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Accounts of experiences of play by individuals practising BDSM

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UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG
SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
PSYCHOLOGY

Research Proposal

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Accounts of experiences of play by individuals practising BDSM

By

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30th April 2021

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
PSYCHOLOGY

SENATE PLAGIARISM POLICY

Declaration by Students

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Abstract

This research aimed to understand the experiences of play by practitioners of consensual bondage, discipline, dominance and submission and sadism and masochism (BDSM). Play is central during a BDSM scene, yet there is limited research taking into consideration the lived experiences of play of the practitioners. Drawing on a phenomenological framework, the lived experiences of BDSM practitioners were foregrounded in order to explore the experiential dimensions of play and what these meant for them. Data was collected via nine in-depth, semi-structured interviews with individuals who identified as BDSM practitioners. They were recruited through an online forum using a snowball sample and the data was analysed use interpretive phenomenological analysis. The experiences of play described in the research revealed clustered around power exchange in play, consent in BDSM play, transcendent states experienced during play, private versus public play. Another dimension that was revealed is how BDSM play empowered and healed many of the practitioners who participated in the research.

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List of Terms

Bottom: A person who receives spankings, floggings, or other forms of stimulation in situations which specifically exclude power exchange (Veaux, 2020).

Consent: Affirmative permission, assent, or approval. In a BDSM context, "consent" is an affirmative assent to engage in a particular activity, freely given without coercion or distress (Veaux, 2020).

Consensual non-consent: Any situation in which one person knowingly and voluntarily gives up the ability to prevent another person from doing whatever he or she wants; as, for example, deliberately engaging in activities which the submissive may be physically prevented from resisting and does not have a safe word. Some forms of rape play are consensual non-consent (Veaux, 2020).

Contract: A mutually negotiated, written agreement between a dominant and a submissive, outlining the submissive's limits, the activities the participants wish to explore, and the like (Veaux, 2020).

Dominant: A person who assumes a role of power or authority in a power exchange relationship. A dominant takes psychological control over or has power over another person, and may, for example, give that person orders which are to be obeyed. Also referred to as a Dom (Veaux, 2020).

Edgeplay: 1. Any practice which involves significant risk of injury or physical harm; as, breath control, fire play. 2. Any practice which challenges the limits or boundaries of one or more of the participants (Veaux, 2020).

Informed consent: Consent freely given with full and prior knowledge of the conditions and potential consequences of the assent (Veaux, 2020).

Kink: Unconventional sensual, erotic, and sexual behaviors (Rehor, 2015).

Participant/Pracitioners: Used interchangeably in this research report to describe an individual who is involved in activities falling with the BDSM spectrum.

Play: a term which, when used in the context of BDSM, describes any of a diverse number of "kinky" activities. The term play might describe mental or physical sexual interactions of various intensities

and levels of social normalcy (Kinkly, 2020).

Scene: 1. A specific period of BDSM activity; as in, *We had a scene lasting about two hours last night.* 2. *Colloquial* The BDSM community as a whole. 3. *In the scene:* participating in the organized BDSM community (Veaux, 2020).

Sex-positive: an attitude towards human sexuality that regards all consensual sexual activities as fundamentally healthy and pleasurable, encouraging sexual pleasure and experimentation (Gabosch, 2014).

Submissive: One who assumes a role of submission in a power exchange relationship. A submissive is a person who seeks a position of or occupies a role of intentional, consensual powerlessness, allowing another person to take control over him or her. Also referred to as a sub (Veaux, 2020).

Top: One who administers some form of stimulation, such as spankings, floggings, or some other kind of stimulation on another person but does not have psychological control or power over that person (Veaux, 2020).

Vanilla: *Colloquial* Not interested in or involved with BDSM or activities related to BDSM; as, *a vanilla person* (Veaux, 2020).

Table of Contents

Abstract iii
Acknowledgements iv
List of Terms v
Chapter 1: Introduction 3
1.1 Rationale 5
Chapter 2: Literature Review 8
2.1 BDSM Practice: Then and Now 8
2.2 BDSM and Experiences of Play 9
2.2.1 Psychological Play 11
2.2.2 Physical Play 12
2.3 BDSM in South Africa 13
2.3.1 Whiteness in the BDSM scene 14
2.4 The Current Study 15
Chapter 3: Methods 17
3.1 Source of Data 17
3.2 Data Collection Instrument 19
3.3 Procedure 20
3.4 Method of Data Analysis 21
3.5 Rigour 22
3.6 Ethical Considerations 22
3.7 Reflexivity 25
Chapter 4: Results and Discussion 27
4.1. Power Exchange in Play (PEP) 27
4.1.1. Power Exchange in Play: Submissive's Point of View 28
4.1.2 Power Exchange in Play: Dominant's Point of View 31
4.2 Consent in BDSM Play 37
4.2.1 Negotiation and Safewords 37
4.3 Transcendent States Experienced during Play 44
4.3.1 Subspace 44
4.3.2 Sub drop 45
4.3.3 Domspace 48
4.3.4 Dom Drop 49
4.3.5 Aftercare 51
4.4 Public vs Private Play 53
4.4.1 Public Plays 53

4.4.2 Private Play 56
4.5 BDSM Play as Empowering and Healing 57
Chapter 5: Conclusion 62
5.1 Limitations 64
5.2 Recommendations 65
Reference List 66
Appendices 88
Appendix A: Permission Letter 88
Appendix B: Signed Permission Letter from FetLife Caretakes 91
Appendix C: Interview Schedule 92
Appendix D: Participation Information Sheet 94
Appendix E: Consent Form for Conducting the Interview 96
Appendix F: Ethics Clearance Certificate 98
Figures 99
Figure 1 99

Chapter 1: Introduction

BDSM is an acronym that groups together various terms, such as bondage and discipline (BD), dominance and submission (DS), sadism and masochism (SM) (Barker et al., 2007). These terms often reflect practices and experiences that are consensual and anchored in exchanges of power, bondage and pain that often stimulate an individual physically or psychologically, resulting in sexual arousal and satisfaction (Wiseman, 1996). Bondage and discipline are described as activities that involve physical restraint and setting rules in punishment, dominance and submission refer to the mutual and consensual act of relinquishing and accepting of control and authority between partners and sadism and masochism refers to sexual gratification derived from inflicting or suffering pain and humiliation within a consensual play session (Faccio et al., 2014).

The definition of BDSM is varying because these are very dynamic terms; each practitioner can use them differently, and thus it can have a different 'meaning.' The umbrella term kink (or kinky) encompasses the infinite ways in which sexuality can be portrayed in an unorthodox manner, including BDSM and fetish concepts (Barker et al . 2007). For example, kinky sex may consist of all the activities found in the BDSM acronym, and the fetish experience may also be included in the BDSM term.

