	-.023	.692*	.078
STCS_17	.544*	.125	-.337
STCS_18	.656*	-.121	-.183
STCS_19	-.324	.680*	.155

	Component		
	1	2	3
STCS_20	.582*	-.361	.012

Note. \* indicates the strongest factor loading.

### Construct Validity

Interscale correlations for the STCS revealed that “sexual trust” was negatively correlated with “fear of retaliation” ( $r = -0.536$ , 95% C.I. [-0.578, -0.490]) – greater sexual trust corresponded to decreased fear of retaliation from a sexual partner – and modestly positively correlated with “feelings of guilt” ( $r = 0.137$ , 95% C.I. [0.076, 0.196]), in that increased sexual trust corresponded to increased feelings of guilt. “Fear of retaliation was negatively correlated with “feelings of guilt” ( $r = -0.449$ , 95% C.I. [-0.496, -0.399]), in that increased fear of retaliation from a sexual partner corresponded to lower feelings of guilt.

As expected, the “Sexual Trust” subscale was significantly positively correlated with positive attitudes towards establishing consent (SCS-R;  $r = 0.596$ , 95% C.I. [0.556, 0.634]), awareness of consent (SCS-R;  $r = 0.611$ , 95% C.I. [0.571, 0.648]), verbal consent behaviours (VNSCQ;  $r = 0.684$ , 95% C.I. [0.650, 0.716]), nonverbal initiation and pleasure (VNSCQ;  $r = 0.467$ , 95% C.I. [0.418, 0.514]) and perceived behavioural control (SCS-R;  $r = 0.162$ , 95% C.I. [0.102, 0.221]). Sexual trust was negatively correlated with indirect consent approaches (SCS-R;  $r = -0.593$ , 95% C.I. [-0.632, -0.551]) and nonverbal sexual refusal (VNSCQ;  $r = -0.410$ , 95% C.I. [-0.460, -0.358]). No significant associations were found for reasons for consenting to unwanted sex or consent norms.

The “Fear of Retaliation” subscale was significantly negatively correlated to positive attitudes towards establishing consent (SCS-R;  $r = -0.393$ , 95% C.I. [-0.444, -0.340]), awareness of consent (SCS-R;  $r = -0.438$ , 95% C.I. [-0.486, -0.388]), verbal sexual communication (VNSCQ;  $r = -0.404$ , 95% C.I. [-0.454, -0.351]), and nonverbal sexual initiation and pleasure

(VNSCQ;  $r = -0.217$ , 95% C.I. [-0.274, -0.158]). The subscale was positively correlated with indirect consent approaches (SCS-R;  $r = 0.660$ , 95% C.I. [0.623, 0.693]), consent norms (SCS-R;  $r = 0.162$ , 95% C.I. [0.102, 0.221]), nonverbal sexual refusal (VNSCQ;  $r = 0.596$ , 95% C.I. [0.556, 0.634]), and reasons for consenting to unwanted sex (RCUSS;  $r = 0.531$ , 95% C.I. [0.447, 0.581]). No significant associations were found for lack of perceived behavioural control.

The “Feelings of Guilt” subscale was positively correlated to positive attitudes towards establishing consent (SCS-R;  $r = 0.108$ , 95% C.I. [0.047, 0.168]), awareness of consent (SCS-R;  $r = 0.129$ , 95% C.I. [0.069, 0.188]), verbal sexual communication (VNSCQ;  $r = 0.069$ , 95% C.I. [0.007, 0.130]). The subscale was negatively correlated with indirect consent approaches (SCS-R;  $r = -0.319$ , 95% C.I. [-0.373, -0.263]), consent norms (SCS-R;  $r = -0.219$ , 95% C.I. [-0.276, -0.160]), perceived behavioural control (SCS-R;  $r = -0.146$ , 95% C.I. [-0.205, -0.086]), nonverbal sexual refusal (VNSCQ;  $r = -0.327$ , 95% C.I. [-0.381, -0.272]), nonverbal sexual initiation and pleasure (VNSCQ;  $r = -0.141$ , 95% C.I. [-0.201, -0.081]), and reasons for consenting to unwanted sex (RCUSS;  $r = -0.378$ , 95% C.I. [-0.438, -0.314]).

### Discussion

The purpose of the first study was to validate a measure of safety and trust in relationships affecting consent and sexual communication. Although the scale was originally thought to have a single factor, in which feelings of safety operated along a single continuum, the results of the factor analysis and the correlational analyses suggest that there are three distinct ways in which relational dynamics are related to consent and sexual communication—increased trust, fear of retaliation, and internalized guilt. The *Process Based Consent Scale* (PBCS) is a measure of consent beliefs, focused on communication fluidity and sexual coercion; this scale measures similar constructs, however, changes the directionality of the question. Many sexual

consent belief scales are actor/action based, in which the questions assess the beliefs and behaviours of the respondent (i.e., the one who enacts the behaviour). The STCS is different in that the respondent is answering from a receiving standpoint, and is asked to extrapolate on the beliefs of their partner (i.e., the one who is subjected to the behaviour).

The three subscales in the STCS bear some resemblance to those in the PBCS. Items in the *ongoing consent* subscale in the PBCS hypothesizes instances of discordance or ambiguity in a sexual partner's consent signalling and assesses the actions of the respondent in those moments to remedy the discordance (i.e., the respondent is addressing their partners discomfort). The *sexual trust* subscale in the STCS also hypothesizes instances of potential sexual distress, but assesses the situation from the opposite perspective (i.e., the respondent's discomfort is being addressed by their partner). The *subtle coercion* subscale in the PBCS and the *fear of retaliation* subscale in the STCS operate in the same "swapping perspectives" way, in which instances of sexual coercion are hypothesized and assessed. The *feelings of guilt* subscale in the STCS is unique from the PBCS, in that feelings of emotional obligation are not addressed in the PBCS. Rather, the *communicative sexuality* subscale in the PBCS assesses respondent's outspoken self-efficacy to communicate without regard to emotional or relational pressures.

The distinctions between the STCS and other consent beliefs scales allow for an understanding of how context affects a person's self-efficacy to communicate. The results of the PCA reiterates that one's beliefs and behaviours must be understood within the context of the relationship under which they exist. Considering that individuals who endorse a high fear of retaliation from their partner are more likely to engage in sexual compliance and use more indirect, nonverbal consent cues, it may be the case that those who fear negative reactions from their partner are not likely to attempt communicating at all. The PBCS and the STCS can be used

in tandem to better understand how individuals perceive their own beliefs and behaviours compared to how their intimate partner perceives them. Using statistical approaches such as the actor-partner interdependence model (McCabe, 2017), the PBCS and the STCS can be used to better understand how an individual's perception of their own consent knowledge and beliefs translates to actual sexual contexts.

### **Scale Correlations**

Instances in which individuals perceive their relationship to have a high degree of safety and trust (i.e., “sexual trust”) are perhaps more likely to have positive attitudes, and utilize more direct consent communication due to anticipated positive responsiveness encouraging their communication. This subscale demonstrates that a high degree of anticipated positive partner responsiveness may relate to consent attitudes and behaviours by creating a relational dynamic in which individuals will feel that their desires and limits will be respected, expanding upon the work of Muise et al. (2023) on the positive effects of partner responsiveness in sexual communication.

In contrast, instances where individuals anticipate negative responsiveness from their partner (i.e., “fear of retaliation”) have more negative attitudes of consent and utilize less direct consent communication, and are more likely to use indirect non-verbal refusal cues and endorse more reasons for consenting to unwanted sex to rationalize their behaviours to themselves and others—suggesting that individuals who fear retaliation are more likely to engage in sexual compliance. Considering that this subscale is negatively related to direct consent communication and positively related to reasons for consenting to unwanted sex, this subscale provides additional evidence in support of the work of Humphreys and Kennet (2010), who suggested that

previous exposure to sexual aggression and victimization result in decreased self-efficacy to communicate and heightened reasons for sexual compliance.

Although the results demonstrate significant correlations between feelings of guilt and a variety of consent parameters, the small magnitude of these associations suggests very little to no actual association between these constructs. However, it does appear that instances in which individuals reported a great deal of guilt and shame in sexual and consent communication are more likely to have positive attitudes and knowledge of consent, have more perceived behavioural control, and utilize more verbal sexual communication, and are less likely to use non-verbal or indirect methods of communication and report fewer reasons for consenting to unwanted sex. It may be the case that individuals who endorse a high level of trust and safety in their relationship may feel guilt for disappointing their partner, not due to low self-esteem or fear of relationship dissolution, but due to positive regard for their partner resulting in an altruistic or reverent desire to please. However, it is probable that the limited number of items or lack of breadth of the items is resulting in some discrepant results. In particular, the coefficients suggest only very small correlations between these variables. Future studies may expand upon this scale to capture other motivations for feelings of guilt in sexual communication, including unique relational dynamics that may account for these feelings.

### **Limitations**

A potential relational dynamic that is not being accounted for in the current scale is sexual preferences that involve the voluntary abdication of power (i.e., BDSM power dynamics). There are unique challenges to examining consent withdrawal in BDSM relationships, due to the fact that some relationships have a component of negotiated non-consent practices, or “rape-play”, in which a person willingly gives up their right to refuse erotic activity with their partner

(Cascalheira et al., 2022). These practices alongside reported submissives' desire to please their partner (Hebert & Weaver, 2015), result in practitioners of BDSM being unable or unwilling to withdraw consent when they desire to. For example, a submissive individual may report a high degree of safety and trust in their dynamic, and therefore feel guilty for withdrawing consent and disappointing their dominant counterpart. There are guidelines for safe BDSM practices to maximise pleasure and minimize harm to all involved. Mantras like "hurt, don't harm", and educational workshops on proper equipment use (rope bondage or suspension, whips, paddles, etc.) help foster a standard of safety and comfort for all involved. Although this scale was created alongside a board of community experts to deliberately emphasize wording that discouraged respondents from answering within the context of consensual non-consent, it may nevertheless be the case that some respondents interpreted these items within the context of their BDSM relational dynamic. Another potential flaw of this scale is that it assumes that an individual has a high degree of sexual assertiveness, and that their abilities to communicate are not hindered by internal cognitive blocks. Therefore, to truly understand nuanced motivations underlying issues with sexual communication, scales relating to internal self-assertiveness and dyadic trust and communication in sexual encounters should be employed simultaneously.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the modification and adaptation of this scale was a successful measurement of relational dynamics affecting consent communication. The validation of this scale suggests that relational dynamics relate to consent communication in potentially three ways: increasing safety and trust, facilitating fear of retaliation, and developing feelings of guilt for communicating. However, the scale should undergo further amendments and revisions before finalization, especially in regard to the "feelings of guilt" subscale. This subscale demonstrated

low internal consistency, although given the plethora of evidence depicting women's sexual compliance due to feelings of obligation or guilt (Impett & Peplau, 2002, Kennett et al., 2013; O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998; Quinn-Nilas et al., 2013), the construct itself deserves further development and inclusion in the current scale. Overall, the development and validation of this scale provides evidence that relational dynamics are important to investigate alongside self-efficacy and sexual assertiveness to fully understand the communication and consequences of sexual consent.

## Study 2

### Participants and Procedure

For the purposes of the second study, the same pool of participants were divided into groups based on their participation in BDSM and their affiliation with a BDSM community. Self-identification as a BDSM practitioner was based on assigning a score for selecting "never" or "once or twice" (score of 0), or "occasionally" or "frequently" (score of 1) engaging in BDSM erotic activities. For those that indicated they were BDSM practitioners, affiliation with a BDSM community was measured in the same way—selecting "never" or "once or twice" (score of 0), or "occasionally" or "frequently" (score of 1) interacting with a BDSM community. Participants who indicated they were *not* BDSM practitioners (i.e., responded "never" or "once or twice") were not privy to this question to avoid group delineation issues. The summed scores of these two items were used to assign individuals to three distinct groups. The three groups of interest for the current study consist of the general population group (GEN; n=185), private BDSM practitioners (BDSM-PP; n=159), and the community-affiliated BDSM practitioners (BDSM-CP; n= 774). Labelling for the groups of interest was taken from Coppens et al. (2020) study on BDSM exposure, participation, and role identity. The three groups of interest did not

significantly differ in age, gender, or socioeconomic status; however, BDSM-CP demonstrated more sexual and ethnic diversity, reported a larger variety of play partners, and were more likely to be non-monogamous compared to the other groups. See Table 1 for more information.

**Table 3**

**Gender and BDSM Role Cross Tabulations**

		Gender			Total
		Man	Woman	Non-Binary/Queer	
BDSM Role	Dominant	270	216	14	500
	Submissive	63	179	41	283
	Switch	52	65	27	144
Total		385	460	82	927

*Note.* Six participants declined to answer.

**Materials**

***Risk Assessment Inventory***

In order to assess participants' perceptions of risk and consent importance for sexual behaviours, three identical lists of novel, researcher-developed sex- and BDSM-related activities (e.g., oral stimulation, use of impact instruments) were presented, in which respondents were required to indicate their perception of the likelihood of harm, the severity of harm, and the importance of consent for each activity on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very). Principal component analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation was conducted on the battery of items for both *likelihood of harm* and *severity of harm* to determine whether items could be grouped into "high", "medium", or "low" risk behaviours. Results from the three PCAs suggested identical two-factor structures among all lists to be most appropriate for the risk assessment inventory,

based on an eigenvalue greater or equal to 1 and thematic congruence among grouped items. The first factor included items that were determined to be “low risk, non-violent” erotic behaviours (e.g., kissing, hugging, oral sex, role play) ( $\alpha = 0.87$  for likelihood,  $\alpha = 0.89$  for severity), and the second factor included “high risk, violent” erotic behaviours (e.g., choking, using impact instruments, spanking) ( $\alpha = 0.76$  for likelihood,  $\alpha = 0.74$  for severity). These factors were used to determine whether greater perception of risk was associated with greater importance of consent.

Participants’ specific motivations for engaging in consent communication were investigated using a researcher-developed eight-item, 7-point Likert-type scale questionnaire in which participants indicated the relevancy of proposed statements with respect to their motivations to engage in consent communication (e.g. “to avoid misunderstandings”) on a scale from 1 (not important) to 7 (very important). These items were used to determine whether BDSM affiliation and/or community involvement affected motivations for engaging in consent communication with sexual partners.

### ***Sexual Consent Scale - Revised***

Participants' attitudes and beliefs regarding sexual consent negotiation with sexual partners were measured using the *Sexual Consent Scale-Revised* (SCS-R; Humphreys & Brousseau, 2010). The original SCS was developed using the theory of planned behaviour to investigate attitudes, subjective norms, and lack of perceived behavioural control regarding sexual consent negotiation and maximize the predictive potential of the scale. The *SCS-R* is a 39 item, 7-point Likert scale questionnaire which asks respondents to indicate their agreement to proposed statements (e.g., “I think that verbally asking for sexual consent is awkward”) on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Items 11, 20, 22, 35 and 39 were reverse-

coded. The SCS-R includes three attitudinal subscales (*Positive Attitudes Towards Establishing Consent*,  $\alpha = 0.86$ ; *Lack of perceived behavioural control*,  $\alpha = 0.87$ ; *Sexual Consent Norms*,  $\alpha = 0.63$ ) and two behavioural subscales (*Indirect Consent Behaviours*,  $\alpha = 0.62$ ; *Awareness of Consent*,  $\alpha = 0.68$ ), which are averaged to create total subscale scores, with higher scores indicating more positive attitudes and behaviours regarding sexual consent. Reliability for the entire SCS-R has been previously determined to be 0.87, with test-retest reliability for each of the subscales ranging from 0.68 - 0.79. The calculated reliability of the subscales in the current sample was between 0.62 - 0.87.

### ***Verbal and Nonverbal Sexual Communication Questionnaire***

Sexual consent behaviours were measured using the Verbal and Nonverbal Sexual Communication Questionnaire (*VNSCQ*; Santos-Iglesias & Byers, 2018). The *VNSCQ* was developed to investigate the frequency and modality (verbal or non-verbal) of consent communication during sexual activity, following the assumption that sexual consent communication occurs for one of four purposes: to initiate sexual contact, to refuse sexual contact, to communicate about sexual pleasure, and to communicate about sexual preferences. The *VNSCQ* is a 28-item, 7-point Likert scale questionnaire which asks respondents to indicate their agreement to proposed statements (e.g., “When things go wrong during sex, I avoid being touched by my partner”) on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Item 25 was reverse-coded. The *VNSCQ* includes three subscales: *Verbal Sexual Communication*, *Nonverbal Sexual Initiation and Pleasure*, and *Nonverbal Sexual Refusal*, where items within each subscale are summed to create total scores, with higher scores indicating more communication. Scores on the *Verbal Sexual Communication* subscale range from 13 to 91, with a previously reported reliability of 0.84, and a current calculated reliability of 0.84. Scores on the *Nonverbal Sexual*

*Initiation and Pleasure* subscale range from 8 to 56, with a previously reported reliability of 0.87, and a current calculated reliability of 0.73. Scores on the *Nonverbal Sexual Refusal* subscale range from 7 to 49, with a previously reported reliability of 0.85, and a current calculated reliability of 0.77.

### ***Safety in Sexual Communication Scale***

Feelings of safety during sexual activity was measured with the Safety and Trust in Sexual Communication Scale (*STSC*) (See study 1 for details). The *STSC* is a 20 item, 7-point Likert scale questionnaire that asks respondents to indicate their agreement to proposed statements (e.g., “Once I begin having sex with my partner, I know that they will be upset if I want to stop”) on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Items 1, 2, 5, 6, 8, 9, 11, 16 and 19 are reverse-coded. The *STSC* contains three subscales: *Sexual Trust* ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ), *Fear of Retaliation* ( $\alpha = 0.76$ ), and *Feelings of Guilt* ( $\alpha = 0.61$ ), and items in each subscale are averaged to create total scores. The *Sexual Trust* subscale encompasses items relating to increased feelings of intimacy, safety, trust, and expectations of responsiveness from a sexual partner. The *Fear of Retaliation* subscale includes items pertaining to individual’s expectations of negative reactivity or coercion from their sexual partner. The *Feelings of Guilt* subscale incorporates items that detail internal feelings of obligation and expectations of disappointment or emotional withdrawal from a sexual partner.

### ***Reasons for Consenting to Unwanted Sex Scale***

Participants’ experiences with consenting to unwanted sexual activity and reasons for doing so were assessed using the Reasons for Consenting to Unwanted Sex Scale (*RCUSS*; Humphreys & Kennet; 2010). The *RCUSS* was developed based on previous research to suggest that individuals frequently consent to sexual activity they do not desire (e.g., Impett & Peplau,

2002). The RCUSS assesses the strength of a variety of reasons why individuals do so, including to satisfy their partner's needs, avoid tension, and fulfil perceived relationship obligations. The RCUSS is an 18-item, 7-point Likert scale questionnaire in which respondents indicate their endorsement of a proposed motivation for consenting to unwanted sex on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Reliability for the RCUSS has been previously determined to be 0.96, and in the current sample was determined to be 0.79, with previous test-retest reliability determined to be 0.85. While the RCUSS was developed with an intended female audience, the scale has been adapted for male samples with replicable results (Quinn-Nilas et al., 2013). For the purposes of the current study, gendered language within the RCUSS was amended to be gender neutral (e.g., partner).

### ***Consent Violations Survey***

To investigate individuals' experiences with consent violations, participants completed an amended version of the Consent Violations Survey (CVS; Wright et al., 2015). Due to the sensitive nature of consent violations, items from the questionnaire that were determined to be invasive, potentially re-traumatizing, or beyond the scope of the current project, were removed (e.g., *How was your consent violated?*). The amended version of the CVS included nine forced-choice questions asking participants about the nature of the relationship with the violator (e.g., friend, stranger, romantic partner), how often violations occurred, potential reasons for the violation (e.g., intoxication, misunderstanding), attempts at consent re-negotiation, and continued interaction with violators. These items were included to investigate whether BDSM affiliation and/or community involvement affected instances of consent violations. As a follow-up to this questionnaire, participants were provided an opportunity to explain their motivations for continuing to engage with a person who had violated their consent boundaries in the past (*What*

*was your motivation to continue to engage in sexual activities with this person after the disregard of your boundaries?").* This question was included at the recommendation of BDSM community consultants to lessen the emotional impact of discussing past consent violations. Participants were informed of their right to refuse this section of the survey without penalty, and resources for trauma counselling were included in the debriefing form.

### ***Open-ended Questions***

In order to capture individuals' experience with sexual consent exposure and education, an open-ended, qualitative question was presented to participants (*"In your opinion, how have your past experiences/community involvement shaped your current sexual consent communication behaviours?"*). This question was included to give participants the opportunity to explain their subjective experiences in their own words, without the constraints of close-ended questions. The question assessed community influences on consent communication to determine whether participation in BDSM directly influences consent communication behaviours, while also gaining insight into other social influences on consent behaviours for individuals who do not participate in BDSM

### **Statistical Analysis**

Following tests of normality, reliability, and correlation, the proposed hypotheses were analyzed primarily through linear regressions, multivariate ANCOVA (MANCOVA), and moderation analyses, in which continuous variables relating to consent beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours were compared across the three groups of interest: non-BDSM-affiliated individuals, non-community BDSM practitioners, and community-involved BDSM practitioners. In all MANCOVA analyses, gender was added as a covariate to observe and control for the effect of gender on all consent communication parameters. Although gender is perhaps the most salient

factor in consent communication, it is not the focus of the current study and was therefore controlled for. The relationship between gender and group membership was examined and determined to be non-significant, rendering gender as an appropriate co-variate to add to the models.