Weinberg et al.'s (1984) eight-year study in San Francisco using multiple forms of data collection found five unique practises familiar to BDSM. These are (1) dominance and submission (or power play which means one individual/role ruling the other in a more submissive role), (2) role-playing, (3) consensus/agreement on what practise will take place (willingness as opposed to forced), (4) mutual understanding of what the activities involve and (5) these activities acted out in a sexual context (p. 4).

However, there is a fundamental concept to the practices of BDSM that is primary in understanding what BDSM entails. This concept is that practitioners consent to the activities instead of being forced to engage, as would be the case in rape or sexual assault, and in the latter instance, thus punishable under law (Weinberg, 2006). BDSM play and its dynamic during a scene are at the forefront of what BDSM is and distinguishes the practice radically from other forms of sexuality (Faccio et al., 2014). Firstly, BDSM play revolves primarily around sensation and power play and not necessarily sexual play (often secondary) as sex is not fundamental to BDSM play, in contrast to non-BDSM play (vanilla sex) (Simula, 2017). In vanilla sex, sex, sexual pleasure,

and eroticism are difficult to distinguish (Faccio et al., 2014). In BDSM play, what causes pleasure may not be sexual, and what is described as erotic does not include the genital or erogenous zones (Faccio et al., 2014).

Furthermore, there is always consent and mutual understanding of what will be done in a BDSM play session (Faccio et al., 2014). Play in BDSM has been compared to Vygotsky's (1934/1966) play theory which has been used to understand the role of fantasy and make-believe in BDSM (Turley et al., 2017). Vygotsky (1934/1966) suggested that children use fantasy play to escape everyday situations that constrain their imagination, enabling them to explore thoughts and emotions, creativity and meaning-making that surpass their ordinary circumstances. Turley et al. (2017) applied the above theory to BDSM play by saying that play allows practitioners to enter a world of make-believe which is only limited by their imagination. It removes them from their own psychological, gendered and bodily constraints as they could engage in imaginative play sessions that allowed them to experience an alternative reality impossible to achieve in the real world. Therefore, BDSM play enables experimentation with "gender, social non-conventions and physical and psychological sensations" (Turley et al., 2017, p. 326) that might be novel to individuals participating, which allows for an opportunity to play with "diverse elements of experience" (Zittoun & Cerchia, 2013, p. 312). Fundamentally, BDSM is about sensation and power play (Dunkley et al., 2019; Labrecque et al., 2020, p. 9). Hence, for this study, the term BDSM play refers to the range of activities that come with practising BDSM and will be used throughout this research report.

Individuals typically exchange power during BDSM play by assuming roles, which are either dominant or submissive, with some switching back and forth between these assumed roles depending on the BDSM scene being implemented. BDSM typically occurs in a scene, a formal or informal setting in which activities take place (Turely et al., 2017). Spanking or caning, bondage with chains or restraints, verbal humiliation, and the application of extreme physical stimuli such as heat or pain are some examples of BDSM activities (Langdridge & Barker, 2007). Safety and consent are fundamental to BDSM practitioners, and the frameworks that practitioners are guided by, such as safe, sane and consensual (SSC) or risk aware consensual kink (RACK), express this clearly (Langdridge & Barker, 2007). Only a few studies have been done to determine the prevalence of BDSM-related interests in Western populations, and figures range from 10% to 22% (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2007; Richters et al., 2008), suggesting that interests in BDSM are not uncommon. Individuals who participate in consensual BDSM are no more likely to be dangerous

than other people, according to research (Connolly, 2006), and there is no correlation between consensual BDSM and psychopathology (Connolly, 2006; Cross & Matheson, 2006). In reality, those who engage in BDSM find it pleasant, enjoyable, and meaningful (Faccio et al., 2014; Turley, 2012).

The range and scope of empirical research in this field have been gradually expanding. However, most of the research on consensual BDSM has been ethnographical (Newmahr, 2010), cultural (Weiss, 2020) and anthropological (Rivoli, 2015). Furthermore, researchers have been generally interested in the sociology of BDSM from an outsider perspective, but not many studies have focused on the psychology of BDSM. In the cases where psychology is researched, it includes psychological characteristics of BDSM practitioners (Connolly, 2006; Richters et al., 2008; Wismeijer & Assen, 2013), depathologising BDSM practice (Wright, 2018), practices associated with BDSM (Nordling et al., 2006) and outsider views of BDSM practitioners (Yost, 2010). In a South African context, even less academic work has been conducted. The focus has been either on BDSM being a sexually violent act (Noyes, 1998), online constructions of sexual intimacy (Wolfaardt, 2014), a philosophical lens to investigate feminist theories and what those mean in the BDSM scene (Van Reenen, 2014) or understanding the multimodal meanings of BDSM bodies (McCormick, 2018).

This calls for further research in BDSM communities from a South African perspective and conducting deeper investigations into the lived experiences of individuals who practice BDSM and what these lived experiences mean to these individuals. It is important to interrogate these experiences locally and to get a feel for what the BDSM landscape looks like in South Africa, including its dynamics and opportunities that BDSM offers. Looking at BDSM play and what opportunities it provides South African practitioners, this study contributes knowledge that opposes the notion of alternative sexual practices and looks at BDSM through a sex-positive lens.

1.1 Rationale

The popular imagery commonly associated with BDSM is dark and unsettling. Chains, whips, and cages exist in this dark, dungeon-like space. This imagery is used by critics to argue that BDSM is anti-woman and maintains heteronormative gender roles (Fahs et al., 2018). These depictions are inaccurate, and they tear down and neglect the tradition of BDSM. From a psychology standpoint, potential mental health problems, unhealthy fixations on particular sexual activities, or the presence of childhood abuse, as predicted by psychopathological and psychoanalytic models, have traditionally fueled research interests in the BDSM (Langdridge, 2006). This psychoanalytic

approach remained the dominant method for addressing S/M behaviour until the 1950s. Further to these misconceptions is that BDSM is still often understood to be linked to violence and abuse and not considered part of the interpersonal dynamics that make BDSM a consented practice between partners (Weinberg, 2006).

Against this pathologisation and stigma of BDSM is its reconceptualisation as a form of adult creativity and enjoyment (Turley & Butt, 2015). Williams (2009) argues strongly against categorising BDSM as a form of deviance and pathology. This position is supported by Stebbins (2007), who suggested the term 'serious leisure' to describe BDSM and its defining activities. Williams (2009) defines these activities as skills or techniques that assist in a successful BDSM play session. People have overlooked the opportunities that BDSM offers many of its practitioners, from experiencing transcendence, freedom from everyday constraints of normative behaviour, even to the healing aspects of BDSM play (Weinberg, 2006). Furthermore, it's a narrative about how gender is created and how social norms are challenged (Prior, 2013). BDSM is a lifestyle for many who practice it; it has its rules and orders to ensure everyone is safe and enjoying themselves (Williams, 2009).

This study is interested in the phenomenology of BDSM play from a sex-positive standpoint (the idea that sex is a normal and celebrated practice as long as it is mutually consensual) rather than a cultural standpoint (which has been the main focus in the social sciences field) (Weiss, 2020). The study relies on insider perspectives of how play is experienced by those practising BDSM and what role this experience has on these individuals instead of relying on outsider views, clinical populations, or psychiatric accounts of BDSM play. Furthermore, the growth of BDSM communities has led to research demands that are in line with the participants' phenomenology (Langdridge & Barker, 2007). The phenomenological approach sheds light on phenomena based on how individuals perceive a situation, in this case, play within BDSM scenes, while focusing on the experience as a whole instead of breaking it down into separate parts (Giorgi, 2012).

What follows in Chapter 2: Literature Review is a detailed analysis of academic literature on BDSM, comparing views of BDSM as pathology and how that view has moved towards more contemporary perspectives that are sex-positive and accepting and what BDSM play entails (physical and psychological). This section concludes by explaining what the current study would achieve and its significance in South Africa.

The Methods chapter focused on the steps followed in conducting the study. It included a description of the phenomenological approach that the study adopted to fulfil the aim. The data source was also described: the sampling, the recruiting of participants, and interviewing of participants, including the form of analysis, which was interpretative phenomenological analysis to analyse the transcripts. The chapter concluded by stating the ethical considerations that directed the execution of this study.

The Results and Discussion chapter undertakes a detailed discussion of the data collected during the participant interviews. It starts with power exchange in play and how it is defined and experienced by submissives and dominants. Secondly, what consent means in BDSM play and the fundamental importance it plays in ensuring all parties' safety and the boundaries that need to be adhered to keep within the desired frameworks, be it safe, sane and consensual (SSC) or risk aware consensual kink (RACK). Thirdly, the transcendent states that submissives and dominants experience, from dom/subspace to the drop from this experience and the steps that need to be taken to minimise this drop. Fourthly, how play dynamics differ in public versus private settings, focusing on sexual versus non-sexual play scenes due to social rules and personal preference. Lastly, this chapter concluded with the healing opportunities BDSM has provided practitioners and how it has empowered participants to come out and be the best version of themselves that they could be.

The Conclusion chapter reflects on the experiential highlights of BDSM play as reported by the participants. This chapter discussed and summarised what the experiential highlights of BDSM play were. These centred around power exchange play and how it followed the rules and guidelines set out during the negotiation phase, what transcendent states were experienced when in a BDSM play session, what positive benefits BDSM play had to offer these practitioners and how the dynamic differed from private and public spaces. This chapter concluded by stating what the limitations of the study were for this study and recommending avenues for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Consensual bondage and discipline (B&D), dominance and submission (D/s), sadism and masochism (S&M), typically referred to as BDSM, describes a variety of sexual interests that are not typical in terms of sexual acts in the societal sphere (Faccio et al., 2020). These activities involve receiving intense physical and/or psychological sensations (Turley & Butt, 2015) and consensual exchange of power that is eroticised (Langdridge & Butt, 2005). Atypical and non-normative sexual practices are often stigmatised and misunderstood. Individuals who do not engage in BDSM have been shown to have derogatory perceptions and opinions toward BDSM practitioners (Stockwell, Walker, & Eshleman, 2010). According to researchers, this is primarily due to the mainstream media's pathologising of BDSM (Wilkinson, 2009; Yost, 2010). Additionally, stigma towards BDSM has been reported in cases of discrimination in employment (National Coalition for Sexual Freedom [NCSF], 2011), suspension of child support (Kleinpatz & Moser, 2006) and charges of abuse and violence towards partners (White, 2006). Moreover, extensive research on BDSM has not decreased stigma, and it is so prevalent that these individuals often hide from society and avoid sharing their sexual preferences from family, friends, and healthcare practitioners because they fear being judged, shamed, and discriminated against (Bezreh et al., 2012). Participants who had previous knowledge of BDSM through their participation, others' involvement, or a higher degree of understanding had more positive attitudes toward BDSM (Yost, 2010). Negative perceptions of BDSM practitioners tend to derive from misunderstandings about the sexual practice, many of which are fueled by media misinformation (Ibrahim, 2014).

2.1 BDSM Practice: Then and Now

In the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 2nd edition (DSM-II), Sexual Sadism and Sexual Masochism were included and described as sexual deviances and could be found in the personality disorder section (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 1968). Continuing with the DSM-III (APA, 1980) and the DSM-IV-TR (APA, 2000), Sexual Sadism and Sexual Masochism had not significantly shifted in terms of their description. Both were classified under paraphilias. Lastly, the DSM-V depathologised the way paraphilias are described. This depathologisation allowed BDSM practitioners to freely practise their preferred form of sexuality without being labelled as disordered[1].

[1] Although extensive engagement with the DSM may prove valuable, given the aims of the project/research, the researcher did not want to give clinical diagnostics around BDSM as that is not fundamental to the experience of play.

While prejudices and misinterpretations still exist among professionals (Hoff & Sprott, 2009; Kolmes, Stock & Moser, 2006; Wright, 2006), studies have consistently shown that BDSM is not pathological (Connelly et al., 2006; Powls & Davies, 2012; Richters et al., 2008; Weinberg, 2006). BDSM practitioners are no more likely than the general population to have experienced violence or trauma as a child or to have shown some criminal behaviour that may have led them to this type of sexual practice. (Connolly, 2006; Powls & Davies, 2012; Richter et al., 2008; Sandnabba et al., 2002; Weinberg, 2006).

Various researchers have pursued these alternative understandings of BDSM for study (Powls & Davies, 2012; Pillai-Friedman et al., 2015; Weinberg, 2006), and that has challenged the "traditional" (pre-DSM-V) viewpoint of BDSM in psychology/psychiatry being a pathology. Additionally, new stories and research on BDSM have tried to understand reports that BDSM practitioners themselves tell about their lives and sexual activities (Richter et al., 2008). Much of this research has emerged from the BDSM communities' growth (Langdridge & Butt, 2004). These organisations advocate for the freedom to express their identities and participate in SM activities and perhaps for even wider public acceptance and acknowledgement of the rights of BDSM practitioners as individuals (Sisson, 2007; Weiss, 2011). With consent being at the forefront of any activity, BDSM is quickly becoming more accepted as an alternate form of sexuality in academic works and psychological practice (Moran, 2013).