Hypotheses one and two were addressed through multiple MANCOVA analyses with gender as a covariate, in which responses from the SCS-R, VNSCQ, RCUSS and violations questionnaires were compared across the three groups of interest. Follow-up post hoc tests were done using discriminant function analysis. Hypotheses three and four were addressed through moderation analyses, to determine whether participation in, and affiliation with, the BDSM community moderates the relationship between verbal consent communication (i.e., VNSCQ-V) and consenting to unwanted sex (i.e., RCUSS) and consent violations. Hypotheses five and six were addressed using linear regressions to determine whether perceived likelihood and severity of risk for a variety of sexual/erotic behaviours were related to the perceived importance of consent for each activity. Finally, a number of exploratory regression analyses were conducted to determine whether increased exposure and retention of consent messaging (i.e., social learning) related to consent beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours. Responses from the open-ended questions were analyzed using data-driven, inductive thematic analysis, in which relevant themes were generated by the identification of recurring phrases or themes within data itself. The data were coded by two independent raters. Initial interrater reliability was determined to be 0.724 and 0.758 for the two questions; therefore, all discrepancies in coding were discussed and resolved so that all responses were coded with 100% agreement.

## Results

### Tests of Normality

Tests of normality on the response variables (e.g., SCS-R, VNSCQ, STCS) revealed significant deviations of normality; however, specific investigations of skew and kurtosis within each variable revealed non-significant skew in all of the response variables, and only some significant platykurtic distributions among the variables. Therefore, the decision to retain outlier data and continue with parametric tests was made. Levene's test of homogeneity of variances revealed significant violations of homogeneity across the three groups in all response variables except for awareness of consent and consent norms. Given the overall violations of normality across variables and across groups, robust statistics will be used and reported whenever possible and appropriate.

### Group Differences

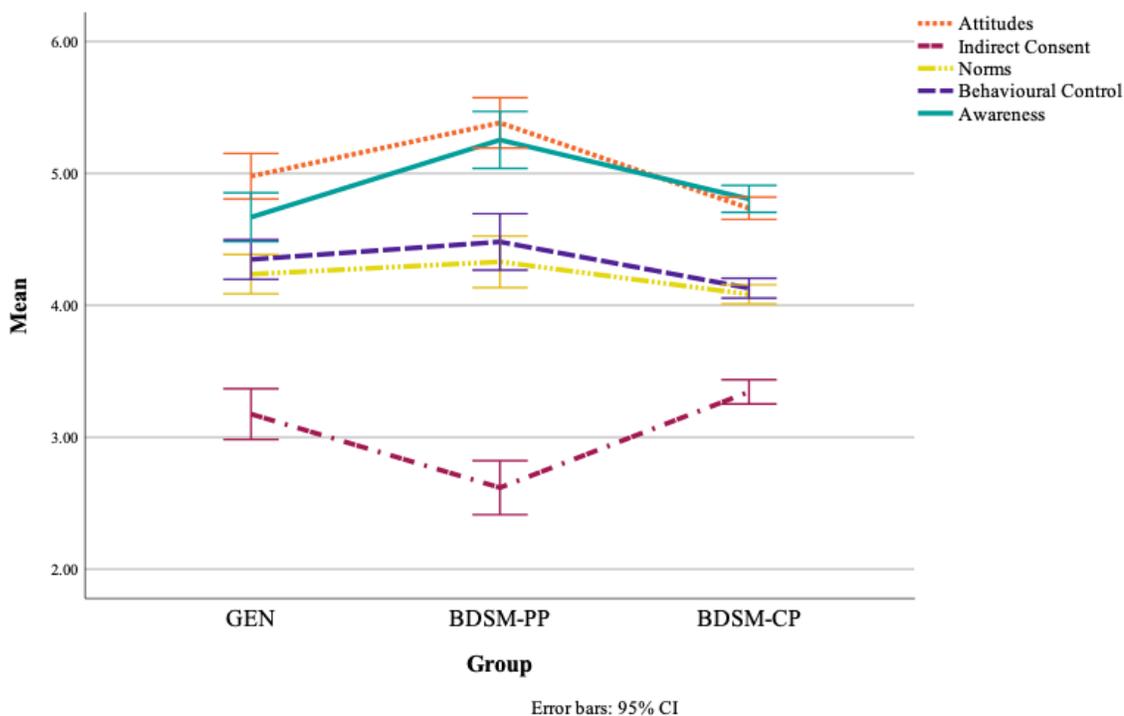
#### *Consent Beliefs*

A multivariate ANCOVA with group as fixed factor and gender as a covariate was used to assess differences in consent beliefs (i.e., SCS-R) across the three groups of interest (i.e., non-practitioners, non-community BDSM practitioners, and community-involved BDSM practitioners). The Box's  $M$  test of equality of covariances was violated ( $M= 89.888$ ,  $F(30,3860)= 2.958$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), meaning that the Pillai's Trace statistic, which is robust to unequal variances, will be used to report multivariate results. Gender was determined to be a non-significant covariate in the model ( $V= 0.006$ ,  $F(5,1009)= 1.136$ ,  $p= 0.340$ ). The multivariate result was significant after controlling for gender ( $V= 0.092$ ,  $F(10,2020)= 9.739$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2= 0.046$ ), indicating a difference in various consent beliefs based on participation in, and affiliation with, the BDSM community.

Follow-up univariate tests revealed significant differences in consent attitudes ( $F(2,1013)= 19.7555, p<0.001, \eta_p^2= 0.038$ ), perceived behavioural control ( $F(2,1013)= 8.903, p<0.001, \eta_p^2= 0.016$ ), indirect consent ( $F(2,1013)= 20.127, p<0.001, \eta_p^2= 0.038$ ), and awareness of consent ( $F(2,1013)= 14.405, p<0.001, \eta_p^2= 0.015$ ). Multiple pairwise comparisons with the Bonferroni correction revealed complex relationships between each group with each consent belief: all groups significantly differed on consent attitudes, with BDSM-PP scoring the highest and GEN scoring the lowest; BDSM-PP significantly differed from BDSM-CP, but not GEN, on perceived behavioural control, in which BDSM-PP scored higher; and BDSM-PP differed from both GEN and BDSM-CP on indirect consent and consent awareness, in which BDSM-PP scored the lowest on indirect consent and the highest on consent awareness.

**Figure 2**

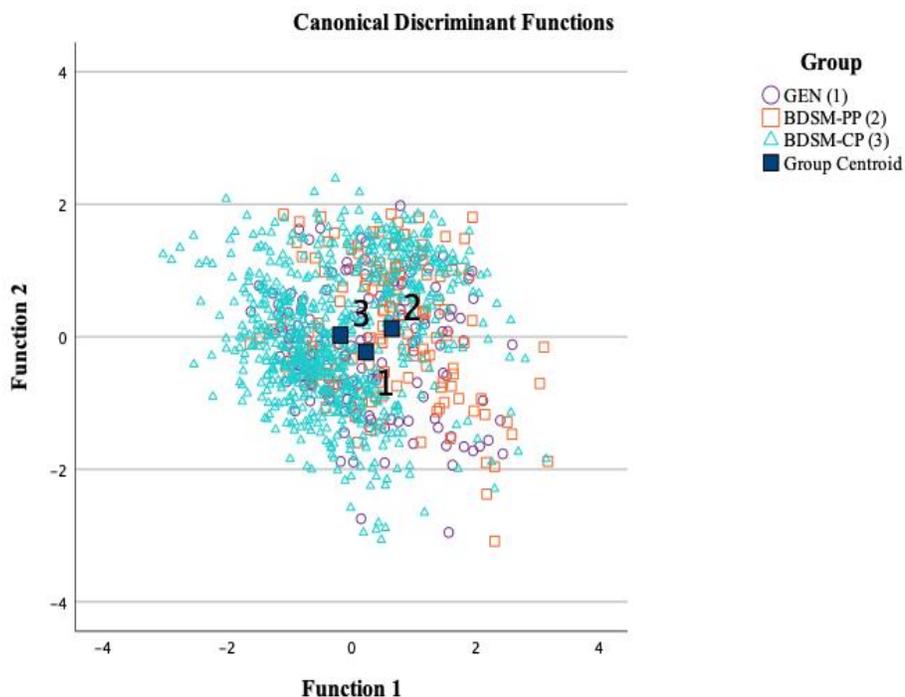
**Group differences in SCS-R Consent Beliefs**



The multivariate ANCOVA was followed up with a discriminant function analysis, which revealed a two-factor structure. The first explained 89.6% of the variance, whereas the second structure explained 10.4% of the variance. Function 1 situated consent attitudes ( $b = 0.575$ ), norms ( $b = 0.360$ ), and lack of perceived behavioural control ( $b = 0.433$ ) as having a positive discriminatory effect on group membership, with indirect consent ( $b = -0.724$ ) and awareness ( $b = -0.460$ ) negatively affecting the discrimination. The second function situated consent norms ( $b = 0.061$ ) and awareness ( $b = 1.134$ ) as having a positive discriminatory effect and attitudes ( $b = -.630$ ), indirect consent ( $b = -0.232$ ), and lack of perceived behavioural control ( $b = -0.208$ ) having a negative effect on group membership. The plot demonstrated that the first function discriminated BDSM-PP from GEN and BDSM-CP, in which BDSM-PP demonstrated more positive consent attitudes, norms, lack of perceived behavioural control, and less indirect consent approaches and consent awareness. Function 2 differentiated BDSM practitioners from non-practitioners, in which GEN demonstrated lower consent norms and attitudes, and more positive attitudes, more indirect consent approaches, and greater lack of perceived behavioural control. See Figure 3 for more details.

Figure 3

## Plot of Canonical Discriminant Functions for Group Beliefs



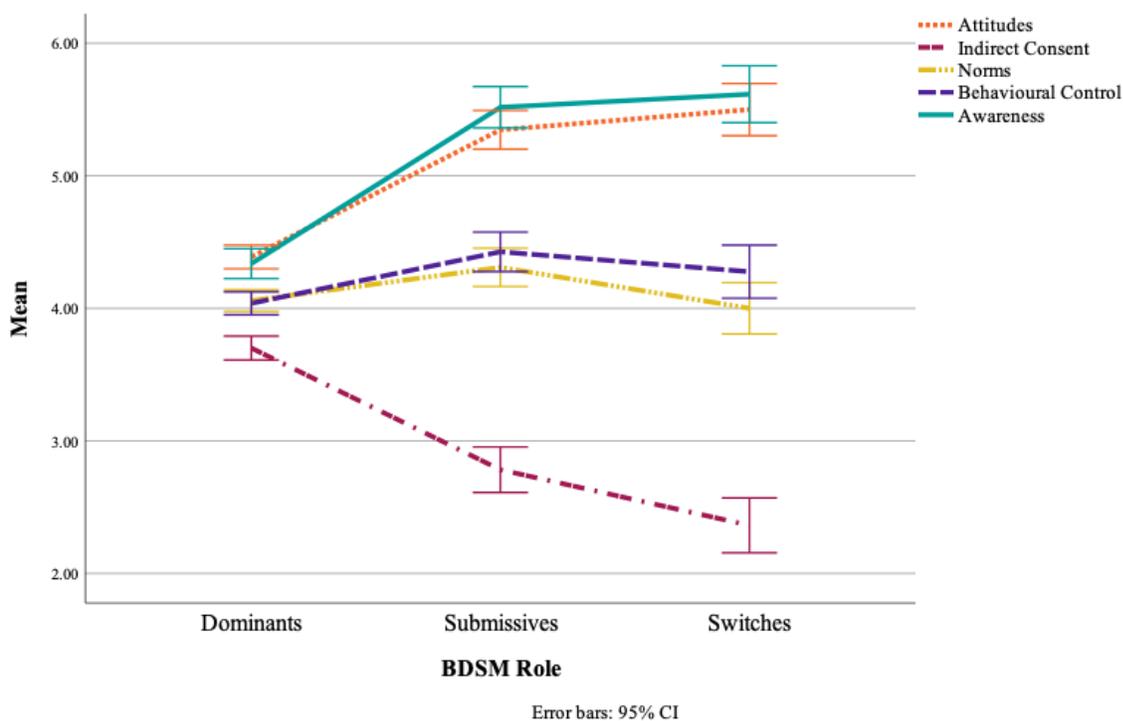
An exploratory follow-up multivariate ANCOVA with BDSM role as a fixed factor was used to assess the effect of BDSM role identity on consent beliefs. The multivariate result was significant ( $V = 0.32$ ,  $F(20,3428) = 14.891$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.080$ ), indicating that participants with differing BDSM role identities demonstrated different consent beliefs.

Follow-up univariate tests revealed significant differences in consent attitudes ( $F(3,859) = 64.522$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.184$ ), perceived behavioural control ( $F(3,859) = 8.647$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.026$ ), consent norms ( $F(3,859) = 4.239$ ,  $p = 0.007$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.014$ ), indirect consent ( $F(3,859) = 64.129$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.183$ ), and awareness of consent ( $F(3,859) = 66.869$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.189$ ). Multiple pairwise comparisons with the Bonferroni correction revealed that dominant individuals scored significantly lower on consent attitudes from submissives or switches; all three role identities scored significantly different from each other on indirect consent, in which dominants

scored the highest and switches scored the lowest; submissive individuals scored significantly higher on consent norms compared to dominants or switches; submissives scored significantly higher on perceived behavioural control compared to dominants, but not switches; and dominants scored significantly lower on consent awareness than submissives or switches.

**Figure 4**

**BDSM Role Differences in SCS-R Consent Beliefs**

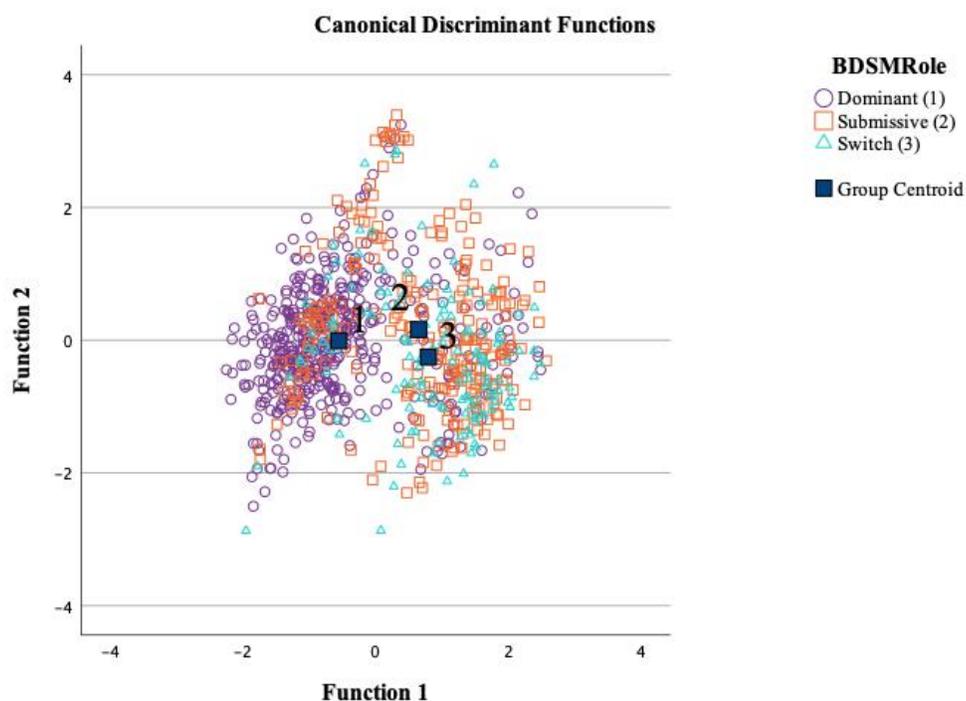


The multivariate ANCOVA was followed up with a discriminant function analysis, which revealed a two-factor structure. The first explained 95.7% of the variance, whereas the second structure explained 4.3% of the variance. Function 1 situated indirect consent ( $b = -0.460$ ) as having a negative discriminatory effect, and consent attitudes ( $b = 0.372$ ), norms ( $b = 0.180$ ), lack of perceived behavioural control ( $b = 0.346$ ), and awareness ( $b = 0.357$ ) as having a positive discriminatory effect on group membership. The second function produced similar coefficients for all five facets of consent beliefs (consent attitudes ( $b = 0.311$ ), indirect consent ( $b = 0.853$ ),

consent norms ( $b = 0.594$ ), lack of perceived behavioural control ( $b = 0.021$ ), and awareness ( $0.440$ )), in which the groups were positively discriminated by all five facets. The plot demonstrated that the first function discriminated dominants from both submissives and switches, in that dominant individuals demonstrated more indirect consent approaches, and less positive consent attitudes, norms, awareness, and greater lack of perceived behavioural control. Function 2 differentiated switches from dominants and submissives, in that switch individuals demonstrated more positive consent attitudes, norms, awareness, and greater indirect consent approaches and lack of perceived behavioural control. See Figure 5 for more details.

**Figure 5**

**Plot of Canonical Discriminant Functions for Role Beliefs**



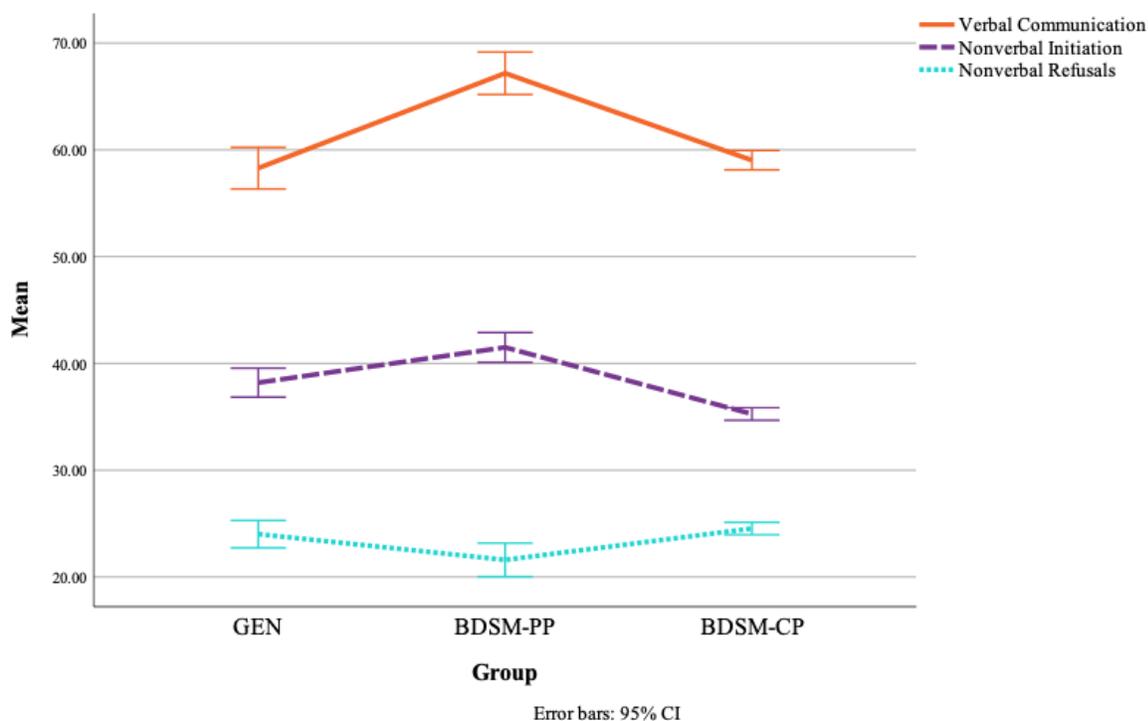
### ***Consent Behaviours***

A multivariate ANCOVA with group as a fixed factor, and gender as a covariate was used to assess differences in consent behaviours (i.e., VNSCQ) across the three groups of interest (i.e., non-practitioners, non-community BDSM practitioners, and community-involved BDSM practitioners). The Box's  $M$  test of equality of covariances was violated ( $M= 63.718$ ,  $F(12,645019)= 5.268$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), meaning that the Pillai's Trace statistic, which is robust to unequal variances, will be used to report multivariate results. Gender was determined to be a non-significant covariate in the model ( $V= 0.004$ ,  $F(3,1004)= 1.344$ ,  $p=0.259$ ). The multivariate result was significant after controlling for gender ( $V= 0.103$ ,  $F(6,2010)= 18.257$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2= 0.052$ ), indicating a difference in various consent behaviours based on participation in, and affiliation with, the BDSM community.

Follow-up univariate tests revealed significant differences in verbal sexual communication ( $F(2,1006)= 27.230$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2= 0.051$ ), and nonverbal initiation and pleasure ( $F(2,1006)= 37.640$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2= 0.070$ ), and non-verbal refusals ( $F(2,1006)= 7.531$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2= 0.015$ ). Multiple pairwise comparisons with the Bonferroni correction revealed that BDSM-PP significantly differed from BDSM-CP and GEN in verbal communication, with BDSM-PP scoring the higher than the other groups; all three groups significantly differed on nonverbal initiation and pleasure, with BDSM-PP scoring the highest and BDSM-CP scoring the lowest; and BDSM-PP significantly differed from BDSM-CP and GEN in non-verbal refusals, with BDSM-PP scoring the lower than the other groups.