2.2 BDSM and Experiences of Play

As a pleasure principle, BDSM practitioners get involved in and use language that is associated with BDSM play, like toys, players and often the word 'play' follows to describe specific activities related to BDSM, for example, "'puppy play', 'role play' and 'wax play'" (Turley, 2016, p. 326; Weiss, 2011). In the context of BDSM, play is a term used to describe any of a diverse number of 'kinky' activities (Greenberg, 2019). The word 'play' could describe mental or physical interactions of different intensities and social normalcy levels (Marks, 2019). The term 'play' was first invented by BDSM party and club culture members to describe the events that are taking place inside a scene. It has grown to cover the entire spectrum of BDSM interactions today (Marks, 2019).

Attwood and Smith (2013) state that if we consider BDSM play as a form of pleasure, we tap into an understanding of the varied practises of BDSM that goes beyond the models of medicine and pathology and into the recreational and pleasurable elements of BDSM. Typically, the playful aspects

of BDSM involve exchanges of power between individuals during a BDSM scene where roles are adopted and acted out (most often referred to as dominant or submissive) (Turley et al., 2017). These scenes are spaces where BDSM practices (formal or informal) may include spanking or caning, use of handcuffs and rope for bondage, verbal humiliation by the dominant to the submissive, and applying intense sensations, such as heat or pain (Langdridge, 2007). This type of intimacy does not necessarily involve genital penetration or genital stimulation, which Giddens (1993) terms 'plastic sexuality'. This term's focal point is around how sexuality is pleasurable and enjoyable instead of focusing on sex for reproduction and fuel romantic love. Plastic sexuality, therefore, offers the prospect of individuals being able to negotiate their terms of what is enjoyable and pleasurable and this negotiation creating equality within the relationship (Giddens, 1993).

It is interesting to note that to understand BDSM play in these contexts, one needs to compare the BDSM experiences with non-BDSM practitioners. Firstly, sex in non-BDSM practitioners is described as vanilla, meaning pleasant and plain (Faccio et al., 2014). In vanilla sex, it is difficult to separate sex from sexual pleasure and acts that are erotic. Anything defined as eroticism is related to the genital or erogenous zones (Faccio et al., 2014). In the context of BDSM, there is no necessary overlap between sex, sexual pleasure and eroticism. For instance, what induces pleasure may not be sexual, and what is defined as erotic may not involve the genital or erogenous areas. Even when BDSM experiences are coupled with sex involving the genital area, there are a few differences when comparing it to vanilla sex (Simula, 2017). Some of these differences include but are not limited to orgasm, the deep trust formed with partners, negotiating conditions of BDSM play and the outcomes of these BDSM play sessions.

An orgasm is not the determining factor of a successful and satisfactory BDSM play session: the experience can be highly erotic, sexually stimulating, deeper and more intense, even without an orgasm (Faccio et al., 2014). This breaks the constructs of sexuality and eroticism away from reproduction and focuses on the phallus (Giddens, 1992). Further to this, BDSM sex calls for and leads to creating deep connections. This is due to divulging hidden secrets that do not conform to the normative definition of sex and trusting someone wholeheartedly to enact these play sessions without fear of getting hurt or judgement of their fantasies (Simula, 2017). These secrets and fantasies are negotiated and understood beforehand, allowing plays to be monitored under these conditions. This communication and attention to rules are constant and empathic (Simula, 2017). "Very often, in conventional sexual relations, people are reluctant to acknowledge what they are seeking or hoping

to attain via their sexual contacts. Among some BDSM practitioners, emotional and erotic transparency is valued so that at least in theory, particular motives and goals are to be divulged and shared rather than hidden obliquely" (Kleinplatz 2006, p. 341). Lastly, the plurality of its effects is another important aspect of the experience of engaging in BDSM. While the sexual experience can be the primary positive outcome, there are other non-sexual, positive effects. Through BDSM play, participants describe being able to explore themselves and report spiritual, cathartic or therapeutic rewards (Faccio et al., 2014).

These BDSM activities allow practitioners to experience eroticism and sexuality in a way that is led by fantasy. Additionally, these activities can be experienced in the physical and/or psychological form. It is essential to distinguish between these two experiences as they are not necessarily dependent on each other; you do not necessarily need the physical activity to experience the psychological experience or vice versa ("Your NO BS Intro to BDSM", 2017).

2.2.1 *Psychological Play*

Psychological experiences of BDSM play are a collection of activities aimed at producing psychological impact, often without a physical component (Hébert & Weaver, 2015). These activities can range from but not limited to role play, exhibitionism and power play (where the dominant individual orders the submissive to obey any instructions during the play session) ("Your NO BS Intro to BDSM", 2017). Baker (2016) investigated the psychological, spiritual experience of BDSM and produced the theme of crucial constituents that included six subthemes. These were: "ordeal, surrender, visionary experience, embodied sense of an energetic force, self-surrendered/transcended state of consciousness, sense of spiritual presence (other), and deeply personal and lasting sense of meaning" (Baker, 2016, p. 5). Furthermore, BDSM practitioners have reported experiencing positive psychological outcomes, ranging from "the cathartic to the spiritual to the therapeutic" (Turley et al., 2011, p. 131). BDSM play is a way of exploring the body as a dominant or submissive, enhancing feelings of a relationship with the body and contributing to a new sense of connection with the world around its participants (Turley, 2016).

In line with the formal studies undertaken by Taylor and Ussher (2001), many BDSM practitioners described their experiences as "fun... inexplicable... dissidence, purposeful and intentional opposition to a sexually authoritative practice, or, "patriarchal heterosexuality" (p. 302), and escapist (where one can escape the mundane of everyday life) and transcendent" (Yost & Hunter,

2012). Referring to transcendence, Newmahr (2010) quoted one of her participants who described a lived experience of a transcendental state:

> "It was a very intense buzz. My body was very light; I didn't feel the weight of my body. I didn't lose awareness of where I was, but my head cleared up completely, which was really wonderful because I'm always thinking. I have a very busy mind, and sometimes that gets the better of me . . . I'd describe it as more as a high than a buzz. The closest thing I can say is that it's like being drunk . . . so it was really amazing at that moment to be—all that I was, was the sum of my five senses. That was the thing that I most relished, being able to use my body to the utmost." (p. 328)

BDSM play has also been considered a form of erotic play for adults, where rules and boundaries are controlled by the individuals taking part in the consensual and sexual play (Turley et al., 2017). Baumeister (1988) suggested that BDSM play provided temporary relief from modernisation's complex structures as individuals shouldered new roles and public identities. BDSM play offered a temporary and effective escape from high-level self-consciousness as an abstract, temporally expanded, symbolically constructed identity to a low-level, temporally constricted self-consciousness as a physical body, concentrating on immediate sensations (Baumeister, 1988).

2.2.2 *Physical Play*

Physical play consists of activities that are carried out physically (not always strictly sexual) (Greenberg, 2019). These activities include, but are not limited to restraint/bondage, pain or sensation play (i.e. inflicting unusual sensations on a partner's body, such as flogging/spanking, hot wax, ice cubes etc.), and trans play (intense physical stimulation to reach an altered psychological state, as described in psychological play) (Greenberg, 2019). According to Moser and Kleinplatz (2007), some practitioners do not experience the physical stimulation as painful; they instead refer to it as intensity.

There are "intensity junkies" who yearn for specific intensity levels (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2007, p. 51). These intensity levels range from light play, heavy play to edge play (De Neef et al., 2019). Light play is an activity that consists of elements practised by 'vanilla couples'. These activities are considered to carry little social stigma. Examples of this type of play are light bondage, slapping, biting and casual spanking (Holt, 2016). These activities carry little social stigma because the acts are not considered BDSM by the community. They are performed without the purpose of developing a power exchange dynamic of dominance/submission or causing pain or humiliation, but rather as a way to express

passion, enjoyment of the sensation, or some other benevolent incentive (Holt, 2016). Heavy play consists of activities that are intense and carry considerable social stigma. Examples of this type of play are caning, suspension bondage and erotic hypnosis (Holt, 2016). Lastly, edge play is considered an extreme version of heavy play ("Your NO BS Intro to BDSM", 2017). This type of play pushes and challenges the boundaries of what participants are willing to do. There is a possibility of physical or emotional harm as it consists of activities such as breath play (better known as erotic asphyxiation ["Your NO BS Intro to BDSM", 2017]), knife play, gun play and blood play (drinking or licking blood extracted from partners by using razor blades, knives etc. ["What is Blood Play?", 2017]) (Holt, 2016).

For Williams (2009), BDSM play should be considered as a form of serious leisure that has been carefully planned to allow practitioners to experience sensations that are psychological and bodily and should be perceived as "unusual, unconventional, or different" rather than "psychopathology and dangerousness" (p. 211). Practitioners are not merely acting or playing a role during BDSM; the erotic play is more integrated, involved and evolving continuously (Turley, 2012), reflecting Weiss' (2011) deep play. BDSM play enables experimenting with imagination, vocabulary, physical complexities, and social roles and conventions (Turely et al., 2017).

In its current form, three significant areas of consensus are kept together in the field of BDSM research, despite substantial discrepancies in disciplinary, theoretical and methodological commitments: (1) BDSM is, by definition, voluntary and thus distinct from harassment and violence; (2) involvement in BDSM activities is not, in and of itself, indicative of pathology; and (3) BDSM is a socially complex phenomenon (rather than pathological and medical) that deserves academic study and understanding (Simula, 2019).

2.3 BDSM in South Africa

Only four studies have been found to investigate BDSM in South Africa. Two are located in the psychology discipline, one in the philosophy field and the other in linguistics. Noyes's article (1998) examines the development of BDSM activities and lifestyles following the easing of censorship laws in 1994. As he writes, "S/M imagery perpetuates the types of abuse our culture uses to protect white male heterosexual power," he is expressing a viewpoint shared by anti-porn feminist scholars such as Brownmiller (1984) and Russell (1993). (Noyes, 1998, p. 150). Wolfaardt's (2014) unpublished MA thesis in clinical psychology investigates how BDSM practitioners create intimacy in an online focus

group chat. Her findings show that, despite popular belief that BDSM is about sexual harassment, complex and nuanced intimacies form in online BDSM relationships using Foucauldian discourse analysis and online ethnography. Van Reenen's (2014) critique of Fifty Shades of Grey (James 2012) is based on the issue, "Is this really what women want?" Van Reenen's essay draws on the discipline of philosophy to examine the different feminist approaches to BDSM, ranging from anti-porn to pro-sex. Van Reenen's debate is based on whether the female protagonist is a victim of male abuse or a symbol of feminist sexuality. However, it did not consider the book's reception in South Africa or South African thoughts around the controversies surrounding the book. McCormick's study (2018) focused on the linguistics used in BDSM and how these linguistics shape the practitioners' activities in the study.

2.3.1 Whiteness in the BDSM scene

Authors (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006; Sandnabba et al., 2002) had suggested that BDSM practitioners are typically white, well-educated, and have higher-than-average annual salaries, and they started practising BDSM when they were young adults. Ahmed (2007) suggested that since much of the culture is geared toward whiteness due to colonisation, white bodies have the luxury of living as a "body-at-home" in the world, while racialised bodies have the discomfort of being stopped and diminished in the world. What is also important to note that not only is the culture is geared towards whiteness but spaces as well. Spaces, especially public spaces provide a place for bodies to join collectively, which shapes how that place is identified (Ahmed, 2007). Spaces are shaped by the proximity of some bodies and not others. This can be said for BDSM communities that gather. Because BDSM communities are identified as predominantly white, non-white bodies stick out in these spaces, which make them feel "uncomfortable, exposed, visible, different, when they take up this space" (Ahmed, 2007; p. 157). Fortunately, BDSM research has broadened in recent years. Cruz (2015), for example, made one of the most significant recent contributions to BDSM research by focusing on black women's experiences in her examination of how they "facilitate a complex and contradictory negotiation of pain, pleasure, and control" through online race play (p. 410). Cruz (2015) clarified that black women use race play to question the country's history of racial subordination and brutality and that race play provides black women with the limited ability to overcome black/white power differentials and the "racial and sexual otherness that characterises the lived experience of Black womanhood" (pg. 411). Cruz (2015) went on to say that race play 'imports' racism and racial scripts into simulated interactions of dominance and submission and that the simulation is both done by and on the racialised body.

In terms of a discussion of race in BDSM, the theme in the three South African papers (excluding McCormick's) mentioned above seems to be either to recognise white men's supremacy in the BDSM scene as a result of their lack of control and authority after apartheid's demise (Noyes 1998) or to disregard race entirely. In Wolfaardt's study (2014), there are detailed interviews with nine people, seven men and two women, but their race is never mentioned or even examined. Van Reenen prefers to disregard the fact that all of the protagonists and supporting characters in Fifty Shades of Grey are white. This is worth noting given the book's immense success among black and white female readers in South Africa, as stated in prominent women's magazines such as Marie Claire and Drum (McCormick, 2018). In the current study, race was not the focus, nor did it come up during participant interviews. However, all sample participants were white based primarily on image and names that fitted into what was customarily considered white by apartheid categories (Posel, 2001). This fits in with the general statistical data in academic work stated above, and this aspect of race is taken for granted because the practice is oriented towards white subjectivity (Joyal & Carpentier, 2016). Research on race in BDSM is worth investigating as the subjective experiences of BDSM play of other ethnic groups could divulge other aspects of BDSM play and their experiences as black BDSM practitioners in predominantly white spaces.