Figure 6

## Group Differences in VNSCQ Consent Behaviours

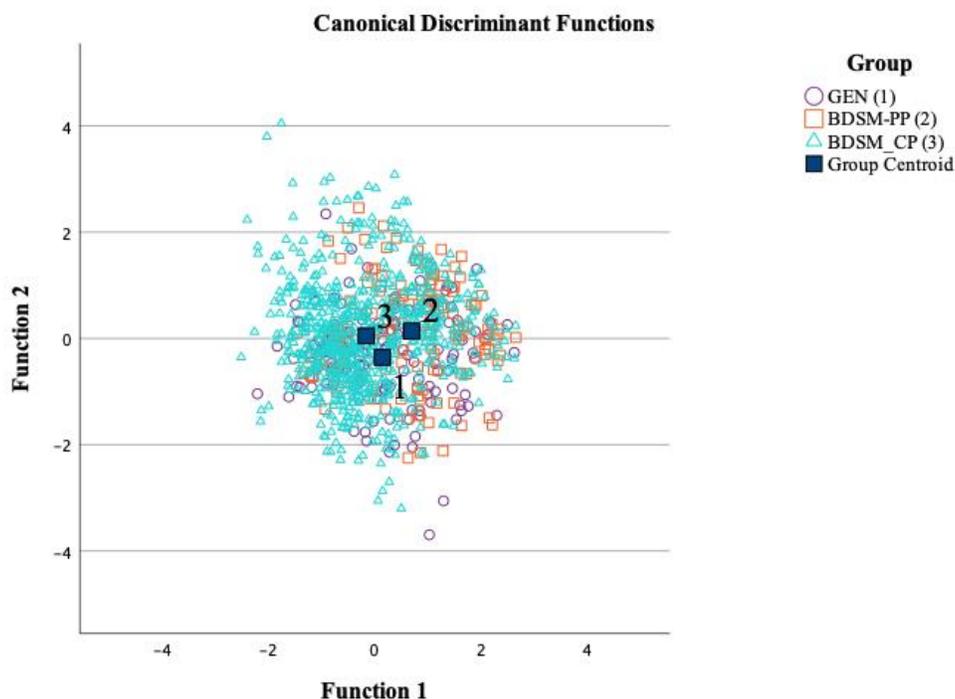


The multivariate ANCOVA was followed up with a discriminant function analysis, which revealed a two-factor structure. The first explained 78.9% of the variance, whereas the second structure explained 21.1% of the variance. Function 1 situated nonverbal refusal ( $b = -0.347$ ) as having a negative discriminatory effect, and verbal communication ( $b = 0.166$ ) and nonverbal initiation ( $b = 0.809$ ) having a positive effect on group membership. In contrast, the second function situated nonverbal initiation ( $b = -0.908$ ) as having a negative discriminatory effect, and verbal communication ( $b = 1.218$ ) and nonverbal refusal ( $b = 0.063$ ) having a positive effect on group membership. The plot demonstrated that the first function differentiated BDSM-PP from both GEN and BDSM-CP, in that BDSM-PP demonstrated less nonverbal refusals, and more verbal communication and nonverbal initiation. Function 2 differentiated BDSM practitioners

from non-practitioners, in that GEN demonstrated more nonverbal initiation, and less verbal communication and nonverbal refusals. See Figure 7 for more details.

**Figure 7**

**Plot of Canonical Discriminant Functions for Group Behaviours**



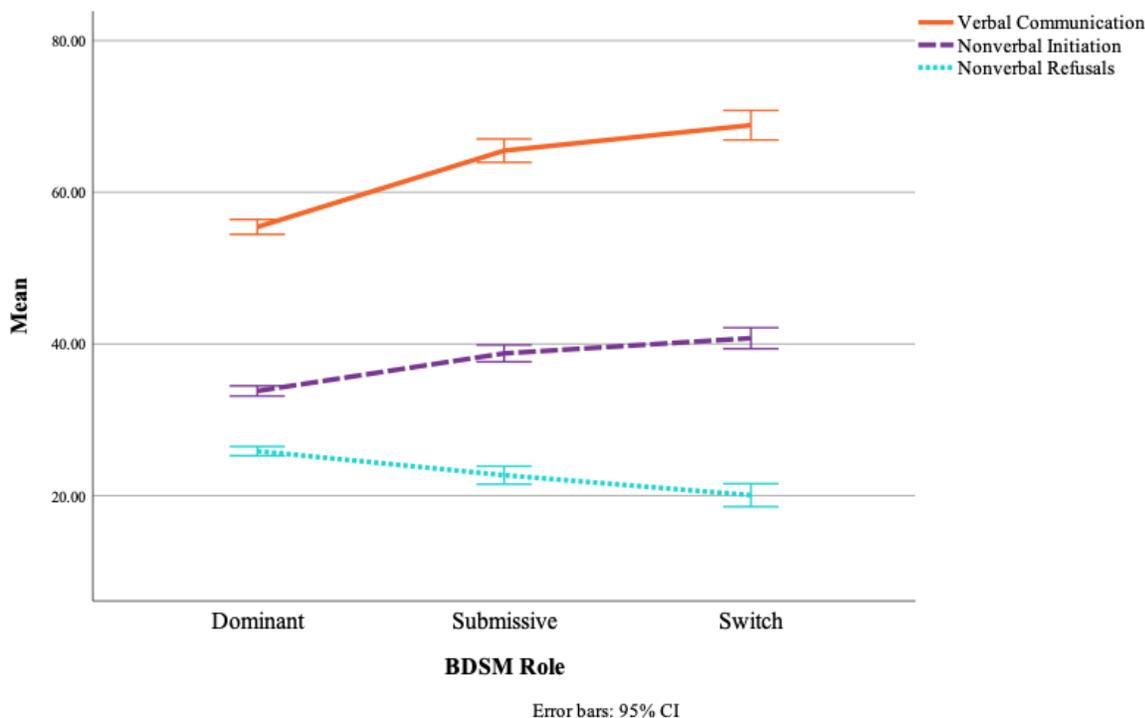
An exploratory follow-up multivariate ANCOVA with BDSM role as a fixed factor was used to assess the effect of BDSM role identity on consent behaviours. The multivariate result was significant ( $V= 0.240$ ,  $F(9,2559)= 24.706$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2= 0.080$ ), indicating that participants with differing BDSM role identities demonstrated different consent behaviours.

Follow up univariate tests revealed significant differences in verbal communication ( $F(3,853)= 71.450$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2= 0.201$ ), nonverbal initiation and pleasure ( $F(3,853)= 37.669$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2= 0.117$ ), and nonverbal sexual refusal ( $F(3,853)= 22.153$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2= 0.072$ ). Multiple pairwise comparisons with the Bonferroni correction revealed that all three roles differed in verbal communication, in which dominant individuals scored the lowest and switches

scored the highest; dominant individuals scored significantly lower in nonverbal initiation and pleasure compared to all other roles; and all roles significantly differed from each other on nonverbal sexual refusal, in which dominants scored the highest, and switches scored the lowest.

**Figure 8**

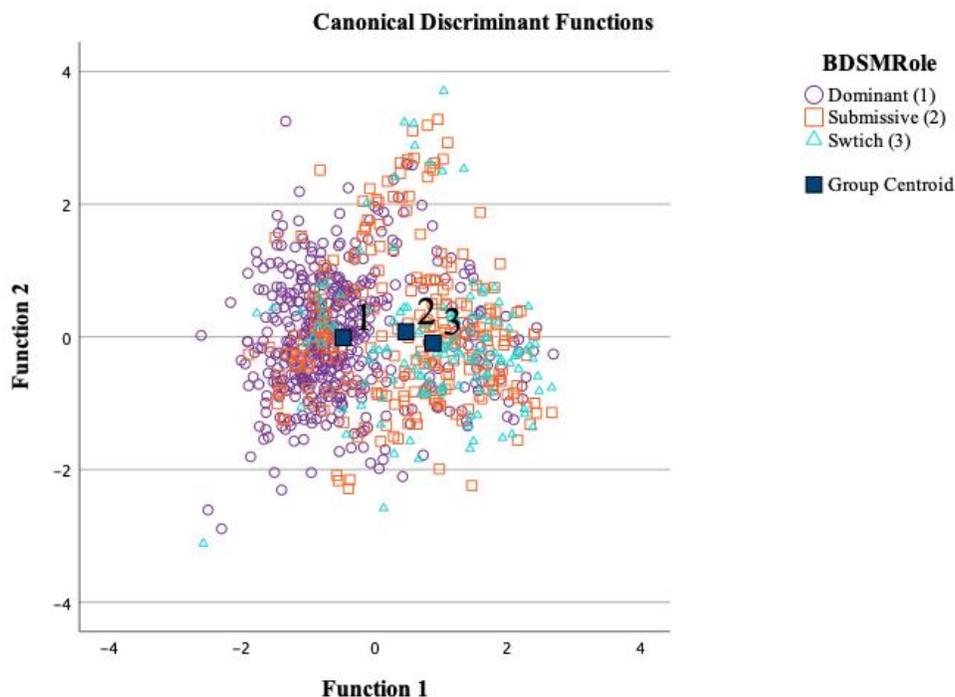
**BDSM Role Differences in VNSCQ Consent Behaviours**



The multivariate ANCOVA was followed up with a discriminant function analysis, which revealed a single factor structure that explained 99.9% of the variance. The coefficients of the discriminant function situated nonverbal refusal ( $b = -0.384$ ) as having a negative discriminatory effect compared to verbal communication ( $b = 0.661$ ), and nonverbal initiation ( $b = 0.382$ ) having a positive discriminatory effect on group membership. The plot demonstrated that the function discriminated dominants from both submissives and switches, in that dominant individuals demonstrated greater nonverbal refusals and less verbal communication and nonverbal initiation. See Figure 9 for more details.

Figure 9

## Plot of Canonical Discriminant Functions for Role Behaviours

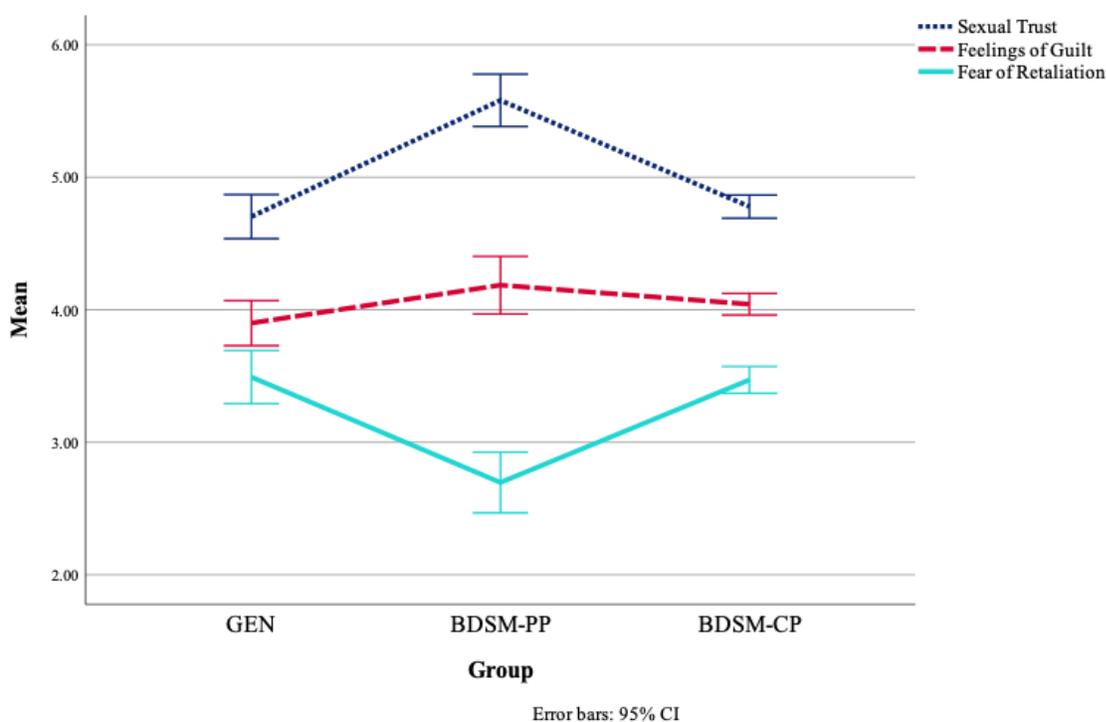
*Safety and Trust in Communication*

A multivariate ANCOVA with group as a fixed factor and gender as a covariate was used to assess differences in relational dynamics (i.e., STSC) across the three groups of interest (i.e., non-practitioners, non-community BDSM practitioners, and community-involved BDSM practitioners). The Box's  $M$  test of equality of covariances was violated ( $M= 21.531$ ,  $F(12,688106)= 1.781$ ,  $p= 0.045$ ), meaning that the Pillai's Trace statistic, which is robust to unequal variances, will be used to report multivariate results. Gender was determined to be a non-significant covariate in the model ( $V= 0.007$ ,  $F(3,1004)= 2.502$ ,  $p=0.058$ ). The multivariate result was significant after controlling for gender ( $V= 0.065$ ,  $F(6,2010)= 11.315$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2= 0.033$ ), indicating a difference in various relational trust based on participation in, and affiliation with, the BDSM community.

Follow-up univariate tests revealed significant differences in sexual trust ( $F(2,1006)=40.550, p<0.001, \eta_p^2=0.056$ ), and fear of retaliation ( $F(2,1006)=36.438, p<0.001, \eta_p^2=0.038$ ). Multiple pairwise comparisons with the Bonferroni correction revealed BDSM-PP significantly differed from GEN and BDSM-CP in both sexual trust and fear of retaliation, in that BDSM-PP scored higher in sexual trust and lower in fear of retaliation compared to the other two groups.

**Figure 10**

**Group Differences in Safety in Sexual Communication**

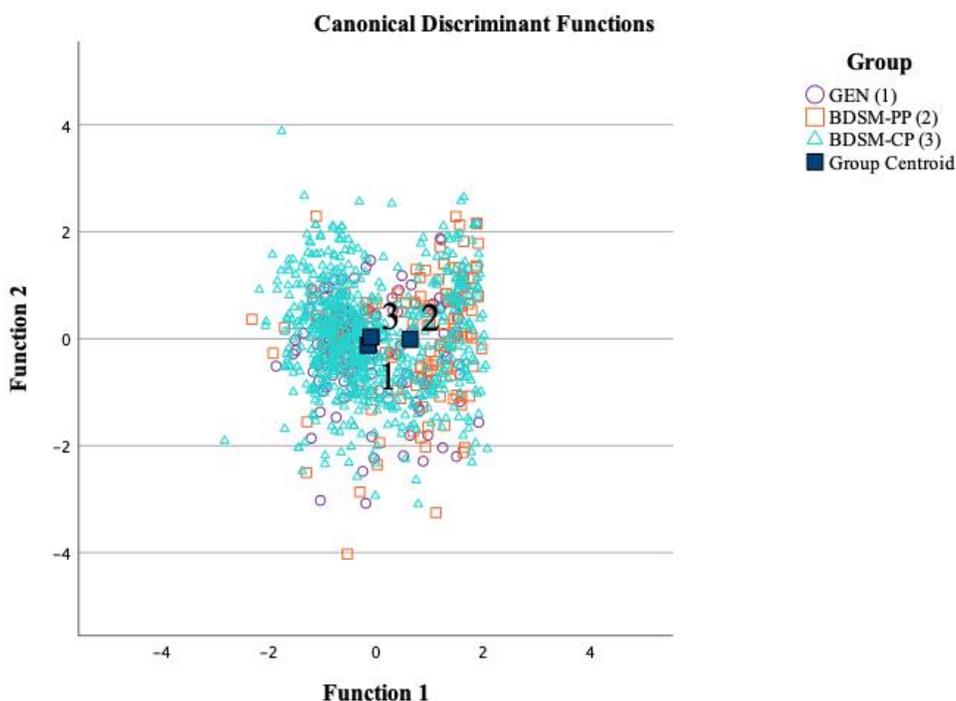


The multivariate ANCOVA was followed up with a discriminant function analysis, which revealed a single factor structure that explained 95.7% of the variance. The coefficients of the discriminant function situated sexual trust ( $b=0.735$ ) as having a positive discriminatory effect and feelings of guilt ( $b=-0.066$ ), and fear of retaliation ( $b=-0.417$ ) having a negative effect on group membership. The plot demonstrated that the function discriminated BDSM-PP from both

GEN and BDSM-CP, in that BDMS-PP demonstrated greater sexual trust, and less fear of retaliation and feelings of guilt. See Figure 11 for more details.

**Figure 11**

**Plot of Canonical Discriminant Functions for Group Sexual Safety**



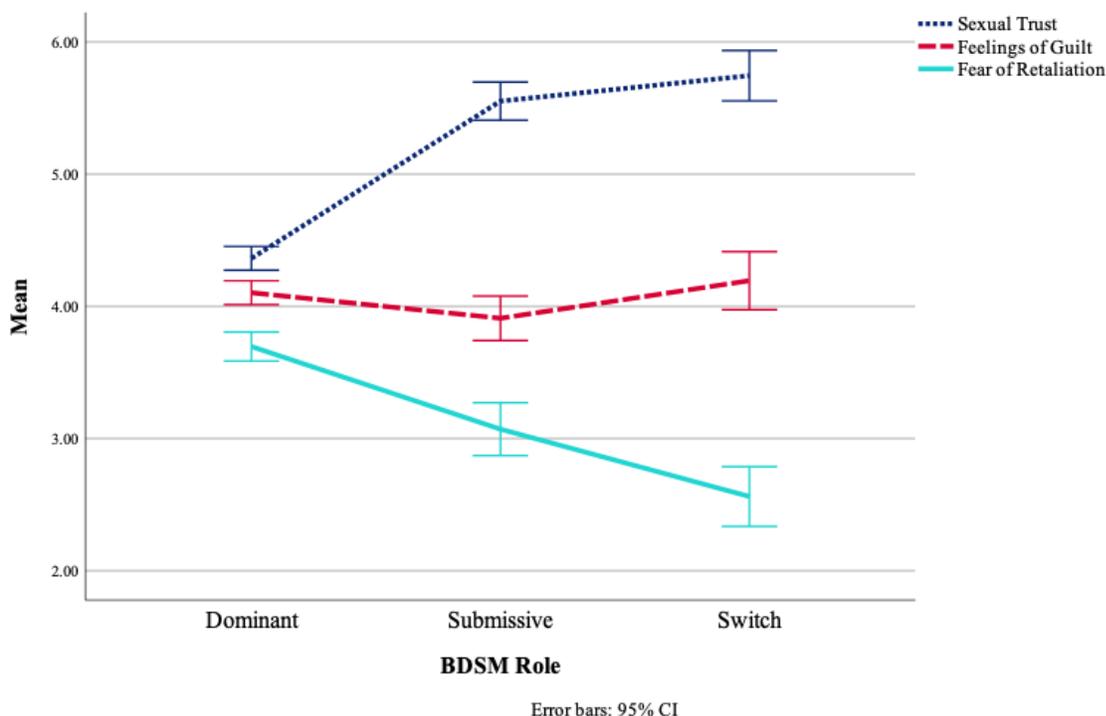
An exploratory follow-up multivariate ANCOVA with BDSM role as a fixed factor was used to assess the effect of BDSM role identity on relational trust. The multivariate result of the interaction was significant ( $V= 0.293$ ,  $F(9,2526)= 30.385$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2= 0.098$ ), indicating that participants with differing BDSM role identities demonstrated different levels of relational trust.

Follow up univariate tests revealed significant differences in sexual trust ( $F(3,842)= 100.404$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2= 0.263$ ) and fear of retaliation ( $F(3,842)= 29.709$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2= 0.096$ ). Multiple pairwise comparisons with the Bonferroni correction revealed that dominants scored significantly lower in sexual trust than all other roles; and all three roles scored significantly

different from each other in fear of retaliation, with switches scoring the highest, and dominants scoring the lowest.

**Figure 12**

**BDSM Role Differences in Safety in Sexual Communication**

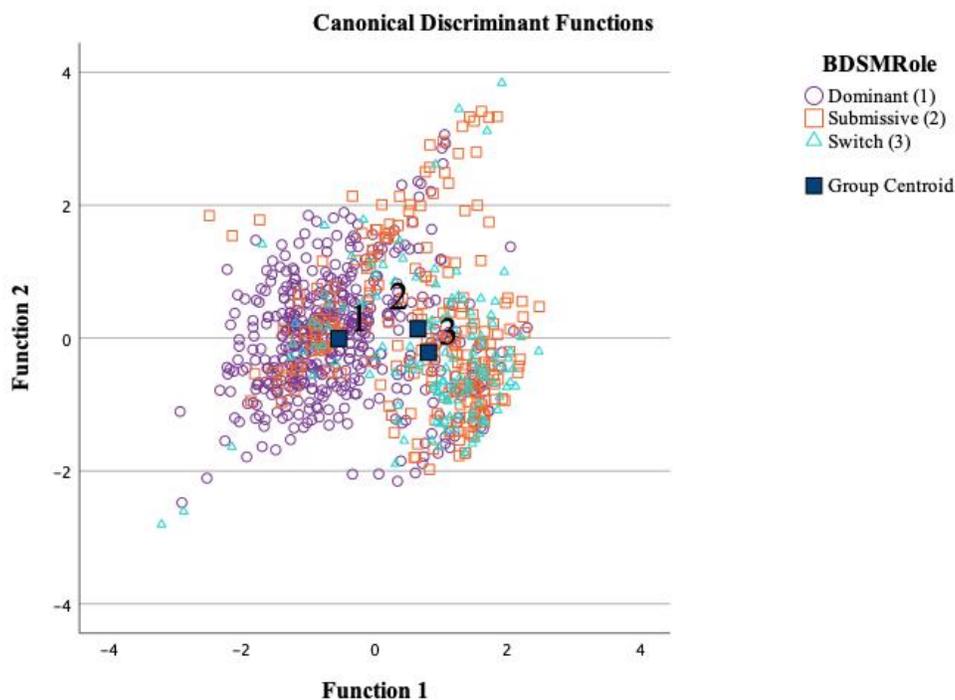


The multivariate ANCOVA was followed up with a discriminant function analysis, which revealed a two-factor structure. The first explained 96.7% of the variance, whereas the second structure explained 3.3% of the variance. The coefficients of the discriminant functions situated sexual trust ( $b = 0.937$ ) as having a positive discriminatory effect, and feelings of guilt ( $b = -0.310$ ) and fear of retaliation ( $b = -0.168$ ) having a negative effect on group membership. The second function situated feelings of guilt ( $b = -0.407$ ) as having a negative discriminatory effect, and sexual trust ( $b = 0.435$ ) and feelings of retaliation ( $b = 0.880$ ) having a positive effect on group membership. The plots demonstrated that function 1 differentiated dominants from submissives and switches, in that dominant individuals demonstrated less sexual trust, and more

fear of retaliation and feelings of guilt. Function 2 differentiated submissives from dominants and switches, in that submissive individuals demonstrated less feelings of guilt, but more sexual trust and fear of retaliation. See Figure 13 for more details.