2.4 The Current Study

Given the various ways that BDSM has been understood and studied, ranging from the practice being associated with a de-pathologised and de-stigmatised view to lived experiences of BDSM, a feature that should also be considered is accounts of play by BDSM practitioners (Barker et al., 2007; Taylor & Ussher, 2001). Albeit limited, existing qualitative research does exist that examines BDSM and play, but with a focus on the political aspect of play (policing and marginalising alternative sexualities; political progression towards acceptance of BDSM play in mainstream society); a focus on scenes of BDSM encounters at play parties in particular or how BDSM can be conceptualised as a form of adult play (Carlström, 2018; Turley et al., 2017; Weiss, 2011) which has provided helpful information into the phenomenon.

However, the current study differs in its focus on subjective experiences of play by BDSM practitioners as well as the methodological perspective in that it seeks to foreground insider perspectives of lived experiences and to apply a phenomenological technique/framework to undertake the research. The focus also concerns the psychological aspect of BDSM play instead of a cultural or sociological one which has been the focus of most research in the social sciences field. This study was heavily embedded in phenomenological tradition that emphasised on the idiographic and experiential

dimensions of play. Two primary research questions guided the focus of the study. These were: (1) What do practitioners of BDSM describe as the key experiential dimensions of play?, and (2) What do practitioners of BDSM describe as the role of play in the overall practice of BDSM?

Furthermore, it was essential to focus on a South African perspective because only four research papers were found, all of which do not take a sex-positive stance but rather clinical, political, or criminal perspectives of the community into account.

Chapter 3: Methods

This study approached the research questions from a phenomenological conceptual and methodological framework in line with a qualitative tradition to better understand the experiential dimensions of phenomena. Such a framework is concerned with the subjective experiences of individuals (Giorgi, 2012). Phenomenological psychology explores the different and various stances of human experiences and how individuals make sense of the world through their meaning-making (Spinelli, 2006). It is interested in gauging individuals' lived experiences concerning a particular phenomenon that the study is trying to reveal. A phenomenological approach in this specific study posed a question, such as 'What is your experience of play in a BDSM setting?' to understand the lived experience of that activity in BDSM (Turley & Butt, 2015). By producing phenomenological data from BDSM practitioners, this study aimed to reveal the experience of BDSM practitioners and their accounts of play as lived (Turley et al., 2011).

3.1 Source of Data

The sampling strategy selected for this study was a purposive homogeneous sampling strategy. According to Groenewald (2004), this type of sampling is a key form of non-probability sampling as it helps identify suitable participants for the study being investigated (Greig & Taylor, 1999). The selected sample group was also criterion-based – to be a practitioner of BDSM. A homogeneous sample is a group of people who share similar experiences and characteristics of particular interest to the researcher (Elliott, 2011). A homogeneous sample is useful when the research under investigation addresses a specific phenomenon that the sample can provide an answer to (Elliott, 2011). Homogeneous sampling was ideal for this study as its purpose was to describe a group of BDSM practitioners' experiences concerning their lived accounts of play and retrieve information-rich, in-depth data (Patton,1990) that shed light on the research questions.

This study's sample size consisted of nine individuals who are actively involved in the BDSM community and who are regular practitioners of consensual BDSM and have been practising BDSM for more than six months to get the enjoyment of the practice. Furthermore, the practice of BDSM was their preferred means of sexual arousal and it was not a remunerated occupation; the practitioners did it in their personal capacity. The details of the participants can be found in the below table:

Participant	Age	Gender	Years as a practitioner	Role Identifier
AR	27	Queer	6	Switch (rope top in public spaces; deep submissive tendencies with their partner)
Bratty Bombshell	42	Female	8	Switch (predominantly submissive)
Kinky Kiepie	41	Male	6	Daddy/Dominant
Liquid Ecstasy	32	Male	15	Switch (a little more comfortable on the dominant side)
Little One	33	Female	2.5	Submissive (service submissive)
Master Tungsten	47	Male	13	Master/protector/sadist (predicament sadist and a sexual pain sadist)
ME	57	Male	26	Dominant sadist
Nina	59	Female	10	Slave
Rope Bunny	29	Female	6	Submissive/baby doll, baby girl

Practitioners also needed to be over 18 and reside in South Africa (limiting the research's focus). Furthermore, the sample group consisted of five females and four males, with the roles varying. Three participants identified as submissive, three participants identified as dominant, and three participants identified as switches. A dominant refers to an individual who enacts a position of power and authority (Veaux, 2020). A submissive refers to an individual who enacts a position of consensual powerlessness, allowing another person to take control over them (Veaux, 2020). Lastly, a switch is an individual who can change between the role of a dominant or submissive (Veaux, 2020).

To gain access to potential participants, the researcher asked for permission (refer to Appendix A) to access online communities and forums, such FetLife (https://fetlife.com/), BDSM Forum (http://bdsmforum.info/) and Collar Me (http://www.collarme.co.za/index.php) to name a few. The researcher was only able to gain permission from the caretakers at FetLife. The legal team signed off on a letter (refer to Appendix B) stating all the rules that the researcher needed to follow. These rules were put in place to ensure all members' safety on FetLife and ensure that the researcher was transparent about their purpose on the forum. FetLife is a website where people interested in BDSM, fetishism, and kink go to socialise and network.

The researcher used snowball sampling to recruit additional participants because they were not getting traction on FetLife. This type of sampling method is used to expand on a sample by asking existing participants in the study to recruit future participants among their acquaintances (Emerson, 2015).

3.2 Data Collection Instrument

A semi-structured interview took place, with an interview schedule (refer to Appendix C) on hand to use to assist with possible probing questions (Smith & Osborn, 2014). The interview schedule consisted of open-ended questions. Open-ended questions were advantageous for this kind of study. The researcher needed the participants to be fully open about their experiences and give as much detail as they could recall. Furthermore, follow-up questions were asked if there was something the researcher wanted the participant to elaborate on (Weller et al., 2018).

Semi-structured interviews consist of a sequence of open-ended questions depending on the research issue areas. The open-ended structure of the question specifies the issue under investigation while also allowing both the interviewer and the interviewee to delve deeper into some of the themes (Minichiello et al., 1990). If the interviewee is having trouble answering a question or only gives a brief response, the interviewer can provide cues or prompts to encourage the interviewee to think about the topic more deeply (Punch, 1998). In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer has the option of probing the interviewee further to clarify the original response or to pursue a line of questioning initiated by the interviewee (Patton, 2002).

This type of interview was beneficial in this study. The researcher explored the lived experiences

of play in BDSM practitioners and their worldview of this phenomenon without a structured or preconceived plan or expectation of how the interview would unfold. From the general question asked, the researcher followed up on cues to further understand the topic at hand and reveal the interviewee's underlying meanings.

3.3 Procedure

The first steps that the researcher took were to get in contact with the owners or administrators of FetLife, BDSM Forum, Collar Me and Club Rome and gain permission to use their forum (refer to Appendix A). The researcher could only secure permission from FetLife to advertise the research (refer to appendix B) and have potential participants email the researcher to partake in the research study. These forums were explicitly designed with the BDSM community in mind, where they share information, resources and discuss topics that are common among the members. It is a safe and supportive space where members can share their most intimate experiences. FetLife was the primary means of finding participants through the study.

Once participants were obtained and informed consent forms were signed, the researcher scheduled audio calls online (Zoom was the preferred method) with the BDSM practitioners. The researcher asked participants open-ended questions to get as much information as possible without limiting the interviewees from elaborating on the question being asked. With participants' permission, these interviews were audio-recorded to get the complete account of the interview for accuracy when transcribing the data verbatim for further analysis. The interviews lasted between 45-90 minutes.

The researcher conducted all interviews via Zoom as it was the most convenient for the participants. The use of online platforms for audio/video calls has advantages as a tool for interviewing others. It is a cost-effective and time-efficient manner of conducting interviews (Krouwel, Jolly & Greenfield, 2019). Furthermore, most of these platforms have strong encryption that protects individuals' data, whether it is a voice, video or file transfers on the platform (Evans, 2020). It also means that one can access hard to reach participants, where it might prove expensive and time-consuming if the researcher were to travel to the participant's location to do the interview (Lo Iacono et al., 2016). It has been noted by Hanna (2012) that conducting interviews over voice calls online is a safer alternative for both the researcher and participant as neither of the parties will have to go to locations that are unfamiliar to them.

During the data collection phase, interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. All audio files and transcriptions were stored in a password-protected device that only the researcher had access to. Anonymity and confidentiality were kept in line with the ethical guidelines discussed in this study's ethical considerations section.

It should be noted the potential challenges that were faced when using online platforms to conduct interviews. The main challenge was participants having access to high-speed internet that caused delayed audio feed and disrupted some of the interviews' flow (Chiumento et al., 2018).

For these participants to participate in the study, the researcher conformed to the protocols stipulated by the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) (Non-Medical). These included securing consent via a participation information sheet (refer to appendix D) and a consent form for conducting the interview (refer to appendix E).

3.4 Method of Data Analysis

The method of data analysis that was utilised was interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA is a qualitative approach to analysing data such as interviews and provides detailed accounts of individuals' personal lived experiences. These accounts are produced on their terms rather than following prescribed theoretical assumptions (Smith & Osborn, 2014). IPA tries to make sense of the participant's viewpoint; it tries to side with the participant (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

Smith and Osborn (2003) prescribed phases to guide the analysis phase of an IPA research study. The first phase looked at finding themes in the first case, which involves reading the transcript a few times and making annotations at sections where the participant said something significant. Osborn and Smith (2003) describe this phase as "close to being a free textual analysis" (p. 67). The researcher made comments where they felt the participant said something important and avoided dividing the text into units of meaning and making comments on those units (Smith & Osborn, 2003). After annotations were made throughout the transcript, themes were created, and connections were suggested across the different cases. Smith and Osborn (2003) note that these connections are made but that they "are still grounded in the particularity of the specific thing said" (p. 68). Hycner (1999) makes the following remark: "Particularly in this step is the phenomenological researcher engaged in something which cannot be precisely delineated, for

here he is involved in that ineffable thing known as creative insight" (p. 150-151). This phase of finding themes was done for every case. The second phase of analysis was where the connection of themes occurred. More analytical thought was put into this phase as it required the researcher to make sense of emerging themes and how they connected to form a full view of the text (Hycner, 1999; Smith & Osborn, 2003). The above stages were carried out for all the transcripts in an iterative process until reasonably clear themes emerged (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The last stage was where general and unique themes from all interviews were brought together to form a summary of themes that encompassed the study's key findings (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Summaries of all the interviews were written to outline the common themes found throughout the interviews and made sense contextually. At this point in the analysis phase, the researcher transformed the participants' expressions into expressions relevant to supporting the research (Hycner, 1999).

3.5 Rigour

To ensure rigour and quality in analysing the study's data, the researcher focused on the coherence in the findings (Willig, 2008). The process was to refine the data during analysis to the extent that the findings could be organised around a meaningful framework without sacrificing the nuances and contradictions in the participants' accounts. Furthermore, the researcher ensured that the findings reflect the participants' actual lived experiences to ensure the research's credibility (Hadi & José Closs, 2015). The researcher also assumed a reflexive attitude towards their involvement in the process of investigating the study. By taking such a reflexive stance towards the study, the researcher was able to note and question their reading of the text and look at alternative readings to ensure that their biases did not affect the analysis of the data (Madill et al., 2000).

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations always need to be considered when conducting any form of research (Kaewkungwal & Adams, 2019). For this study, the following have been taken into consideration: (i) informed consent, (ii) voluntary participation, (iii) avoiding psychological and social harm of participants, (iv) confidentiality, (v) anonymity (vi) the use of online platforms, such as Zoom, as a tool for interviewing.

A participation information sheet and informed consent forms were written up and sent to potential

participants via email so that the consent form could be signed and sent back to the researcher before the interview took place (refer to appendix D and E). The participant information sheet introduced the research and gave information about what the study was about. If participants agreed to participate in the study, participants would sign the consent form to indicate that they were willing participants and accepted the study's terms and conditions stipulated in the forms. The participant information sheet explained what the research was about, keeping the research's purpose transparent to the participants. The study's procedure was stated explicitly so that the participants knew what participation was required and what would happen to their data once the interview was completed. Furthermore, the necessary steps to ensure the data's anonymity and confidentiality were clearly explained (Turcotte-Tremblay & Mc Sween-Cadieux, 2018).

During the interview process, the researcher needed to ensure that no psychological harm came to the participants. Due to the nature of the topic and the community being dealt with, the researcher needed to be mindful that they are working with a group of individuals who are often faced with judgement and discrimination (Damm et al., 2017). Because of the judgement they face, they might have seen this study as an opportunity to confess certain truths or treat the researcher as a therapist to vent about experiences other than the ones the researcher is trying to investigate. The researcher needed to ensure that this does not happen by subtly reminding the participants of the study's topic and nature to refocus the participant and keep them on track during the interview. Another issue that the researcher needed to be mindful of is the potential of re-traumatising a participant during the interview. There are a few reasons why this could have happened. The participants could have had a traumatic experience in their lives that they chose to re-enact in BDSM play sessions to gain mastery over these experiences or they may have felt compelled by partners to engage in certain practices (even if supposedly consensual). If it did happen that the interview questions asked by the researcher brought up traumatising memories, some steps were taken by the researcher to ensure that the participants got the help that they needed should it have been necessary. The researcher provided contact details for counselling services in the Participation Information Sheet (refer to Appendix D) to inform the participant beforehand and had that peace of mind.