**Figure 13**

**Plot of Canonical Discriminant Functions for Role Sexual Safety**



### *Sexual Compliance and Violations*

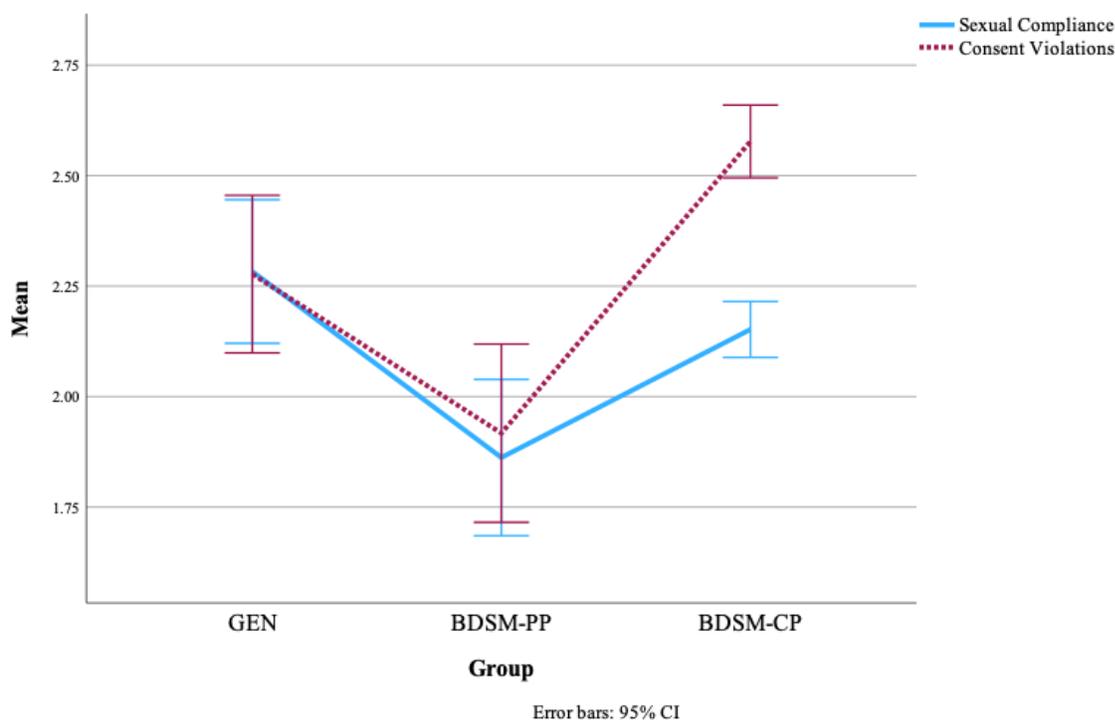
A multivariate ANCOVA with group as a fixed factor and gender as a covariate was used to assess differences in sexual consequences (i.e., violations and instances of consenting to unwanted sex) across the three groups of interest (i.e., non-practitioners, non-community BDSM practitioners, and community-involved BDSM practitioners). The Box's  $M$  test of equality of covariances was violated ( $M= 20.470$ ,  $F(6,1549933)= 3.397$ ,  $p= 0.002$ ), meaning that the Pillai's Trace statistic, which is robust to unequal variances, will be used to report multivariate results. Gender was determined to be a non-significant covariate in the model ( $V= 0.000$ ,  $F(2,1030)=$

0.105,  $p=0.9$ ). The multivariate result was significant after controlling for gender ( $V= 0.055$ ,  $F(4,2062)= 14.614$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2= 0.027$ ), indicating a difference in sexual consequences based on participation in, and affiliation with, the BDSM community.

Follow-up univariate tests revealed significant differences in instances of consenting to unwanted sex ( $F(2,1031)= 7.307$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2= 0.016$ ), and instances of consent violations ( $F(2,1031)= 28.846$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2= 0.041$ ). Multiple pairwise comparisons with the Bonferroni correction revealed that BDSM-PP scored significantly lower in sexual compliance compared to GEN and BDSM-CP; and all groups significantly differed in consent violations, in that BDSM-PP scored the lowest and BDSM-CP scored the highest.

**Figure 14**

#### Group Differences in Consent Consequences

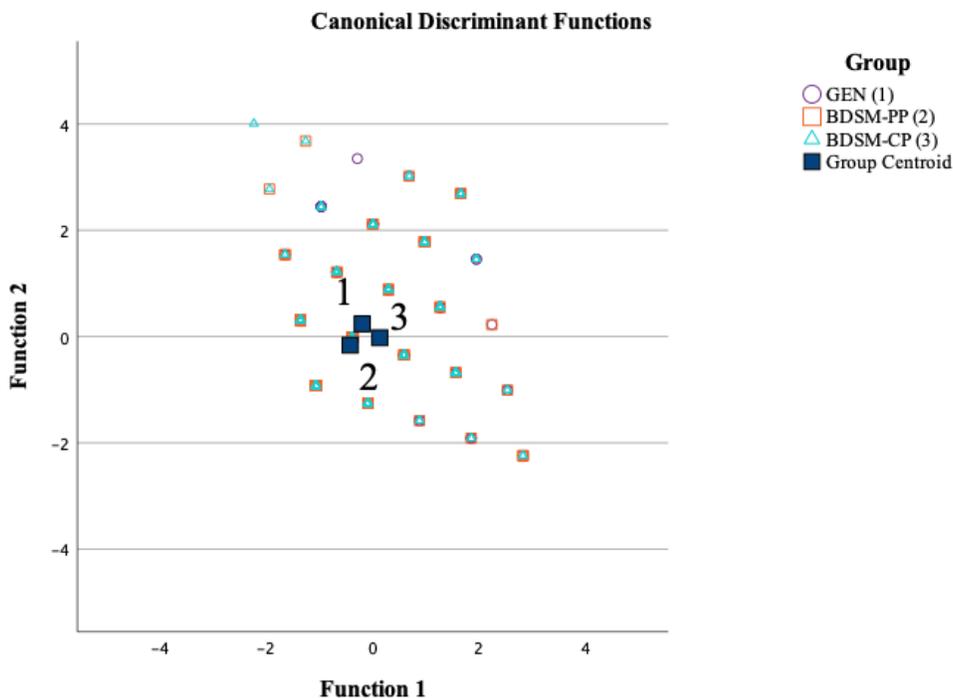


The multivariate ANCOVA was followed up with a discriminant function analysis, which revealed a two-factor structure. The first explained 77% of the variance, whereas the second

structure explained 23% of the variance. Function 1 situated consenting to unwanted sex ( $b = -0.272$ ) as having a negative discriminatory effect, and consent violations ( $b = 1.118$ ) having a positive discriminatory effect on group membership. In contrast, the second function situated consenting to unwanted sex ( $b = 1.148$ ) as having a positive discriminatory effect, and consent violations ( $b = -0.379$ ) having a negative effect on group membership. The plot demonstrated that function 1 discriminated BDSM-CP from both GEN and BDSM-PP, in that BDSM-CP reported less sexual compliance but more consent violations. Function 2 discriminated practitioners from non-practitioners, in that GEN reported more sexual compliance but fewer instances of consent violations.

**Figure 15**

**Plot of Canonical Discriminant Functions for Group Consequences**



A univariate ANOVA was conducted to assess differences in motivations for consenting to unwanted sex across the three groups. The model was significant ( $F(2, 742) = 4.185, p = 0.008$ ,

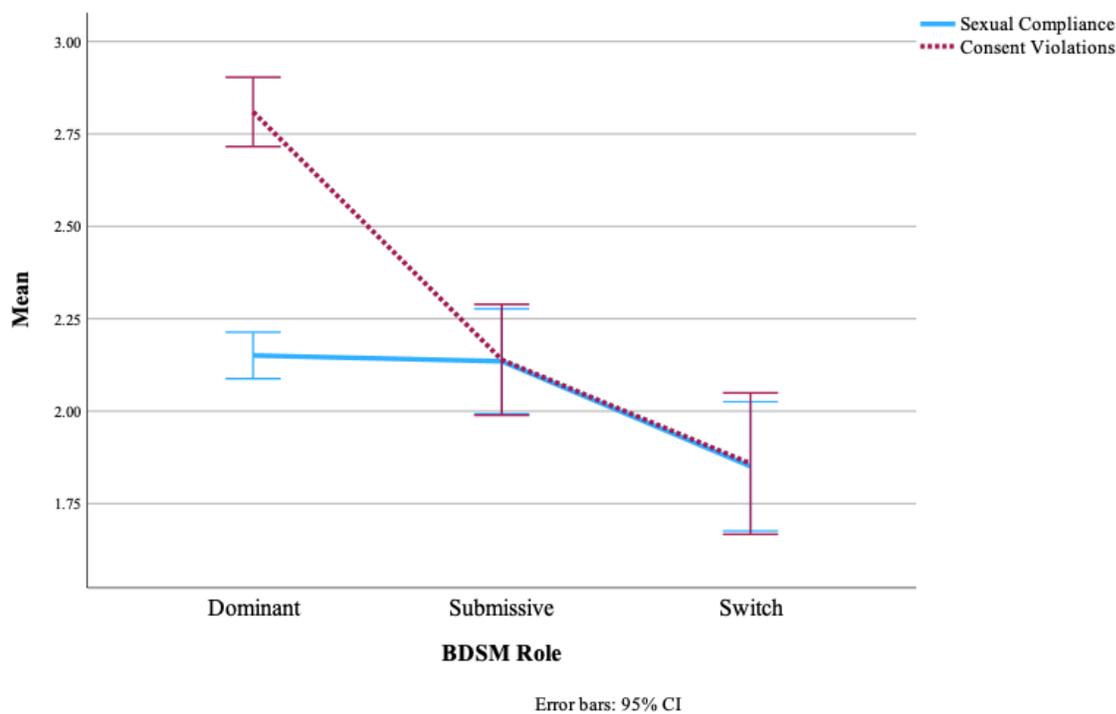
$\eta_p^2 = 0.013$ ), indicating group differences in the number of reasons for consenting to unwanted sex. Tukey HSD post hoc tests revealed that BDSM-PP significantly differed from BDSM-CP, in that BDSM-PP endorsed fewer reasons for consenting to unwanted sex. GEN did not significantly differ from either group.

An exploratory follow-up multivariate ANCOVA with BDSM role as a fixed factor was used to assess the effect of BDSM role identity on sexual consequences. The multivariate result of the interaction was significant ( $V = 0.134$ ,  $F(6,1726) = 20.713$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.067$ ), indicating that participants with differing BDSM role identities demonstrated different instances of sexual consequences.

Follow up univariate tests revealed significant differences in consenting to unwanted sex ( $F(3,863) = 4.082$ ,  $p = 0.007$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.014$ ) and sexual violations ( $F(3,863) = 36.193$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.112$ ). Multiple pairwise comparisons with the Bonferroni correction revealed that switches scored significantly lower in consenting to unwanted sex compared to dominants and submissives; and dominants scored significantly higher in consent violations compared to submissives and switches.

Figure 16

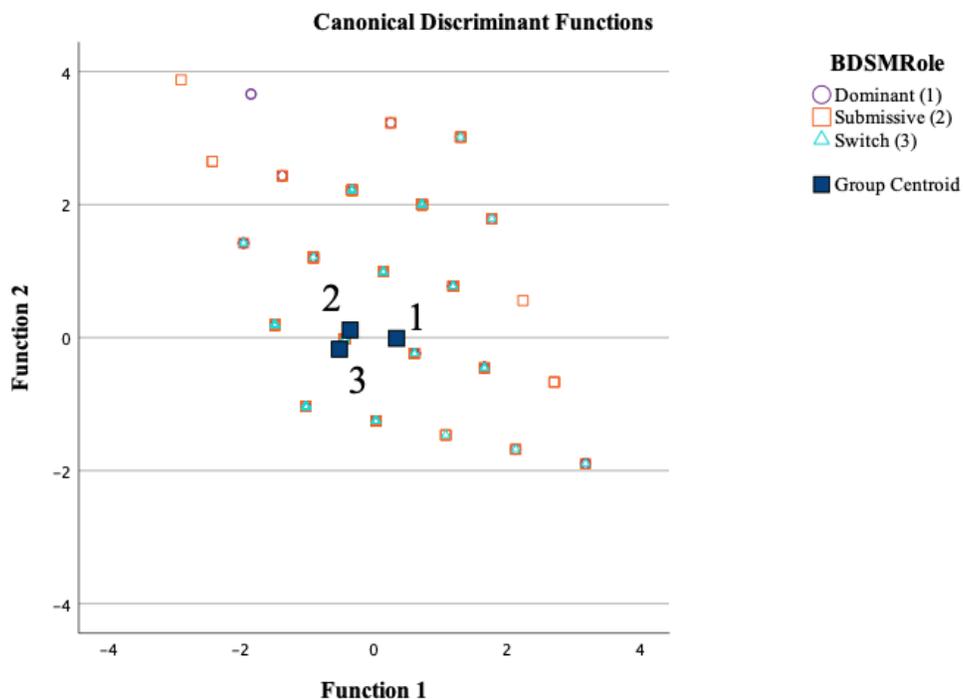
### BDSM Role Differences in Consent Consequences



The multivariate ANCOVA was followed up with a discriminant function analysis, which revealed a two-factor structure. The first explained 94.3% of the variance, whereas the second structure explained 5.7% of the variance. Function 1 situated consenting to unwanted sex ( $b = -0.424$ ) as having a negative discriminatory effect, and consent violations ( $b = 1.108$ ) having a positive discriminatory effect. In contrast, the second function situated consenting to unwanted sex ( $b = 1.162$ ) as having a positive, and consent violations ( $b = -0.238$ ) having a negative discriminatory effect on group membership. The plot demonstrated that function 1 discriminated dominants from both submissives and switches, in that dominant individuals reported more sexual compliance but fewer instances of sexual violations. Function 2 discriminated switches from both dominants and submissives, in that switch individuals reported less sexual compliance but more consent violations.

Figure 17

## Plot of Canonical Discriminant Functions for Role Consequences



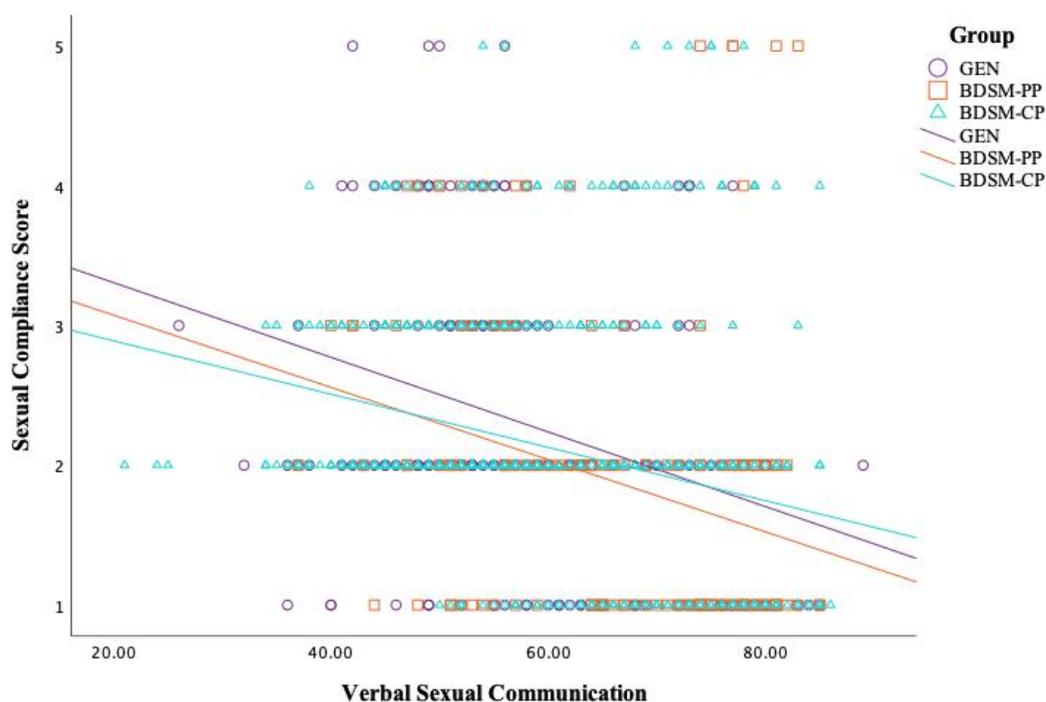
## Consent Consequences

A moderation analysis using a hierarchical regression was used to determine whether affiliation with the BDSM community moderated the relationship between verbal communication and instances of sexual compliance (i.e., consenting to unwanted sex). Verbal communication scores were entered into the model first, which predicted a significant 8.7% of the variance in sexual compliance ( $B = -0.296$ ,  $t = -9.857$ ,  $p < 0.0011$ , 95% C.I.  $B[-0.332, -0.222]$ ). The inclusion of group affiliation into the second model added a non-significant 0.1% change in variance ( $B = -0.040$ ,  $t = -1.067$ ,  $p = 0.286$ , 95% C.I.  $B[-0.112, 0.033]$ ). The interaction term in the third model also added a non-significant 0.1% of variance in sexual compliance, indicating that affiliation with the BDSM community did not moderate the relationship between verbal

communication and sexual compliance ( $B= 0.041, t= 1.145, p=0.252, 95\% \text{ C.I. } B[-0.029, 0.111]$ ).

**Figure 18**

**Moderation of Group Membership on Verbal Communication and Sexual Compliance**

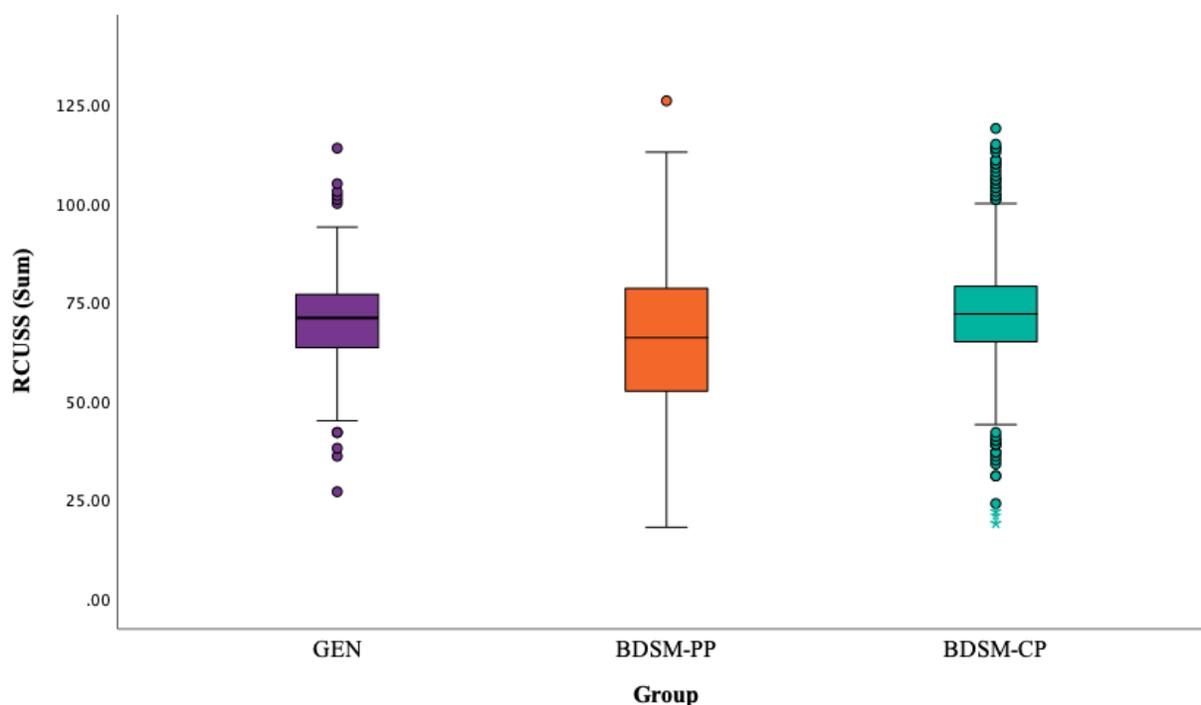


Participants who indicated that they had consented to unwanted sex in the past were asked to identify reasons they engaged in sexual compliance. A one-way ANOVA was used to determine differences in the number of reasons for sexual compliance based on group (i.e., non-practitioners, non-community BDSM practitioners, and community-involved BDSM practitioners). The model was significant ( $F(2, 742)= 4.746, p<0.001, \eta_p^2= 0.013$ ), indicating that the number of reasons for consenting to unwanted sex differed between groups. Tukey HSD post-hoc tests revealed that BDSM-PP endorsed significantly fewer reasons for sexual compliance than BDSM-CP. When examining each reason, it was found that the top three

reasons for sexual compliance based on mean scores in the GEN group were: “seeking acceptance from partner” ( $M= 4.57$ ), “fear of hurting their partner's feelings” ( $M= 4.48$ ), and “not wanting partner to feel rejected” ( $M= 4.29$ ). The top three reasons the BDSM-PP group were: “fear of hurting their partner’s feelings” ( $M= 4.43$ ), “to promote intimacy” ( $M= 4.42$ ), and feeling “obligated to satisfy partner’s needs” ( $M= 4.39$ ). The top three reasons for compliance in the BDSM-CP group were: feeling “obligated to satisfy partners' needs” ( $M= 4.30$ ), “felt guilty saying no” ( $M= 4.29$ ), and “to promote intimacy” ( $M= 4.24$ ).

**Figure 19**

**Group Differences in Number of Motivations for Sexual Compliance**

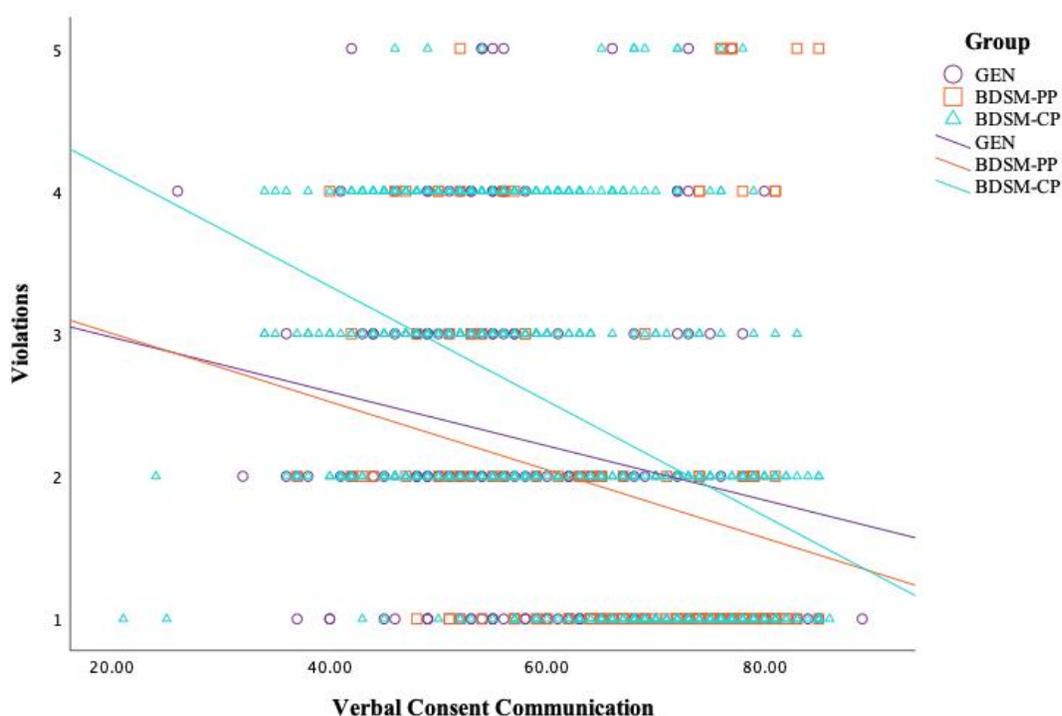


A moderation analysis using a hierarchical regression was used to determine whether affiliation with the BDSM community moderated the relationship between verbal communication and instances of consent violations. Verbal communication scores were entered into the model first, which predicted a significant 15.6% of the variance in sexual compliance

( $B = -0.462$ ,  $t = -13.513$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , 95% C.I.  $B[-0.5292, -0.395]$ ). The inclusion of group affiliation into the second model added a significant 1.7% change in variance ( $B = 0.208$ ,  $t = 4.573$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , 95% C.I.  $B[0.119, 0.297]$ ). The interaction term in the third model also added a significant 1.6% of variance in consent violations, indicating that affiliation with the BDSM community moderated the relationship between verbal communication and consent violations ( $B = -0.189$ ,  $t = -4.444$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , 95% C.I.  $B[-0.272, -0.105]$ ).

**Figure 20**

### Moderation of Group Membership on Verbal Communication and Consent Violations



Participants who indicated that they have had their sexual boundaries violated by a partner were asked to provide a number of details about their experience using closed-ended multiple choice questions, including potential explanations for why they thought the event occurred, attempts at consent renegotiation, relationship status at the time of violation, and prior experience with the individual. Participants in the GEN group identified “misunderstandings or

miscommunication” as the most common explanation for sexual boundary violation (n= 61), followed by “lack of knowledge or skills” (n=46). Participants in the BDSM-PP group also identified “misunderstandings or miscommunication” as the most common explanation for sexual boundary violation (n= 29), followed by “sexual coercion or manipulation” (n= 26). Participants in the BDSM-CP group identified “lack of knowledge or skills” as the most common explanation for sexual boundary violation (n= 182), followed by “misunderstandings or miscommunication” (n= 165). The majority of participants in GEN and BDSM-PP indicated that the violation occurred with a romantic partner (49% and 40% respectively); however, participants in BDSM-CP indicated that the violation occurred with a romantic partner (27%), as well as with ex-partners (21%) or friends (19%).

### **Perceptions of Risk and Consent**

Two standard linear regressions were conducted to determine how the perception of risk of erotic activities predicts the importance of consent for “low risk” and “high risk” behaviours. Regarding low-risk behaviours, the regression model was significant ( $F(2, 1010) = 20.760$ ,  $sr = 0.039$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating an association between perceptions of risk and the importance of consent. Both *likelihood of harm* ( $B = 0.122$ , 95% C.I. [0.036, 0.208],  $t = 2.776$ ,  $p = 0.006$ ,  $sr = 0.086$ ) and *severity of harm* ( $B = -0.251$ , 95% C.I. [-0.332, -0.171],  $t = -6.095$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $sr = -0.188$ ) predicted a significant amount of unique variance in importance of consent. These results suggest that consent importance increases when harm is likely, but decreases when harm is potentially severe.

Figure 21

Regression Plot of Likelihood of Harm Predicting Consent Importance (Low Risk)

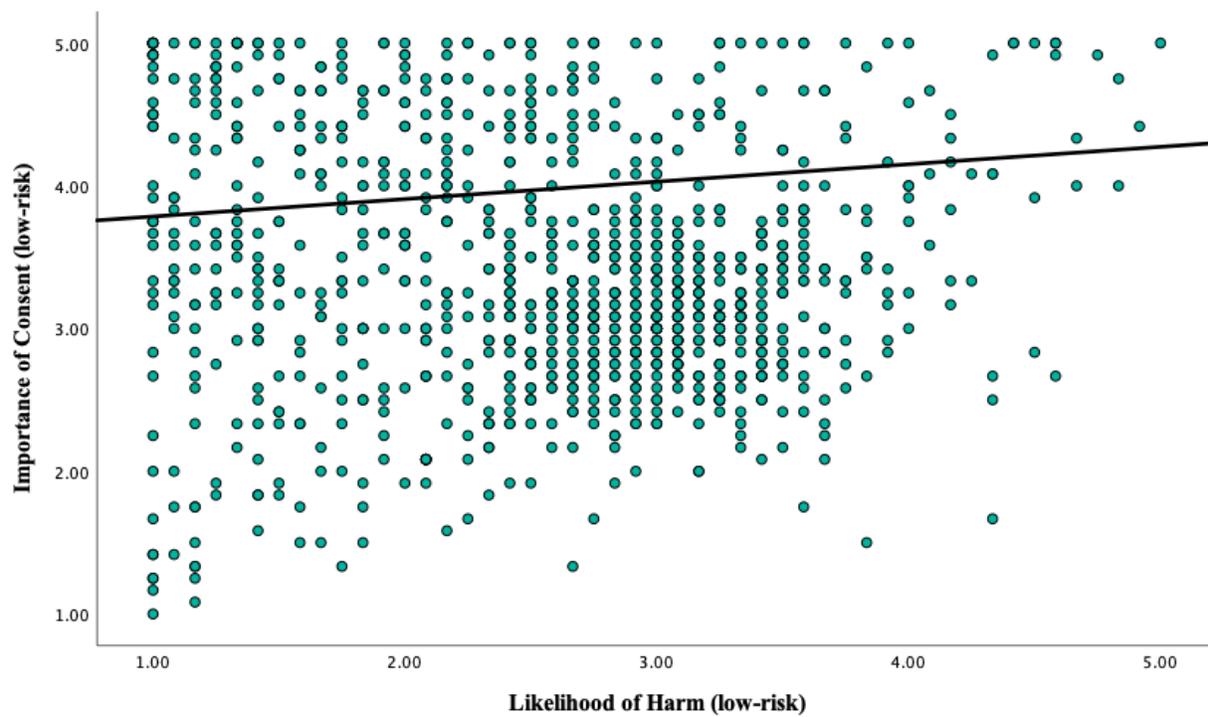
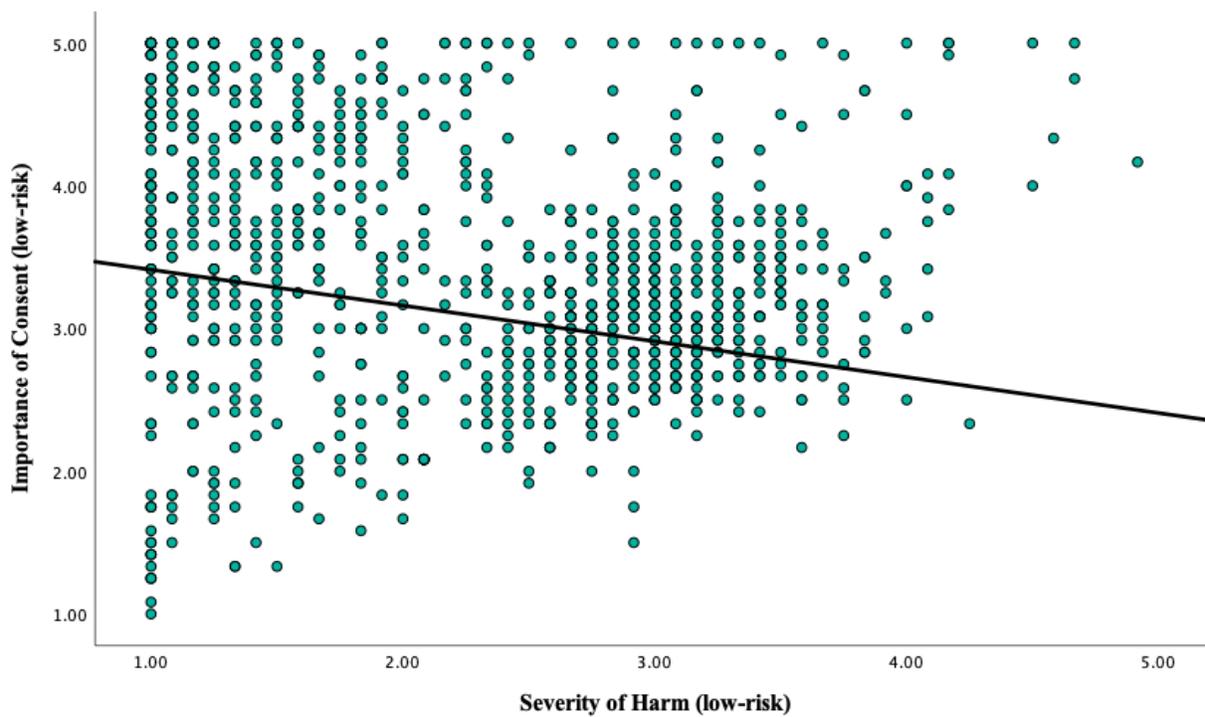


Figure 22

## Regression Plot of Severity of Harm Predicting Consent Importance (Low Risk)



Regarding high-risk behaviours, the regression model was also significant ( $F(2, 1032) = 42.947$ ,  $sr = 0.077$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating an association between perceptions of risk and the importance of consent. In particular, *likelihood of harm* alone ( $B = 0.343$  95% C.I. [0.253, 0.432],  $t = 7.537$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $sr = 0.225$ ) predicted a significant amount of unique variance in importance of consent. These results suggest that the severity of harm is irrelevant in judgments of consent importance for high-risk behaviours—when harm is at all probable, consent importance increases.

Figure 23

Regression Plot of Likelihood of Harm Predicting Consent Importance (High Risk)

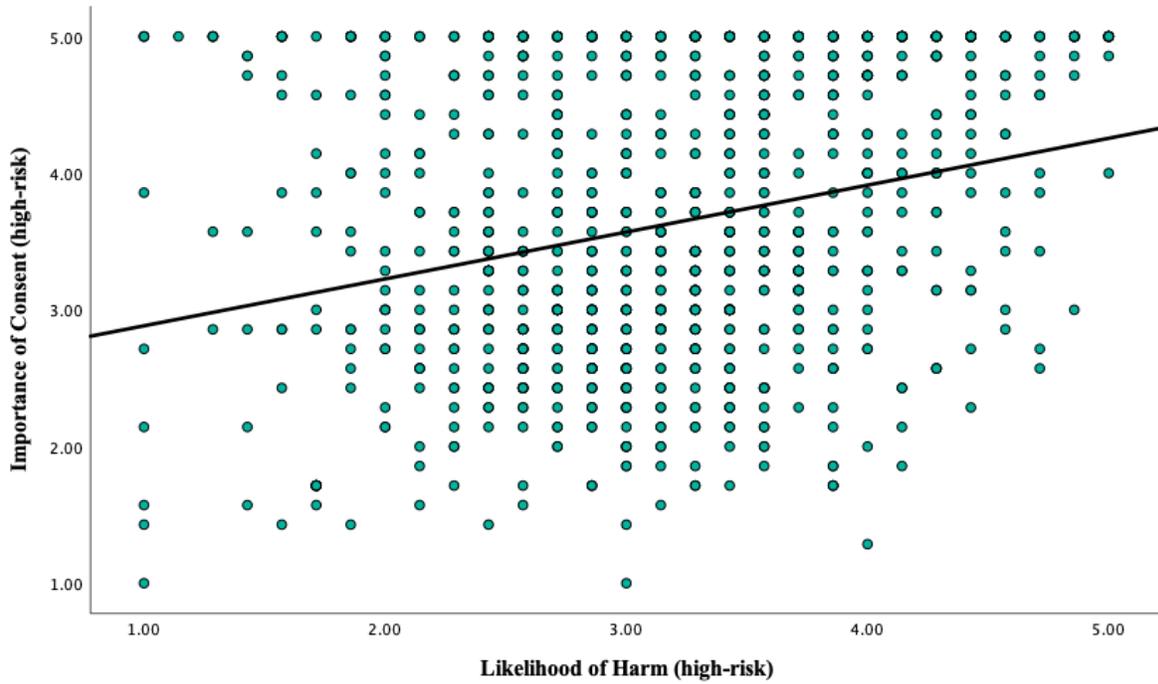
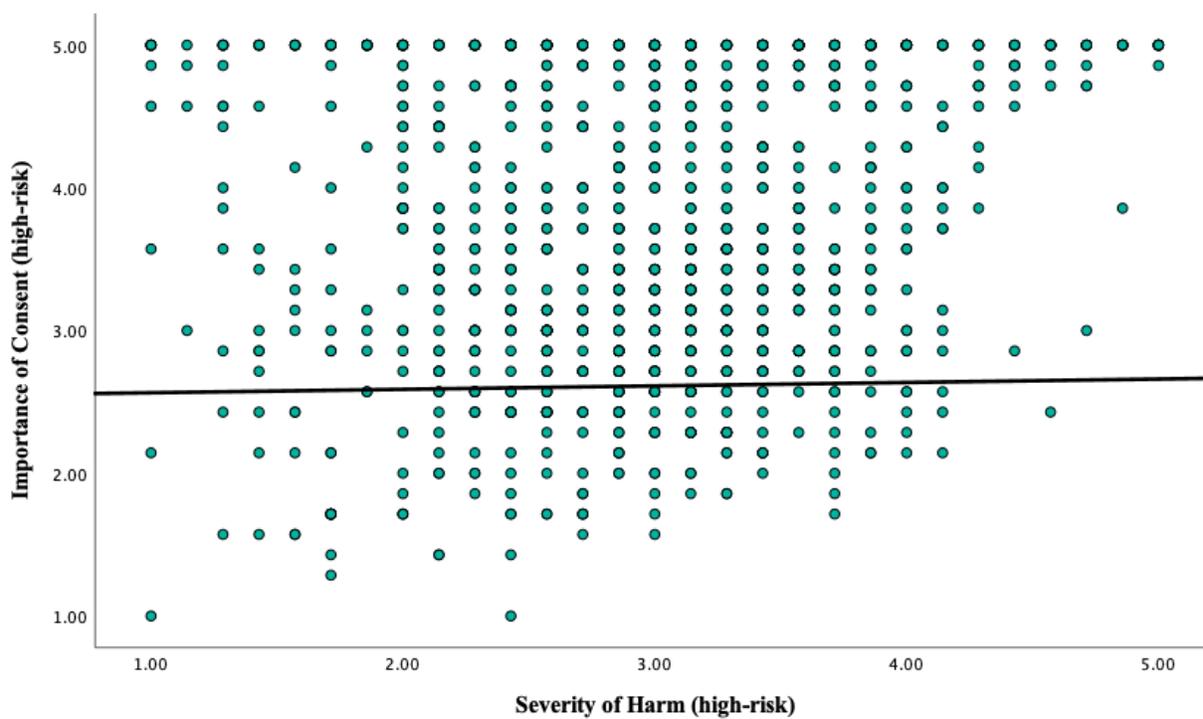


Figure 24

### Regression Plot of Severity of Harm Predicting Consent Importance (High Risk)



### Education and Community Involvement

A number of exploratory analyses were conducted to determine the effect of consent education, observations of consent at community events, and internal motivations on consent beliefs and behaviours among BDSM-CP. Multiple standard regression models were used to determine the effects of education, community involvement, and internal motivations on consent beliefs (i.e., consent attitudes and consent norms) and behaviours (i.e., verbal and nonverbal sexual communication).

Regarding consent attitudes, the sums of methods of consent education, observations of consent negotiation at BDSM community events, and internal motivations for engaging in consent communication were entered into the regression model simultaneously, which together predicted a significant amount of variance in consent attitudes ( $F(3, 34) = 6.596$ ,  $r^2 = 0.368$ ,  $p =$

0.001). In particular, internal motivations predicted a significant amount of unique variance in consent attitudes ( $B= 0.057$ , 95% C.I. [0.014, 0.100],  $t= 2.699$ ,  $p= 0.011$ ,  $sr= 0.368$ ). A follow-up regression analysis was conducted to determine which specific motivations were having the greatest effect on consent attitudes. The regression model was significant ( $F(8, 729)= 87.877$ ,  $R^2= 0.491$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), with multiple motivations predicting significant unique variance to the model. In particular, the motivations “to avoid misunderstandings” ( $B= 0.188$ , 95% C.I. [0.134, 0.243],  $t= 6.782$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $sr= 0.179$ ) and “to mitigate mental distress” ( $B= 0.146$ , 95% C.I. [0.096, 0.196],  $t= 5.766$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $sr= 0.152$ ) were the top two strongest associations with consent attitudes.

Regarding consent norms, the sums of methods of consent education, observations of consent negotiation at BDSM community events, and internal motivations for engaging in consent communication were entered into the regression model simultaneously, which together predicted a significant amount of variance in consent norms ( $F(3, 38)= 11.295$ ,  $r^2= 0.471$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). In particular, consent education predicted a significant amount of unique variance in consent norms ( $B= 0.143$ , 95% C.I. [0.076, 0.210],  $t= 4.311$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $sr= 0.509$ ). A follow-up regression analysis was conducted to determine which specific avenues of consent education were having the greatest effect on consent norms. The overall regression model was significant ( $F(7, 734)= 2.206$ ,  $R^2= 0.021$ ,  $p= 0.032$ ), with only one avenue of consent education demonstrating a significant positive association with consent norms (“community”;  $B= 0.096$ , 95% C.I. [0.034, 0.159],  $t= 3.013$ ,  $p= 0.003$ ,  $sr= 0.110$ ).

Regarding verbal sexual communication, the sums of methods of consent education, observations of consent negotiation at BDSM community events, and internal motivations for engaging in consent communication were entered into the regression model simultaneously,

which together predicted a significant amount of variance in verbal communication ( $F(3, 38)=12.085$ ,  $r^2=0.488$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). In particular, internal motivations predicted a significant amount of unique variance in verbal sexual communication ( $B=1.153$ , 95% C.I. [0.625, 1.680],  $t=4.422$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $sr=0.513$ ). A follow-up regression analysis was conducted to determine which specific internal motivations were having the greatest effect on verbal communication. The regression model was significant ( $F(8, 716)=62.163$ ,  $R^2=0.410$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), with multiple motivations predicting significant unique variance to the model. In particular, the motivations “to increase trust” ( $B=1.655$ , 95% C.I. [1.026, 2.283],  $t=5.168$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $sr=0.148$ ) and “to avoid misunderstandings” ( $B=1.611$ , 95% C.I. [0.980, 2.241],  $t=5.017$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $sr=0.144$ ) were the top two strongest associations with more verbal communication.

Regarding non-verbal sexual communication, the sums of methods of consent education, observations of consent negotiation at BDSM community events, and internal motivations for engaging in consent communication were entered into the regression model simultaneously, which together predicted a significant amount of variance in nonverbal communication ( $F(3, 39)=12.991$ ,  $r^2=0.500$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). In particular, observations of consent at community events predicted a significant amount of unique variance in non-verbal communication ( $B=0.696$ , 95% C.I. [0.324, 1.068],  $t=3.784$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $sr=0.429$ ). A follow-up regression analysis was conducted to determine which specific contexts of observation were having the greatest effect on non-verbal sexual communication. The regression model was significant ( $F(8, 37)=4.714$ ,  $R^2=0.505$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), with only one avenue of observation predicting significant unique variance to the model. In particular, “attending munches” ( $B=4.688$ , 95% C.I. [2.065, 7.311],  $t=3.621$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $sr=0.419$ ) was associated with more nonverbal communication.

## Qualitative Analysis

### *Community Engagement and Experiences*

Participants were asked how their past experiences and/or community involvement have shaped their current sexual communication behaviours in order to better understand the subjective impact of these factors. A total of 354 participants responded to the prompt.

Responses to this question generated five unique themes: (1) evaluations of consent communication, (2) influence of culture and community on consent, (3) consent learning with partners, (4) independent learning, and (5) increase in caution.

Firstly, a large proportion of responses ( $n= 99$ ) endorsed positive evaluations of consent. This theme demonstrated the content of their consent learning, which was often positive in nature. In particular, participants highlighted the importance of consent, with some going so far as to say that consent is “sexy” and improves the overall sexual experience. For example, one participant stated, “my past experiences have shown me that consent is SEXY. Asking someone if they want it and how they want it and what exactly they do want is not only a necessity but can also really set the mood and become verbal foreplay” [capitalization in original]. Responses that included positive evaluations of sexual consent were often coupled with positive perceptions of community and culture shaping these views. In particular, participants noted that their involvement in the BDSM/kink community reinforced how important consent is, not just for sexual activities (e.g., “Being involved in the local scene really helped with solidifying the importance of consent even when hugging someone”). A select few participants ( $n= 6$ ) endorsed a negative evaluation of consent, stating that body language should be sufficient for signalling discomfort, e.g., “it hasn't because it's a gross and weirdo concept (that of asking for verbal permission, as if you somehow can't tell whether someone is into it)”. Other negative evaluations

included the opinion that consent is unnecessary in long-term relationships, or that explicit conversations around consent “ruin the mood”. For example, one participant stated that they would rather “give blanket consent up front, so that the play isn't interrupted by constant questions and renegotiations”.

Secondly, participants indicated positive experiences within their community and culture ( $n= 80$ ) influencing their current consent beliefs and behaviours. This theme reflected the strength of culture and community in shaping consent behaviours. In particular, participants discussed how family and friends provided a foundation for their consent beliefs and behaviours, and provided comfort when consent violations occurred. One participant stated that “from a young age, my mother told me about consent and bodily autonomy...”. Oftentimes, participants discussed how these baseline understandings were expanded upon in community spaces: “friends and family formed the basics (common sense), non-monogamous/play community and some partners provided more depth ”. The BDSM community was the most common source of consent education endorsed by participants ( $n= 49$ ). For example, one participant stated that “the BDSM community is the one that taught me about consent and my rights to boundaries, the ‘regular’ world never bothered to give me that education in any capacity”. Other positive sources of influence noted by participants included age/generation effects (“I’m old, when I was younger consent was not really talked about, now it is very much a focus, and rightly so”), formal sex education, and experiences with queer/polyamory communities. Some participants ( $n= 24$ ) described negative experiences with community and culture, often endorsing religion as a negative influence on their consent understanding and communication. For example, one participant noted that they “grew up in a very [Catholic] household and environment where sexuality was not discussed or explored”. Participants with religious upbringings described how

religion had negative consequences on both their consent communication and sexual functioning (“I was raised religious and didn’t lose my virginity till I was 28, now I’m constantly horny which perhaps says something about the nature of sexual suppression”). Other participants lamented the lack of effective formal sexual education (e.g., “I had no sex education at all”, “lack of any sex education from school”), which sometimes resulted in adverse sexual outcomes (“When I was in school, consent wasn't given the focus it could have. I definitely grew up and ended up in situations in a time when teenagers didn't understand the importance of consent as much as they do now”). Other negative sources of community and culture included pressure to hug unfamiliar family members, and instances of consent violations in BDSM, swinger, and queer sexual communities.

Thirdly, many participants ( $n= 98$ ) attributed their current approaches to consent to positive experiences with their romantic/sexual partner. This theme demonstrated how learning through experience, either positive or negative, is a viable and common method of consent learning. Examples of this include: “...my partner [has] shown me that he’s extremely safety conscious and we share the same aversions/limits, which makes me comfortable consenting to anything”, “I had a very experienced partner that taught me how to talk about these things”, “I am married to a woman about 20 years older... she has drilled consent into me, in all things, and it's played a large role in the last three years in how I approach scenes and new partners”. Many participants reported that these positive experiences increased their self-efficacy to communicate (e.g., “...not only am I more confident behind closed doors, but I'm also more willing to be vocal about my limits and tolerances outside”). Participants also described how repeated experiences led to improved attitudes and behaviours through the use of mantras such as “practice makes perfect”.

Unfortunately, a large proportion of participants ( $n= 82$ ) described negative experiences shaping their consent behaviours, attributing sexual assaults and consent violations as specific motivators for their current behaviours (e.g., “as a sexual assault survivor, I have learned to be incredibly open with my sexual partner in order to ensure that nothing happens that could cause a breakdown”). These violations resulted in increased use of explicit consent for themselves, or heightened awareness and self-monitoring (e.g., “being a victim of sexual assault, I know the distress that comes when being violated. I refuse to do that [to] someone else”). Interestingly, participants also discussed how the negative experiences of others influenced their consent behaviours as well. For example, participants discussed that “hearing how other people, especially my romantic partners, have been hurt in the past has made me very sensitive to the need for clear communication and consent. Especially hearing about their emotional trauma has had a big impact on me”, and that “hearing stories from others helps put consent in perspective”.

Fourthly, participants ( $n= 36$ ) sometimes described a lack of formal sexual education or negative experiences with their community necessitating self-education about consent, including through social media, pornography, or through post-secondary education (e.g., “I have learned about consent from online sex ed resources and from my studies as an aspiring sex therapist”). This theme highlights the desire that individuals have to seek out consent knowledge, again demonstrating the positive attitudes that most individuals have about consent. One participant stated, “I was very active on tumblr from 2012 to 2016 and I cannot emphasize enough how much that shaped my sexual education more than anything else. There was so much talk of the necessity of consent”. Many participants noted that BDSM-related online material was crucial in shaping their consent behaviours and beliefs (e.g., “Through learning safe BDSM practices on

online forums and various videos I've discovered consent is the most important thing"). Discussions of pornography were often cited as negative sources of consent education.

Next, some participants ( $n=34$ ) discussed how learning about consent has resulted in increased caution towards engaging in sexual activities with new partners. For example, one participant active in the BDSM community discussed her selectivity in choosing new partners:

*I ran a munch for many years, so I was in a position to model and also observe good communication practices. Personally, I feel safer when there is a lot of communication around consent and negotiation. I choose partners whom I have been able to observe and interact with in social situations first - do they ask before hugging someone, or do they do a lot of casual touching without consent?*

For some individuals, their increased caution with engaging with new partners was motivated by self-protection (e.g., "Past experiences have caused me to be more cautious with giving and asking for consent before doing anything with another person, both sexual or not"), while for others, the increased caution was due to a fear of prosecution or false accusations. This theme reflected changes in behaviour following consent learning, which was often based out of fear or self-protection. For example, one participant stated that, "I do not even look at women because they will say that I'm harassing them". Other motivations for increased caution included management of potential risks, either physically or mentally (e.g., "When engaging in any form of kinky behaviour, it is important for both sides to give enthusiastic consent and to discuss hard and soft limits as well as safewords before play in order to protect all parties from both physical and emotional/mental harm in any way").

### *Motivations for Continued Interaction*

Participants who indicated that they continued to interact with a sexual partner after a violation of their consent were asked to describe their motivations for choosing to do so, in order to better understand the participants' motivations for continued interaction. This was done in part to provide an opportunity for participants to explain the context of their decision and mitigate any mental distress potentially raised by the question, but also to assess relational dynamics or personal factors that may be related to continued interaction with someone who had violated their boundaries. A total of 117 participants responded to the prompt. Responses to this question generated nine unique themes, consisting of (1) relational dynamics, (2) accidental violations/lack of knowledge, (3) acknowledgement of wrongdoing, (4) continued coercion, (5) poor communication of boundaries, (6) negative view of self, (7) sexual gratification, (8) part of negotiated dynamic, and (9) self-expansion.

The largest proportion of participants ( $n= 42$ ) asserted that fear of relationship dissolution was a motivation for continuing relationships after consent violations. The most commonly endorsed reasons for continuing to engage with a person after the disregard of their boundaries were emotional investment in the relationship, fear of relationship dissolution, feelings of love, and obligations to please. Oftentimes, feelings of love and affection for the transgressor motivated individuals to stay in relationships where consent violations occurred. Others were additionally motivated by fear of the dissolution of the relationship: "I was afraid they would stop being my friend", "a fear of losing the relationship if I didn't comply with what they wanted". In addition, many participants ( $n= 24$ ) stated that consent violations occurred accidentally due to a lack of knowledge or experience on behalf of the transgressor. These violations were usually considered minor and of little negative impact on the victim: "it was a mistake due to

lack of experience (brand new to polyamory, boundaries and needs got a little muddy)", or "[all] the incidences I can think of are issues of messiness in the moment which was not intentional or being too young/inexperienced to better communicate". These accidents were considered out of the ordinary and not a transgression sufficient enough to terminate the relationship.

Many participants ( $n= 21$ ) reported that their motivation for continued interaction with someone who violated their boundaries was due to the acknowledgement of wrongdoing and perceived efforts to rebuild trust and communication. This was exemplified by one participant's response that "when someone oversteps, what's more important is how they respond than what the issue is. When it's not received well, I have no interest in future engagements". Many participants reported that the voicing of their concerns was met with apologies, promises to never repeat the mistake, increased communication and trust, and the re-establishing of boundaries. Responses that indicated that transgressors apologized for their actions were often coupled with the perception that the violations were accidental in nature. These actions led participants to believe that they were safe from future violations, which in most cases, was true: "He apologised a ton and never did it again and we agreed to never try new things during scenes without talking about them outside of sex first when we are both clear headed. We've been together 4 years and it's the only time he ever broke a limit like that". In some cases, however, it was not: "I felt like I had made it clear that it was wrong, so he probably wouldn't do it again (I was incorrect)".

Some participants ( $n= 18$ ) stated that their autonomy was compromised in their relationship which prohibited them from leaving: "I didn't want them to hurt me", "I wanted him out of my home but he wouldn't leave so I went further with him to get rid of him finally", "Wanted to completely avoid him. But he kept pushing himself into my space". Additionally, some participants ( $n= 18$ ) discussed consent violations occurring because of their own lack of

knowledge or self-efficacy to communicate; for example, “Not understanding that I had the right to set boundaries”, and “being afraid to speak up and set a boundary”. Participants who endorsed these reasons for the violation occurring often blamed themselves and continued to engage with that partner with the intent of increasing their confidence to communicate. A small number of participants ( $n= 8$ ) stated that their own mental state or mindset prohibited them from leaving a relationship that they knew was not healthy or suitable for them: “I may have been feeling insecure or lacking in self-confidence, so I continued engaging in sexual activities in order to gain or maintain the other person's approval or acceptance”, or “I was in a low place mentally”, or “I was trying to give them the benefit of the doubt while I attempted to reestablish healthy boundaries. It was an abusive relationship. Nothing changed until the relationship ended”.

Finally, a few participants ( $n= 7$ ) endorsed sexual motivations for continuing to engage with someone who violated their boundaries. Most often, participants described their attraction to the other person overwhelming their judgement to leave an unhealthy relationship. For example, participants offered responses such as “this person was actually very good at sex”, or “He was manipulative but also seemed smart, nice, hot, confident, etc. so I ignored the red flags and kept seeing him”, or “because I can't help myself”. In some cases ( $n= 5$ ), the attractiveness of the transgressor was coupled with specific kinks as motivation to continue interaction: “...really good sex and I have a service kink so it only bothered me after it happened a couple of times”, or “I liked it if she disregarded my boundaries. It was part of my play”. In a few rare cases ( $n= 2$ ), participants reported that the violation of their boundaries actually expanded their interests and limits, allowing them to learn new things about themselves and their sexuality: “it was expanding my boundaries. It is now something that I enjoy but initially was not something I wanted”.

Overall, sexual motivations were regarded with hesitance or shame, but were sufficient in continuing to interact with individuals who violated their consent.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of the second study was to investigate differences in consent attitudes, beliefs, behaviours, and consequences between self-identified BDSM practitioners and non-practitioners. This project was a direct response to Graham et al. (2016), who proposed that social learning theory be applied to BDSM contexts in which education, internalization, and execution of consent communication within the community results in increased consent attitudes and behaviours among member practitioners. The current study expanded on this argument, and not only examined the role of the BDSM community in consent communication, but also quantified the magnitude of consent learning by drawing comparisons against non-community members, both within BDSM and non-practitioners. Social learning theory predicts that exposure to others' behaviours and their subsequent consequences will reinforce and motivate similar behaviours in oneself (Bandura, 1969). The BDSM community has been documented to place great value on effective and egalitarian consent negotiation, and stress the importance of consent in all interactions, not just sexual (Graham et al., 2016; Holt, 2016; Kaak, 2016; Sprott et al., 2021; Pitagora, 2013; Williams, 2014). Accessibility to consent resources and discussions, stringent standards on consent negotiation, and internal methods of policing were hypothesized to reinforce and incentivize individuals to endorse and practise thorough consent communication, resulting in more positive consent attitudes, beliefs, behaviours, and fewer consent consequences compared to those who are not exposed to such messaging (i.e., private practitioners or non-practitioners).

Overall, the results support this assertion - BDSM practitioners had more positive consent attitudes, more awareness of consent, utilized more verbal and direct consent behaviours, reported more safety and trust in their relationship, and fewer consent violations and instances of sexual compliance than non-practitioners. However, the differences among private and community-involved BDSM practitioners often fell contrary to the hypotheses and to the principles of social learning theory. In all cases, across all examined variables, private BDSM practitioners' scores were indicative of more positive attitudes, more verbal direct behaviours, and fewer negative consequences compared to community-involved practitioners. Considering that community-involved practitioners are likely exposed to more consent messaging, policing, and discussions compared to private practitioners, these individuals should theoretically be incentivized to behave in a similar way to what is modelled by their peers. However, the current results suggest that individuals that practise privately express better consent communication instead. It is worth noting that although the statistical models display significant differences across the three groups, all multivariate results demonstrated very small effect sizes, meaning that the way these differences manifest in real life may be negligible or non-existent. The lack of meaningful differences in consent communication among the three groups has implications for the implementation of BDSM consent negotiation strategies into current sexual consent education curriculum, and suggests that sociocultural influences on consent communication in the general population affect individuals in the BDSM community as well.

### **Group Differences in Consent**

Private practitioners of BDSM were found to have significantly more positive attitudes and beliefs about establishing consent, had greater awareness of consent, and utilized fewer indirect consent approaches compared to community practitioners and non-practitioners. These

results suggest that private BDSM practitioners generally place greater value on the communication of consent in their sexual interactions compared to community practitioners. Subsequently, this group appeared to put these values into practice; private practitioners reported utilizing more verbal and non-verbal consent cues, and fewer non-verbal refusal strategies than their counterparts, which may be due, in part, to greater feelings of safety and less anticipated retaliatory reactivity from their sexual partner. As a result, this group reported fewer instances of sexual compliance, endorsed fewer reasons for consenting to unwanted sex, and fewer consent violations than community practitioners.

In many analyses, BDSM-CP did not differ from GEN in consent parameters—all groups scored above the midpoint in consent attitudes, feelings of safety, and verbal communication, meaning that in the current sample, consent communication was generally regarded positively and communicated well. Lack of differences between BDSM-CP and GEN suggest that similar issues that affect consent communication in the general population also may exert influence on BDSM practitioners as well. There were a few instances in which BDSM-CP and GEN differed: GEN scored significantly lower than all other groups on consent attitudes, BDSM-CP scored significantly lower on nonverbal initiation and pleasure than all other groups, and one instance of BDSM-CP scoring the highest in sexual violations compared to all other groups. Regarding consent attitudes, the results reinforce that BDSM practitioners have generally more positive attitudes about establishing consent, which is in line with previous literature that emphasizes the importance of consent within this demographic (e.g., Holt, 2016; Kaak et al., 2016; Pitagora, 2013; William et al., 2014). Along this argument, it does make some logical sense that BDSM practitioners would report more consent violations compared to the general population; BDSM practitioners may have a greater understanding of what constitutes a consent violation and are

therefore able to report on more violations. Additionally, the increased variety of potential play partners may position BDSM-CP as being more vulnerable to consent violations compared to the other groups, who primarily engage in sexual interactions with an intimate partner. The greater variety of sexual partners may also explain why BDSM-CP utilize less nonverbal consent cues compared to the other groups— increased levels of intimacy have been found to relate to more nonverbal communication (Foubert et al., 2006; Humphreys, 2007; Shumlich & Fisher, 2018), meaning that decreased levels of intimacy are likely to relate to less nonverbal communication.

These patterns of results should be considered with caution, particularly because other analyses presented contradictory results; moderation analyses revealed that being affiliated with a BDSM community decreases likelihood of experiencing a sexual violation when verbal consent is used, and qualitative accounts of consent experiences highlight the pivotal role that the BDSM community has had on consent learning and behaviours. Although the size of the effect of these differences is small and may not be ecologically relevant, the trend of these results are in contradiction to the hypotheses and the principles of social learning theory, which warrants further exploration.

Concerning potential demographic explanations for the pattern of results, the three groups of interest did not significantly differ on age, gender, or socioeconomic status, however, BDSM-CP demonstrated more sexual and ethnic diversity, reported a larger variety of play partners, and were more likely to be non-monogamous compared to the other groups. Research on sexual consent among different ethnic groups is limited to rates of sexual violence rather than communication differences (e.g., Coulter et al., 2017), and research on sexual orientation sometimes suggests no difference between heterosexual and minority individuals (e.g., Marcantonio et al., 2022), greater verbal consent in minority individuals (e.g., Beres et al., 2022,

Bauer, 2020), and less verbal consent in minority individuals (e.g., Beres et al., 2004; Beres, 2014; Beres et al., 2022). Therefore, the current trend in results cannot be rationalized by these demographic parameters. That being said, private BDSM practitioners were more likely to be in a monogamous relationship and engaged in sexual or kink play primarily with their monogamous partner, which may provide some insight. Palermo et al. (2021) suggested that being in a long-term relationship can increase comfort levels leading to honest communication. Indeed, Marcantonio et al. (2018) found that women reported greater internal consent feelings of safety and comfort, readiness, and wantedness when engaging in sexual intercourse with a serious long-term romantic partner compared to first-time or casual partners. It is likely that BDSM-PP endorse greater safety and trust in their sexual communication because they are more often engaging in sex and kink play with their intimate monogamous partner. Relationship status may also be affecting BDSM-PP consent behaviours; increased length of relationship has been associated with greater perceived knowledge of a partner's consent cues and greater use of non-verbal cues (e.g., Humphreys, 2007; Jozkowski & Wiersma, 2015; Marcantonio et al., 2018; Shumlich & Fisher, 2018). Willis et al. (2021) found that individuals in relationships longer than 5 years were more likely to use verbal cues than non-verbal. In contrast, BDSM-CP reported more variety of sexual partners (i.e., friends, strangers, ex-partners), which may be resulting in lowered intimacy and trust, and potentially greater vulnerability to consent violations. Although length of relationship was not an examined variable in the current study, it may be the case that BDSM-PP utilize more verbal and non-verbal sexual initiation and pleasure cues due to the monogamous, long-term nature of their relationships. This is likely given that BDSM-PP reported more sexual trust and lower fear of retaliation compared to GEN and BDSM-CP, suggesting that the level of intimacy, care, and respect in long-term monogamous relationships

may also influence consent communication. Therefore, the trend of differences across the two BDSM groups in the current study could be rationalized as an effect of relationship factors on sexual consent communication.

### **Sexual Scripts in BDSM**

Considering the profound effect that gender has on consent communication, the current study aimed to investigate the role of gender on consent within the BDSM community. Surprisingly, gender was not found to influence consent in any capacity, which may be potentially due to greater sexual diversity within both BDSM groups—BDSM-PP were only 48% heterosexual and BDSM-CP were only 67% heterosexual. Frank (2019) and Lamont (2017) demonstrated that non-heterosexual individuals reject heteronormative courtship and sexual practices, and as such, are not pressured to conform to heterosexual sexual scripts. Indeed, participants in Lamont (2017) discussed feelings of explicit pressure to avoid heteronormative sexual scripts—which is the probable explanation for the lack of gender influence in BDSM practitioners' sexual consent negotiation in the current sample. Following the arguments of Popova (2018), the greater representation of sexual and relational diversity in BDSM should, in theory, eradicate or expand upon dichotomous gendered power structures that may affect consent communication. In the current study, it does appear that gender is insignificant as a moderator of consent beliefs and behaviours.

That is not to say that there is not an effect of cultural scripts on BDSM practitioners' consent communication. The current study's examination of differences in consent beliefs, behaviours, and consequences based on BDSM role identity revealed a remarkable trend in results. Across all variables, dominant individuals' scores were indicative of less positive consent attitudes, less verbal and nonverbal communication, and more instances of sexual violations and

compliance, all with medium to large effect sizes. Contrary to the size of the effects for BDSM affiliation, the effect of BDSM role on consent communication appears to have serious and significant consequences for practitioners. Cultural sexual scripts appear to be having an effect on BDSM practitioners' sexual communication, but instead of gender being the vehicle for exercising power differentials (Simula & Sumerau, 2019), BDSM role identity becomes the framework for advancing sexual scripts. Similar to how Popova (2018) described how the proliferation of Alpha/Omega romantic narratives replicate gendered power dynamics in environments that are primed to reject heteronormativity, cultural sexual scripts persist in BDSM through the replacement of gender with role identity.

The manipulation of power differentials within BDSM is an integral part of the practise as a whole, and within the context of play, is desirable and intentional. In addition to this, BDSM practitioners in the current sample reported that negotiating consent was a pleasurable act in and of itself—some participants described consent negotiations as being demonstrative of desire. Others described consent as being a sort of “foreplay”, in which discussions of sexual acts increased anticipation and excitement. However, issues arise when these differentials exude influence on situations and contexts which are *not* intended to be affected by power dynamics, such as consent negotiation. Indeed, submissive participants in Bauer (2021) described encountering difficulties with unintentionally submitting to a partner before the onset of BDSM play, meaning that consent decisions can be affected by submission to their dominant. The results of the current study suggest that dominant individuals' sexual consent is affected by cultural norms in similar ways to that of men. Similar to how men are largely considered sexual initiators that must overcome consent hurdles to be allowed access to sex with women, dominant individuals are initiators of BDSM erotic practices that must operate within the consent limits of

the submissive partner in order to be granted access to play. For both heterosexual men and dominant individuals, an unintended consequence of the “initiator” role may be being at greater risk of violating their partner’s consent. It may be the case that since dominant individuals are typically the ones giving pain or exerting power over the submissive, their consent is assumed to be present, and it is the responsibility of the submissive to set boundaries on what is acceptable at any given moment. This sentiment has been articulated by BDSM scholars who argued that it is the submissive who has the true power in BDSM erotic practises since they control the permissibility and continuation of a scene (Bauer, 2021; Holt, 2016). Despite measures to ensure equality and mutuality in consent negotiations, the responsibility often falls on the submissive to assert their boundaries or use a safeword to signal discomfort (Bauer, 2021; Dunkley & Brotto, 2019; Kaak, 2016). These arguments resemble the power dynamics between men and women, in which sexual interactions are bound by the consent limits that women enforce at the beginning or during an encounter (Beres, 2014; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). In some ways, it can be argued that the BDSM context of these interactions amplify the influence of power dynamics in consent negotiation by the fact that these negotiation strategies are fixed structures within the practise—the cultural gender dynamics that are indirectly affect consent negotiation in the general population are codified in BDSM interactions.

Additional evidence for the influence of sexual scripts on BDSM practitioners consent communication can be found in dominant and submissive individuals' consent attitudes and behaviours in the current study. Dominant individuals' attitudes towards consent resemble that of heterosexual men—men are found to have less positive attitudes and less perceived behavioural control for establishing consent than women (e.g., Silver & Hovick, 2018), which is identical to that of dominant individuals in the current sample. Past research has shown that men are more

likely to use non-verbal cues to communicate consent than women (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999; Humphreys & Herold, 2007; Willis et al., 2019, 2021), and in the current study, dominant individuals were more likely to use nonverbal refusal cues to communicate consent than submissive individuals. Dominant individuals were equally likely as submissives to report engaging in sexual compliance, which aligns with Quinn-Nilas et al. (2013) who found that men are just as likely as women to engage in sexual compliance despite having high sexual resourcefulness. It is crucial to mention that although men typically identify with dominant roles and women with submissive roles, the current trends in results are not a demonstration of gender role influence in BDSM. There was no effect of gender across any analyses, and the total BDSM sample consisted of relatively similar proportions of male and female dominants, suggesting that dominant women in the current study behave in ways that resemble heterosexual men in non-BDSM sexual interactions (see Table 3 for more details). Therefore, the results of the current study lend support to the idea that sexual scripts exert a profound and pervasive influence on sexual communication and interactions, and that within the BDSM community specifically, these sexual scripts manifest through dominant and submissive power differentials.

### **Motivations for Consent Communication**

Above and beyond the question of *what* individuals are doing within the context of consent, the current study also sought to investigate *why* individuals believe and behave as they do. Specifically, motivations for communicating consent were investigated by assessing the strength of internal and external influences on consent communication. Firstly, the study examined whether participants were motivated to communicate consent based on the relative degree of harm that may be incurred by certain behaviours. The results from the risk assessment inventories suggested that for low-risk behaviours, both likelihood of harm and severity of harm

affected judgements of consent; likelihood of harm was associated with increases in the importance of consent, however severity of harm was associated with decreases in the importance of consent. The trend of these results may be due to ceiling effects for the perceived importance of consent. Overall, participants indicated a high degree of importance for consent for all behaviours, including behaviours that were perceived to have a very low severity of harm. The number of participants who indicated high consent for low severity behaviours are likely to be skewing the trend of the data to demonstrate a negative association rather than a null or positive association. Figure 22 demonstrates this effect.

For behaviours that were categorized as high risk, only likelihood of harm –not severity of harm– was associated with endorsement of consent; this suggests that regardless of severity, any tangible threat of harm from engaging in erotic activities is sufficient enough for consent communication to be perceived as important. These results demonstrate that all individuals are sensitive to the potential risks that sexual and erotic behaviours might incur and motivated to seek sexual consent based on the likelihood of harm occurring. The way that the behaviours were categorized as high versus low risk were based on participant perceptions, the results of the PCA demonstrated that behaviours that were considered to carry a high likelihood of harm were also considered to carry greater severity of risk. However, the importance of consent for these behaviours was not necessarily influenced by the severity of that risk, which also provides evidence that perceived likelihood of risk of certain behaviour was not conflated with perceived severity. Similar to the findings across the consent literature (e.g., Curtis & Burnett, 2017; McKenna et al., 2021b; Silver & Hovick, 2018), participants in this study demonstrated positive beliefs about establishing consent for all behaviours, including those that may be culturally considered low risk.

A number of follow-up exploratory analyses were conducted to determine the relative strength of external versus internal motivations for establishing consent within community-involved BDSM practitioners. Participants in Graham et al. (2016) reported that the BDSM community was a significant source of consent education and influence—this study aimed to quantify the strength of these community norms in regulating behaviour compared to other avenues of consent education. Consent norms were significantly predicted by consent education; in particular, education from community sources predicted more positive consent norms. Although the label “community” does not necessarily only refer to the BDSM community, qualitative accounts of how important the BDSM community was for sexual consent education, it is likely that the BDSM community in particular was a significant influence on consent norms within this sample. Additionally, observing consent at community events was a significant influence on consent behaviours; attending “munches” (i.e., informal, non-erotic social gatherings among BDSM practitioners) was a significant predictor of increased non-verbal sexual initiation behaviours. There are a number of reasons why munches, as opposed to other social events, may be a significant influence on non-verbal consent communication. Firstly, larger, more formal BDSM events can be cost prohibitive for some individuals, and therefore munches are a more accessible and more frequently attended social gathering (Weiss, 2006). Munches may also serve as an environment to discuss issues within the community, such as blacklisted individuals, consent negotiation strategies, and aftercare (Holt, 2016; Weiss, 2006). Considering that many participants qualitatively discussed hearing cautionary tales from others as being significant influences on their current consent approaches, it is likely that attending munches provides BDSM practitioners the opportunity to share stories and discuss consent issues, resulting in increased non-verbal communication. Compared to community or educational

influences, internal motivations demonstrated the strongest associations with consent attitudes and verbal communication. Avoiding misunderstandings was endorsed as a strong unique internal motivator for both consent attitudes and verbal consent communication, followed by mitigating mental distress for consent attitudes, and increasing trust for verbal communication. These results show that although participants were worried about misunderstandings, which could be construed as a self-preservation motive, participants were also highly motivated to communicate consent for relational reasons; specifically, individuals were concerned with their partner's wellbeing and relationship strength rather than out of self-concern.

These results together showcase that community influences and internal motivations are both influential in shaping individuals' consent beliefs and behaviours, in ways that reinforce the salience of sexual scripts on sexual communication and interactions. In particular, community influences have been demonstrated to establish and emphasize cultural norms about consent (i.e., cultural scripts), which are then acted upon based on internal motivations (i.e., intrapsychic scripts). Consent norms are set by the community through collective understanding of the way consent communication should progress, which in this case, appear to be non-verbal. These cultural scripts are expanded upon and enacted by individual actors, who may potentially display incongruent behaviours based on internal motivations (e.g., unwanted sexual activity promoting the use of safewords or sexual refusals). In the current sample, many of the internal motivations are relationally focused, meaning that the interpersonal scripts often inform the intrapsychic scripts. The communication of consent must be considered within the context of the relationship in which the behaviours occur—fear of relationship dissolution, feelings of guilt, fear of retaliation have been demonstrated to affect individuals' consent communication behaviours,

meaning that individual motivations for communication consent are affected by interpersonal scripts.

### **Community and Relational Influence on Consent**

The results from the qualitative analysis reinforce the differences between BDSM practitioners and non-practitioners in consent communication attitudes, behaviours, and consequences. Many participants explicitly endorsed the BDSM community as being a crucial influence on their current consent behaviours and beliefs. However, the BDSM community was not the only source of positive influence on participants' consent. Participants also noted that their consent approaches were influenced by interactions with sexual partners, in both a negative and positive way. There were more instances of participants endorsing trial and error, as well as learning their partners' unique needs and boundaries, as being influential in their consent approaches compared to other avenues of education. These results reinforce the idea that consent communication is highly dependent on relational dynamics and not just individual assertiveness or resourcefulness.

Although quantity and quality of sexual education was not measured in the current study, the lack of endorsement for formal sexual education being an influential factor in participants' consent approaches implies that affirmative consent campaigns may not be as effective as they aspire to be (Curtis & Burnett, 2017). In fact, some participants actually discussed how formal sexual education was lacking and ineffectual at protecting against adverse sexual outcomes, although these sentiments are likely referencing past sexual education curricula that did not include formal consent education. These discussions highlight the disconnect between formal sexual education and the realities of how consent is practised and communicated. Whereas affirmative sexual consent campaigns take a preventative approach to consent communication

(i.e., developing skills to prevent adverse sexual outcomes), individuals are more likely to draw upon both positive and negative past experiences or endorse “trial and error” as crucial influences on consent communication. The sentiment that “trial and error” is a common consent learning tool is endorsed by participants describing how consent violations happened due to a “lack of experience”, meaning that learning through experience is considered a valid and perhaps unavoidable method of consent learning—because it is often the essence of learning. According to the principles of social learning theory, individuals will model their behaviour after a trusted role model based on actual or perceived similarity. It may be the case that formal sexual education is ineffectual at shaping consent behaviours due to educators not being regarded as close trusted role models. In comparison, romantic partners, friends, community members, and others in which a close personal relationship occurs may serve as strong role models through which consent can be learned.

The salience of relational dynamics and “learning through doing” in consent communication is made clear by the number of participants who continued to engage in sexual interactions with those who have previously violated their consent for relational reasons, including feelings of love, fear of relationship dissolution, and obligations to please. Individuals' internal motivations were found to be strong predictors of their consent attitudes and behaviours, which were often influenced by their relationships. In particular, participants' decisions to maintain relationships with transgressors were heavily influenced by the reaction to confrontation about the violation. Individuals who expressed that their concerns were met with positive responsiveness (i.e., sincere apologies and regret) often downplayed the seriousness of the violation or regarded it as accidental. These individuals often considered these transgressions as “learning experiences” that were ultimately valuable in shaping their current approaches to

consent communication in a positive way. Conversely, participants who endorsed anticipated negative reactivity from their partner discussed staying in relationships out of fear of retaliation or to placate transgressors until they were able to safely end the relationship. In both cases, positive or negative, the response of the partner influenced future consent decisions of the participants, showcasing the strength of relational dynamics affecting consent communication. These types of responses outnumbered those that described maintaining relationships with transgressors for lack of self-efficacy or assertiveness reasons.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

There were a number of limitations within the current study that affected the validity and interpretation of the results. Firstly, potential sampling bias and the unequal distribution of participants across the three groups significantly limited the power of the analyses and may add considerable confounding effects to the results. Participants were recruited from social media and reddit forums that were sexuality-based, and therefore, may have more sex positive membership, meaning that the true variability in consent attitudes, behaviours, and consequences in both BDSM practitioners and the general population may not have been captured within the current sample. Although the overall large sample size contributed significant power to the analyses, two of the three groups failed to reach the critical sample size to detect true effects. Post-hoc power analysis implied that the current study demonstrated inflated power to detect a small effect size. Based on these parameters, it may be the case that the statistical significance of many of the analyses are in fact due to inflated power, and the found effects are not, ecologically relevant. This is further supported by the small effect sizes demonstrated in the analyses. The interpretation of these results was met with caution despite statistically significant results. Future

studies should endeavour for more proportional sample sizes to avoid complications with power in analysis.

Secondly, the measurement of gender within the current study presented some issues with the inclusion of gender within the analyses. In an attempt to be more inclusive of diverse gender identities and avoid potentially harmful “othering” of gender minority individuals, the categories of “man” and “woman” were inclusive of cisgender and transgender individuals, with no additional question to ascertain transgender identity. While this decision maximized inclusivity and validation of gender identity, the gendered analysis was limited to the broad categories of “man”, “woman”, and “non-binary/gender-queer/gender non-conforming” individuals and precluded the possibility of more sophisticated gendered analysis. Given the salience of gender within the investigation of sexual consent communication, it may have been useful to determine whether there were differences between cisgender and transgender individuals in consent attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours. Future studies may endeavour to examine gender minority individuals within the BDSM community to determine any interaction effects of gender and BDSM participation on consent beliefs and behaviours.

Thirdly, the intention of the current study was to measure consent within *sexual* interactions, which may have presented challenges for BDSM practising participants who do not engage in sexual kink play, or engage in more complex forms of kink such as consensual non-consent. In order to properly draw comparisons between BDSM practising individuals and the general population, the current study focused on beliefs and behaviours that would be relevant and applicable to all participants – BDSM or not. This decision did necessarily exclude non-sexual kink play or consensual non-consent, which many participants took issue with in post-survey reflections. This response was anticipated—however, priority was given to ensuring the

comparison of equivalent constructs rather than inclusivity in the research. Future investigations could elucidate differences in consent communication in sexual versus non-sexual kink play, which could indirectly provide more insight into differences between BDSM practitioners and the general population in consent negotiation. Additionally, although the survey was created in consultation with a board of BDSM community experts, the ambiguous wording of some of the questions may have caused differing interpretations leading to different constructs being examined. For example, the specific use of the word “harm” in the risk assessment inventory was based on the commonly used BDSM motto “hurt, don’t harm”, but in post-survey reflections, many participants took issue with the lack of specificity over what type of harm was being inquired about (e.g., mental, physical, emotional, or relational). Some participants may have responded in regard to physical harm, while others may have responded in regard to emotional harm. This response was also anticipated—however, the decision to retain ambiguity was made to balance brevity and breadth within the survey.

Finally, the current study, based on the principles of social learning theory, only accounts for social community influences on consent communication, meaning that individual differences affecting consent communication could not be established within the current analyses. Specifically, the lack of inclusion of a measure of sexual assertiveness or self-efficacy in communication is a considerable limitation to the current analyses. Considering community influences appear to have small or negligible effects on consent communication, it is possible that there are individual personality differences that may contribute to differences in consent across the three groups. Especially in regard to the measure of safety and trust in communication, a measure of self-efficacy or assertiveness would provide clarification regarding the relative strength of community norms in regulating behaviour in comparison to personality attributes.

This is especially salient given the strength of internal motivations in influencing attitudes and intentions to communicate consent. Future studies should include a measure of self-efficacy or sexual assertiveness alongside measures of social and relational dynamics affecting consent communication.

Despite limitations, this study has many strengths and presents ample opportunity for future investigation. This study is the first to directly quantify differences in consent communication between self-identified BDSM practitioners and non-practitioners, bridging a considerable gap in the consent literature. Until this time, research on consent communication has neglected to investigate differing norms, standards, and ideals of unique sexual demographics, such as the BDSM community. This study demonstrated that although BDSM practitioners emphasize the value of consent communication and perceive a high degree of education from their community, there are few differences between BDSM practitioners and non-practitioners in attitudes or in practise. The lack of difference between these groups may be due to similar cultural factors influencing attitudes, behaviours, and consequences of consent communication. Furthermore, this study demonstrated that within the context of consent communication, social learning can be significantly hampered by broader cultural norms. Indeed, the results demonstrated that power dynamics may affect consent communication between dominant and submissive individuals in ways that mirror or mimic that of heteronormative gender sexual scripts, resulting in similar discrepancies between attitudes and behaviours within the general population. Future studies may endeavour to utilize theoretical frameworks that account for cultural norms or power differentials in the investigation of attitudes, behaviours, and intentions in the BDSM community, such as the sexual script theory or theory of planned behaviour. Additionally, understanding how BDSM practitioners differ in personality traits, such

as orientation towards power, sexual assertiveness, social dominance orientation, may yield interesting insight into individuals' motivations for and influences on consent communication.

A final strength of the study was the large number of BDSM practitioners sampled for the investigation; nearly 1,000 self-identified BDSM practitioners were recruited and retained in the current study, making this one of the largest studies on BDSM to date. Due to persisting stigma and discrimination against BDSM (Goerlich, 2020; Klien & Moser, 2006), practitioners are not always receptive to investigation or research. The formation of a community board of experts and using principles of community-based participatory research was crucial in designing research tools and approaching community spaces in ways that were non-discriminatory, meaningful, and collaborative. A (near) future endeavour of this study is the dissemination of the research results to the community members from which the data was collected from. The inclusion of open-ended qualitative questions and an open-ended post-survey reflection space provided rich data on the subjective experiences of trauma, healing, growth, learning, and forgiveness within the BDSM community, as well as provided insights into ways the study may be improved in the future, and gave suggestions on what kind of research the BDSM community would be interested in learning or participating in.

### **Implications**

The findings of the current study have important implications for contextualizing current research on consent communication and negotiation within BDSM communities. Previous research has argued that individuals in the BDSM community practise effective, egalitarian consent communication and covertly suggest that these practises are superior to consent in the general population (Graham et al., 2016; Holt, 2016; Williams et al., 2014). Small sample qualitative studies have also demonstrated that BDSM practitioners do perceive a greater degree

of safety and respect, and experience fewer instances of consent violations, within the BDSM community compared to their experiences with non-BDSM sexual interactions (Beres & MacDonald, 2015). The qualitative results in the current study align with these previous studies; BDSM practitioners often discussed how their involvement in BDSM, both with a partner and in a community, has improved their consent negotiation attitudes and behaviours. However, the current quantitative analyses, that directly compare BDSM practitioners and non-practitioners, have provided evidence that the purported differences between BDSM practitioners and non-practitioners are very small or potentially non-existent. Therefore, previous literature on consent within the BDSM community should be interpreted with caution as it might be explained as being the subjective experiences of a few individuals, and not representative of the practice or the community as a whole.

Simon & Gagnon (1986) describe how sexual subcultures derive from incongruence between differing levels of scripts—that when personal motivations or interpersonal interactions differ from those of the greater culture, new understandings of the sexual experience potentiate private sexual cultures within the greater collective sexual culture. The BDSM community exemplifies this phenomenon; rejection of traditional sexual scripts and adopting of unorthodox erotic practices has created a private sexual subculture with its own collective norms and expectations. The education that BDSM practitioners receive from their community is informed by, and perpetuates, the social norms of this private sexual subculture. Drawing from the work of Popova (2018) and Simula and Sumerau (2019), the diversity of membership and the rejection of heteronormative gendered sexual scripts within BDSM may encourage beliefs that the culture of BDSM is unique to that of the mainstream sexual culture and invulnerable to cultural influences on interactions and communication. These beliefs may be contributing to identical discrepancies

between consent attitudes and behaviours within the BDSM community as that of the general population. As the current study suggests, sexual consent attitudes, norms, and behaviours of the BDSM community are likely affected by cultural norms just the same as the general population.

These results also have implications for the implementation of BDSM consent communication models into mainstream sexual education curricula. Scholars such as Rocha (2015) and Easton-Mueller et al. (2023) have argued that BDSM-style models of consent negotiation that emphasize the discussion of intentions, desires, limits, and safewords prior to the onset of sexual interactions would be an effective measure against both sexual violence and sexual compliance. In particular, Easton-Mueller et al. (2023) argued that BDSM-style consent negotiations are based on pleasure, rather than permissibility. Such discussions would be a notable deviation from traditional sexual progressions outlined in dominant heteronormative sexual scripts, and would potentiate environments in which women's agency in sexual decision-making would be respected, allowing the dynamic negotiation of sexual interactions (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012).

Promoting the negotiation of sexual interactions well before the onset of behaviours would be beneficial for multiple reasons—it would foster more egalitarian, pleasure-based sexual negotiations (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Easton-Mueller et al., 2023), and it would permit people to engage in “aggressive” or “seduction”-style sexual interactions that are so often romanticized and desired in ways that are more safe and morally permissible (Curtis & Burnett, 2017; Rocha, 2015). This would also incorporate education on healthy sexual relationships and ethics of care in sexual interactions, which have been documented to be lacking in current sexual education programs (Nielsen, 2010; Thiessen et al., 2021). However, the current results suggest that these ideals that the BDSM community inspire are not completely realized within the

community itself. The power dynamics that affect the communication of consent within the general population persist within BDSM under a different label, and as such, implementing these strategies may be an improvement, but not sufficient in completely protecting against sexual compliance and violations for all, not just the general population. To fully address the underlying issues resulting in sexual compliance and violations for both BDSM and non-BDSM practitioners, a direct examination of how power is understood, allocated, and mobilized in sexual communication is necessary.

Many participants described their consent attitudes and behaviours being borne out of experiences, both positive and negative. This “learning through doing” sentiment contradicts the preventative approach that many sexual education curricula employ. It is logical that education would aim to prevent adverse sexual outcomes before they occur, which is the intention behind affirmative consent education and “no means no” campaigns. However, this study highlights that, in direct contradiction to the ideals of affirmative consent, the ways in which people actually learn consent negotiation is through embodied experience. This contradiction may be a significant problem and culprit behind the lack of enthusiasm and adherence to affirmative consent ideals. So perhaps a new approach to sexual consent education that may yield positive results is not to promote unnatural preventative behaviours—a strategy that is currently met with reluctance—but to challenge assumptions about heteronormative gender dynamics, sexual scripts, and the permissibility of sexual behaviours. Humphreys and Herod (2007) found that men, compared to women, preferred to assume consent and proceed with sexual interactions until being told otherwise. These assumptions result in women being required to unilaterally assert sexual boundaries (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). Notions about seduction and aggressive hook-ups that make explicit communication unappealing permits power imbalances and inequality by

relying on culturally understood norms about men and women's (or dominant and submissive's) sexuality, and also places constraints on consent communication to occur prior to the start of sexual activity. Bauer (2021) notes when consent communication occurs in this way, there is necessarily a power imbalance that requires careful transference in order to maintain equality in sexual interactions. Combating these assumptions could be an effective intervention approach to decreasing rates of sexual violence and compliance. Beyond assumptions about consent, challenging cultural scripts regarding men and women's gendered sex roles, and understanding how power influences consent communication would help eliminate the "gatekeeper" model of consent that is so prominent in sexual scripts.

The parallels between heterosexual men and dominant individuals within the sexual scripting framework point to a common underlying mechanism that influences the ways in which sexual scripts manifest—power. Gendered sexual scripts and BDSM sexual scripts are both guided by power relations between participating members. The literature of consent communication has been concerned with the influence of gender on communication and behaviour however, the replication of gendered power dynamics in BDSM as "role" effects demonstrates that the underlying mechanism of gendered sexual scripts is actually power. In the current dominant culture, gender is the primary vehicle for power dynamics to manifest, however, in BDSM, the vehicle for power is role identity. Therefore, it is evident through this research that although gender is an important factor to consider in the investigation of consent communication, it may in fact be power that is the driving force of communication. Future research should concern itself with the scholarship of power to understand the variety of ways that power exerts influence on the cultural understanding of sexual interactions and sexual communication. A potential future direction would be to investigate consent attitudes and

behaviours alongside measures of social dynamics or power relations, such as social dominance orientation, to elucidate how power or attitudes about power influence interpersonal sexual interactions.

### **Conclusion**

The current study aimed to both quantify and qualify differences in consent communication between members of the BDSM community and those of the general population. Previous work on consent communication in the BDSM community argues in favour of the existence of a culture of consent that is focused on pleasure, mutuality, and agency, leading to fewer consent violations and instances of sexual compliance compared to “vanilla” sexual interactions. Qualitative research by Graham et al. (2016) highlighted the importance of community norms in consent teaching and learning, and proposed a social learning theory model of consent education within the BDSM community. The overall sample demonstrated generally positive attitudes and behaviours towards establishing consent, which were found to be primarily motivated by relational and risk-sensitive reasons. Although BDSM participants in the current study qualitatively endorsed consent learning through their BDSM community, few statistical differences were observed in consent attitudes, beliefs, behaviours, or consequences between self-identified BDSM community practitioners and non-practitioners. Conversely, recurring trends of differences between dominant, submissive, and switch individuals call attention to the effect of power dynamics in affecting consent communication—in ways that are not necessarily intentional or desirable.

Sexual interactions, including consent communication, in the general population are largely affected by cultural scripts that dictate ideal attitudes and behaviours of men and women. The BDSM community consists of greater diversity of gender and sexual orientations, and are

therefore not necessarily beholden to *gendered* cultural scripts, but are still, however, influenced by cultural scripting, nonetheless. The results of the current study are preliminary evidence that BDSM erotic interactions are bound by cultural scripts that dictate the roles and responsibilities of dominants and submissive individuals in very similar ways to how men and women are considered in heteronormative sexual scripts. Although scripts provide meaning to ambiguous social interactions, they also impose limits on what individuals are expected and understood to do or want. Men and dominant individuals are bound by cultural expectations of power, control, initiative—whereas women and submissive individuals are bound by cultural expectations of their vulnerability, and responsibility to advocate for themselves and limit the advances of the other. These scripts present significant issues for sexual consent education and sexual assault prevention campaigns, characterized by reluctance to deviate from these norms. Some scholars have suggested the implementation of BDSM style consent negotiations into mainstream sexual education, which may help diminish adverse sexual outcomes such as sexual violations and compliance. However, substantial changes require direct challenges and upheaval of cultural understandings of power in order to target the underlying issues affecting sexual interactions and communication.

Past and current literature on sexual consent, both within and outside of BDSM, support that people have great knowledge and positive attitudes about sexual consent. BDSM practitioners, in particular, have been repeatedly found to strongly advocate for the positive influence of community on their consent beliefs and behaviours. There are undeniable differences between BDSM practitioners and non-practitioners—aesthetics, history, erotics, behaviours—however, there are larger and more important similarities that provide insight into the strength of cultural norms and scripts influencing sexual behaviour. The solutions to

combating adverse sexual outcomes and improving sexual consent education will not arise through investigating various demographics in hopes of employing unique strategies to old problems, but instead must come from an evaluation of grander cultural scripts that equally influence us all.

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## Appendix A

### Consent and Debrief Form



### DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

**Project Title:** Sexual Consent and Communication Survey  
**Information and Consent Form**

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** Jessica R. Johnson, B.A. Hons.

**INFORMATION** You are invited to participate in a study examining differences in sexual experiences and consent communication strategies among various populations; specifically, between self-identified Bondage/Discipline, Dominance/submission, Sadism/Masochism (BDSM) practitioners and non-practitioners. Participation in this study involves filling out a survey concerning typical sexual/erotic practises (BDSM or non-BDSM) and typical engagement levels with local BDSM communities, as well as typical consent negotiation practises. To be eligible for this study, you must be at least 18 years of age, be able to read and write in English, and have had at least one partnered sexual experience (i.e., penile-vaginal sex, anal sex, or oral sex). The questionnaire takes approximately 30 minutes to complete.

**RISKS & BENEFITS** It is possible that some participants may feel discomfort when answering certain questions within the survey, particularly in regards to items that ask participants about sexually explicit activities or consent violations. The final section of this survey includes a few multiple-choice questions that will ask you about your experiences with consent violations. You are free to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty and are also free to leave any particular question(s) blank, if you so choose. The MTurk, Prolific, and Qualtrics systems are completely confidential and anonymous.

**CONFIDENTIALITY** Your responses will be kept completely anonymous and confidential. You are only known by your survey panel ID. The demographic information being collected will not be used to identify you. During data collection, your data will be stored on a secure server through Qualtrics - the information is protected by Transport Layer Security encryption, the data is only accessible to the principal investigator and research supervisor. It is expected that the results of this study will be reported in a thesis, psychology journal article, and in presentations at academic conferences. Note, only aggregated data (i.e., averages from many people) will be reported. No identifying information will be collected or downloaded. Once downloaded, the data will be stored on the principal investigator's private computer, and on a secure encrypted password-protected server. The results will be stored in an encrypted file. Raw data will be destroyed five years after the completion of this study, in accordance with the American Psychological Association's guidelines.

**COMPENSATION** For those completing the survey through MTurk or Prolific, you will receive \$2.00 (USD). If you leave before completing a minimum of 75% of the study, you will not be provided any compensation and we will not use your data. The full \$2.00 will be allotted to participants who complete more than 75% of the survey. Data is reviewed once a week after participants have completed the survey to assess monetary allocation. Your MTurk/Prolific ID number will be used to allocate your credit. For those completing the survey through social media, completion of 75% of the survey will make you eligible to win one of four \$50 or one \$100 Amazon gift card(s) (USD).

**CONTACT** If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the

primary researcher, Jessica R. Johnson, at [jesjohnson@trentu.ca](mailto:jesjohnson@trentu.ca), or Dr. Terry Humphreys (supervisor) at the Psychology Department, Trent University, [terryhumphreys@trentu.ca](mailto:terryhumphreys@trentu.ca). This project has been reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee. If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during this project, you may contact Jamie Muckle, Certifications and Regulatory Compliance Officer, Trent University, (705) 748-1011, ext. 7896.

**FEEDBACK** If you wish to receive a summary of the results of this study, you are welcome to email the primary researcher, Jessica R. Johnson at [jesjohnson@trentu.ca](mailto:jesjohnson@trentu.ca) to request them. The results will be sent out at the end of the study, approximately June of 2024. If you do not wish to participate in this study or do not complete the survey, you can still request the results of the study. If you are requesting a summary of results, you will not have your email address, or any other identifying information tied to your data. Your email will be deleted after your request has been fulfilled.

### **CONSENT**

“By signing this form, I agree to the following statements: I am at least 18 years of age at the completion of this survey, I have had at least one partnered sexual experience (manual-genital, oral-genital, genital-genital contact), I have read and understood the preceding description, have had the procedures explained to me, and have satisfactorily answered any questions I might have. I give my voluntary **consent** to participate in this study with the understanding that I am **free to withdraw** at any time and/or omit any question(s)/procedure(s) I choose. I understand that withdrawal will not affect my future opportunities for research participation.”

## TRENT UNIVERSITY PROJECT SUMMARY



**PROJECT** Sexual Consent and Communication Survey  
**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR** Jessica R. Johnson, B.A. Hons.

Thank you for taking part in this study. Your participation is greatly appreciated. We would like to take this opportunity to provide you with a more in-depth understanding of the study.

Past research has shown that people do not use direct or verbal consent communication with their sexual partners. However, the research has typically only been done with students; meaning other demographics of people have been left out. Our goal is to remedy that fact by examining differences in consent communication between the general population and BDSM practitioners. Due to the risks involved in BDSM activities, this demographic has been known to have a strong focus on consent negotiation and are held to high standards of behavioural conduct from their BDSM community. It is true though, that not all BDSM practitioners are involved in a local community. There may be differences in consent communication between the general population, BDSM practitioners who *are* involved in a community, and BDSM practitioners who are *not* involved in a community. Your participation today helped to address this gap in the research and perhaps answer some very important questions about consent education and communication.

As part of the questionnaire that you filled out today you were asked to disclose your typical sexual/erotic activities, your attitudes and beliefs regarding consent, your typical consent negotiation behaviours, and your experiences with consenting to unwanted advances and consent violations. The results from this study may help us understand the strength of community in regulating behaviour, which may help de-stigmatize the BDSM community. It may also be used as a guideline for creating consent educational tools that promote verbal, direct, and ongoing consent communication to protect against consent violations and give individuals the power to say “no” when they really do not want to.

If you wish to receive a summary of the results of this study, you are welcome to email Jessica R. Johnson at [jesjohnson@trentu.ca](mailto:jesjohnson@trentu.ca) to request them. If you are interested more specifically in BDSM erotic expression, the following paper may be of interest to you:

Labrecque, F., Potz, A., Larouche, M., & Joyal, C. C. (2020). What is so appealing about being spanked, flogged, dominated, or restrained? Answers from practitioners of sexual Masochism/Submission. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 58(4), 409–423.

It is normal for some people to experience uncomfortable feelings as a result of filling out questionnaires on highly sensitive issues, such as sexuality. If any of the material that you have experienced in this study has disturbed you to the point that you wish to seek out **emotional support**, I recommend contacting: <https://checkpointorg.com/global/> which houses global national hotlines and resources for a number of mental health support services.

**Thanks again for your participation!**

## Appendix B

### Full Survey

I am at least 18 years of age at the time of survey completion.

- Agree
- Disagree

I have had at least one partnered sexual experience (e.g., manual-genital, oral-genital, genital-genital contact) prior to survey completion.

- Agree
- Disagree

By signing this form, I agree to the following statements: I am at least 18 years of age at the completion of this survey, I have had at least one partnered sexual experience (manual-genital, oral-genital, genital-genital contact), I have read and understood the preceding description, have had the procedures explained to me, and have satisfactorily answered any questions I might have. I give my voluntary consent to participate in this study with the understanding that I am free to withdraw at any time and/or omit any question(s)/procedure(s) I choose. I understand that withdrawal will not affect my future opportunities for research participation.

- I consent to the following Terms and Conditions
- I do NOT consent to the following Terms and Conditions

How did you hear about this survey? Note: This question will be used to properly allocate compensation for participation

- MTurk
- Social Media (Reddit, Twitter, Fetlife, etc.)
- Word of Mouth/Other

Select the gender that best represents you:

- Agender
- Man (including cis, trans, transmasculine)
- Nonbinary/genderqueer
- Queer
- Woman (including cis, trans, transfeminine)
- Prefer to specify: \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer not to answer

What is your current age?

\_\_\_\_\_

What is your current country of residence?

\_\_\_\_\_

What is your approximate yearly earnings after tax?

- Less than \$9,999
- \$10,000 - \$19,999
- \$20,000 - \$49,999
- \$50,000 - \$99,999
- \$100,000 - \$149,999
- More than \$150,000
- Don't know
- Prefer not to answer

What is your ethnicity?

- Asian
- Black
- Caucasian
- Hispanic/Latinx
- Middle Eastern
- Mixed Race
- Native Indigenous
- Prefer to Specify \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer not to answer

Select the sexual orientation that best represents you:

- Asexual
- Bisexual
- Exploring/Evolving/Curious
- Gay/Lesbian
- Heterosexual
- Pansexual
- Queer
- Prefer to Specify \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer not to answer

What is your current relationship status?

- single
- in a romantically and sexually monogamous relationship
- in a consensually negotiated non-monogamous relationship
- Prefer to Specify: \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer not to answer

To answer the next question, we ask that you review the following definition:

Bondage/Discipline, Dominance/submission, and Sadism/Masochism (BDSM) is loosely defined as: "[erotic] behaviours that involve some sort of power exchange between two or more partners and/or the use of pain to elicit sexual pleasure, though sensations other than pain (e.g., pleasure)

are also frequently used in play...". Some examples of BDSM sexual activities include sensation exploration, bondage, the use of whips or paddles, and manual choking.

Based on the definition above, do you engage in BDSM, kink, or power exchange erotic activities?

- Yes, I regularly engage in these practises
- I occasionally engage in these practises
- I have tried this once or twice
- No, I do not engage in these practices

Some individuals who practise BDSM seek out like minded peers and involve themselves in a community of BDSM-practising people. These communities can have a physical presence (e.g., getting together to share a meal - "munches", educational workshops, or large-scale BDSM/kink conventions) or an online presence (e.g., Fetlife, Discord, Reddit). These communities typically offer friendship, support, safety, play, and education for all involved. Based on the examples above, do you consider yourself to be connected to, or interact with, a BDSM community?

- Yes, I regularly interact with a BDSM community
- I occasionally interact with a BDSM community
- I have interacted once or twice
- No, I do not interact with a BDSM community

What kind of community events do you regularly participate in (either online or in-person)? Please select all that apply.

- Munches/Sloshes (the sharing of meals or drink for social purposes)
- Workshops (educational, recreational)
- Conventions (e.g., CLAW, Dark Odyssey, WinterFire)
- Community Events (e.g., camping events, rope nights)
- Competitions
- Play Parties
- Online Forums (e.g., Fetlife, Reddit, Discord)
- Prefer to Specify: \_\_\_\_\_

Select the dynamic role that best represents you:

- Dominant/Top
- Submissive/Bottom
- Switch
- Prefer to Specify: \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer not to answer

What is the nature of your BDSM relationship(s), i.e., who do you play with? Please select all that apply.

- Stranger
- Romantic Partner
- Ex-Partner
- Friend
- People in my circle

- Acquaintance  
 Prefer to Specify: \_\_\_\_\_

At each community event, how often do you recall observing consent communication behaviours being practised by other people?

	Never	Sometimes	About half the time	Most of the time	Always	Not Applicable
Munches/Sloshes	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Workshops	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Annual	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Conferences	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Community Events	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Competitions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Play Parties	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Online Forums	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Prefer to Specify:	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

How likely is it that you could be harmed by engaging in the following activities?

	Extremely unlikely	Somewhat unlikely	Neither likely nor unlikely	Somewhat likely	Extremely likely
Hugging	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Kissing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Caressing with clothes on	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Caressing with clothes off	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Erotic (nude) Massage	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Speaking Suggestively ("dirty talking")	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Manual Stimulation (of the breasts, buttocks, genitals)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Oral Stimulation (of the breasts, buttocks, genitals)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Penetrative Sex (using fingers, toys, genitals)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Use of Vibrating Toys (with partner)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Use of Blindfolds (with partner)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Use of Handcuffs (with partner)	<input type="radio"/>				
Engage in Rope Bondage (with partner)	<input type="radio"/>				
Use of Impact Instruments (whips, floggers, paddles, crops)	<input type="radio"/>				
Manual Choking Bare-handed	<input type="radio"/>				
Spanking Role Play (doctor/nurse, teacher/student, pet/owner)	<input type="radio"/>				
Edging (bringing a partner close to orgasm but denying completion)	<input type="radio"/>				
Use of a Gag Toy Engaging in Watersports (urinating/being urinated on by partner)	<input type="radio"/>				

How severely could you be harmed by engaging in the following activities?

	Not severe at all	A little severe	Moderately severe	Quite severe	Very severe
Hugging	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Kissing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Caressing with clothes on	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Caressing with clothes off	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Erotic (nude) Massage	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Speaking Suggestively ("dirty talking")	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Manual Stimulation (of the breasts, buttocks,	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

genitals)					
Oral Stimulation (of the breasts, buttocks, genitals)	<input type="radio"/>				
Penetrative Sex (using fingers, toys, genitals)	<input type="radio"/>				
Use of Vibrating Toys (with partner)	<input type="radio"/>				
Use of Blindfolds (with partner)	<input type="radio"/>				
Use of Handcuffs (with partner)	<input type="radio"/>				
Engage in Rope Bondage (with partner)	<input type="radio"/>				
Use of Impact Instruments (whips, floggers, paddles, crops)	<input type="radio"/>				
Manual Choking	<input type="radio"/>				
Bare-handed Spanking	<input type="radio"/>				
Role Play (doctor/nurse, teacher/student, pet/owner)	<input type="radio"/>				
Edging (bringing a partner close to orgasm but denying completion)	<input type="radio"/>				
Use of a Gag Toy	<input type="radio"/>				
Engaging in Watersports (urinating/being urinated on by partner)	<input type="radio"/>				

In your opinion, how important is direct, verbal, explicit consent for each of the following activities? Please indicate from 1 - not at all important to 5 - extremely important

	Not at all important	Slightly important	Moderately important	Very important	Extremely important
Hugging	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Kissing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Caressing with	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

clothes on					
Caressing with clothes off	<input type="radio"/>				
Erotic (nude)	<input type="radio"/>				
Massage					
Speaking					
Suggestively ("dirty talking")	<input type="radio"/>				
Manual					
Stimulation (of the breasts, buttocks, genitals)	<input type="radio"/>				
Oral Stimulation (of the breasts, buttocks, genitals)	<input type="radio"/>				
Penetrative Sex (using fingers, toys, genitals)	<input type="radio"/>				
Use of Vibrating Toys (with partner)	<input type="radio"/>				
Use of Blindfolds (with partner)	<input type="radio"/>				
Use of Handcuffs (with partner)	<input type="radio"/>				
Engage in Rope Bondage (with partner)	<input type="radio"/>				
Use of Impact Instruments (whips, floggers, paddles, crops)	<input type="radio"/>				
Manual Choking	<input type="radio"/>				
Bare-handed					
Spanking	<input type="radio"/>				
Role Play (doctor/nurse, teacher/student, pet/owner)	<input type="radio"/>				
Edging (bringing a partner close to orgasm but denying completion)	<input type="radio"/>				
Use of a Gag Toy	<input type="radio"/>				
Engaging in	<input type="radio"/>				

Watersports  
(urinating/being  
urinated on by  
partner)

Listed below are a number of different reasons why people ask for sexual consent. How important are each of these reasons in influencing your decision to ask for consent?

	Not at all important	Slightly important	Moderately important	Very important	Extremely important
To avoid physical injury	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To mitigate mental distress	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To enhance pleasure for everyone	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To avoid misunderstandings	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To show my partner I respect them	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To avoid false accusations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To prove to my friends/community that I am a good person	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To increase trust with my partner	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

How much have you learned about consent communication from the following sources?

	None at all	A little	A moderate amount	A lot	A great deal
Family (including mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, grandparents, siblings, cousins)	<input type="radio"/>				
Internet (sex education websites, pornography videos)	<input type="radio"/>				
Friends/Peers	<input type="radio"/>				
Romantic/Sexual Partners	<input type="radio"/>				
Community (religious, recreational, social)	<input type="radio"/>				





























because I consented to the sexual activity before. I didn't want to hurt my partner's feelings.	<input type="radio"/>						
They physically would not let me leave.	<input type="radio"/>						
I didn't want them to feel rejected.	<input type="radio"/>						
I felt that if I consented to the unwanted sexual activity, they would like/love me.	<input type="radio"/>						
I wanted to feel accepted by my partner.	<input type="radio"/>						
They sweet talked me into it.	<input type="radio"/>						

How often do you establish limits regarding your sexual preferences and acceptable behaviours with your current or most recent sexual partner?

- Never
- Sometimes
- About half the time
- Most of the time
- Always

How often have your pre-established limits been disregarded in a sexual scene or relationship?

- Never
- Sometimes
- About half the time
- Most of the time
- Always

Think of a time when your boundaries were disregarded. Please think of this event when answering the following questions. Please indicate which of the following are most indicative of the reason for why it may have happened. Select all that apply.

- Intoxication (Self or Other)

- Accidental
- Overstep of the Negotiated Dynamic
- Lack of knowledge or skills
- Misunderstanding or miscommunication
- Sexual coercion or manipulation
- Forced Violation
- Prefer to Specify \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer not to answer

Did the person who disregarded your boundaries try to re-negotiate your consent prior to the disregard your boundaries?

- No
- Unsure
- Yes

How did they attempt to renegotiate the interaction?

- In person verbal negotiation
- In person nonverbal negotiation
- Online negotiation
- Multiple negotiations methods were used
- Did not renegotiate

What was your dynamic role identity at the time of the disregard of your boundaries?

- Dominant/Top
- Submissive/Bottom
- Switch
- Prefer to Specify \_\_\_\_\_

What was the nature of your relationship with the person who disregarded your boundaries?

- Stranger
- Romantic/Sexual Partner
- Ex-Partner
- Friend
- Acquaintance
- Prefer to Specify: \_\_\_\_\_

How many times had you engaged in sexual activities with this person <b>prior</b> to the disregard of your boundaries?

- Never
- Once or Twice
- A Few Times
- More than 10 Times

How many times had you engaged in sexual activities with this person <b>after</b> the disregard of your boundaries?

- Never

- Once or Twice
- A Few Times
- More than 10 Times

What was your motivation to continue to engage in sexual activities with this person after the disregard of your boundaries?

---

Thank you for your participation in this survey! In the space below, please add any comments on your experience or details that you believe were not covered in the questionnaire.

Appendix C  
Advertisements

## What's Your Kink and How Does It Link?

Jessica Johnson, M.A., Terry Humphreys, Ph.D.



### Do you identify as someone in the BDSM/kink community?

Participate in our study about  
*consent communication* for a  
chance to win one of four \$50  
Amazon gift cards!

Must be 18+ to participate

For more information, contact:  
jesjohnson@trentu.ca



**Click Here to Join!**

**Deadline to participate in this  
study is: April 1st, 2024**

Community-Academic Consortium for  
Research on Alternative Sexualities  
(CARAS) Approved



# Let's Talk About Sex!

## Communication and Negotiation

Jessica Johnson M.A., Terry Humphreys, Ph.D.



**Click Here to Join!**

For more information, contact  
Jessica Johnson:  
jesjohnson@trentu.ca

**Participate in our  
study about consent  
communication for  
a chance to win one  
of four \$50 Amazon  
gift cards!**

Must be 18+ to participate

**Deadline to participate in this  
study is: April 1st, 2024**

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