Other ethical points considered were confidentiality and anonymity through the data collection phase and the write up of the data. Guaranteeing complete anonymity is unachievable in a qualitative study (Van Den Hoonaard, 2003). An ideal view of anonymity is that any individual

taking part in a study will never be traceable from the data they present about themselves to the researcher. Scott (2005) argues that there will always be one person who will have access to the participants' data and some identifying information. The researcher of this study knew who the participants were because they recruited participants from the online forums and were referred to other participants. Names and emails were shared to build rapport with the participant. The only guarantee that the researcher could make in ensuring participants' anonymity was by removing the participant's name and replacing it with a pseudonym, and eliminating any identifying information that could be traced back to the participant (Saunders et al., 2014). The end goal in ensuring anonymity was to "maximise protection of participants' identities and maintain the value and integrity of the data" (Saunders et al., 2014, p. 2).

Confidentiality of participants and their data was ensured by a range of measures and explained to them. Some measures that were taken into consideration was safeguarding of data in various ways: (i) ensuring that participants knew who would have access to their data (in this case, it was the researcher's supervisor and external readers who examined the research report), (ii) technological measures were put in place, such as having passwords on the computer, encryption and backups of data (audio recordings of the interview as well as the transcriptions) so that the data was protected from unauthorised people and could be retrieved should something happen to the computer and (iii) research design safeguards, such as anonymising the data to ensure that no identifiable information was present for unauthorised people to see it (King et al., 2014). To ensure confidentiality of online interviewing was met, the researcher needed to establish a safe online environment by inviting participants to an online site that required a password or code to join the session. Another issue of online interviews that are in the form of audio calls was that it was difficult for the researcher to act on visual cues, such as smiling, frowning, as well as non-visual cues such as turning of heads or looking down during a particular part of the interview (Chiumento et al., 2018).

In addition to the general guidelines stipulated above, one needed to consider the ethical considerations specifically around dealing with online communities relevant to this study and how they were recruited. These considerations included respect for privacy and interests as well as transparency from the researcher. Respect for participants' privacy and interests was crucial and was handled responsibly (Gelinas et al., 2017). Although their personal information, thoughts and views were made widely available on the forum they belong to, the researcher needed to curtail the

likelihood of individuals suffering embarrassment, having reputations diminished or any other harm that could have come from recruiting these individuals (Parsi & Elster, 2014). The researcher also ensured that if other participants were recruited from the same forum, they did not disclose any sensitive or potentially identifying information about other members (including online names) (Taddicken, 2013).

Transparency demands truthfulness and honesty from the researcher when communicating with participants (Andrews, 2012). Transparency in this study required the researcher to avoid deception and refrain from fabricating an online identity to access these online BDSM communities. Deceiving participants would have hindered the researcher's reputation and would have broken trust with an online community that already has difficulty trusting outsiders due to the stigma surrounding BDSM practice (Bezreh et al., 2012). Instead, the researcher asked for explicit permission from site administrators to access these communities (refer to Appendix A). Furthermore, the researcher proactively disclosed their presence on these online groups so that online community members were reminded of the researcher's purpose of being involved in the community (Andrews, 2012).

The ethical considerations listed were crucial and were adhered to during the study to ensure that the researcher could be trusted and that any collaborative work was done in a mutual, fair, and respectful manner. It also ensured that principles such as benevolence and nonmaleficence were followed (Kaewkungwal & Adams, 2019).

3.7 Reflexivity

Reflexivity pertains to the "analytic attention to the researcher's role in qualitative research" (Gouldner, 1971, p. 16, as cited in Dowling, 2006). In terms of research reflexivity, the researcher is not a practitioner of BDSM nor has had any experience with any facets of this sexual practice. This came with its advantages and disadvantages. The advantages were that the researcher had no preconceived idea of the experiences and assisted in keeping an open mind about the topic being studied, and no prior knowledge would influence the interviews nor the analysis of the data. The disadvantage was that potential participants were reluctant to share their experiences with a researcher because they had bad experiences with researchers in the past and believed that people who researched BDSM only saw the practice negatively. This made it obvious that this community of people does not trust outsiders who do not have the experience of being a practitioner and what comes with that, which is being judged, stigmatised, and pushed away. This information was divulged during a conversation with a Dom who was an influencer in the community who did not trust what

was being done and posted on the forum that others should not trust the researcher or study because they could not meet me in person. This affected the number of potential participants enquiring about the study. The researcher then needed to engage with potential participants offline to explain her position in the study and further explain what the research was about. This reassured most of the participants who took part in the study and made them feel at ease about the research process and why the researcher was doing it.

In terms of methodological reflexivity, the researcher acknowledges the reported experiences of BDSM practitioners, specifically experiences of play, through individual interviews that were conducted online. The reasons the researcher chose this data collection method was, firstly, because it was the least problematic in terms of ethics and logistics. Secondly, it was easier to reach these participants via online communication due to the nature of the participants. Thirdly, because this research was being conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, it was safer to meet online, and it adhered to the Covid-19 lockdown rules at the time of data collection. Lastly, through online communication, participants felt at ease knowing that I could not see them physically, which gave them peace of mind of their identity being anonymous.

In terms of participant reflexivity, as a non-BDSM practitioner who came in with an open mind and no judgement, it aided in receiving rich data from participants who believed in what the researcher was trying to achieve. Furthermore, the researcher's positionality allowed them to enjoy the conversation and open up because the participants were sharing an experience that the researcher cannot judge or comment on, but rather listen with a curious mind, with no bias attached to anything that was discussed. A journal was used to monitor these conversations and the researcher's feelings towards each participant, and what these feelings meant and if this had any effect on the conversation had with the participants.

Chapter 4: Results and Discussion

The analysis aimed to address the two research questions that guided the aim of looking at key experiences of play and the role of play in BDSM. As a starting point, participants' experience of play centres around the following themes: power exchange play, consent, the dynamic between private versus public play, transcendent state experiences during play and the healthy and empowering benefits of BDSM play. A detailed discussion of how participants experience play in BDSM will follow according to the themes mentioned above and the participants' understanding of play within their context of BDSM, whether from a dominant, a submissive or a switch's point of view.

The two major features that came out of the analysis were a chronological and spatial element to BDSM play. The chronological element speaks to how BDSM practitioners start any BDSM play session. It follows stages for these BDSM play sessions to be successful. All play sessions have a form of power exchange play, but for this power exchange to occur, there is a pre-play that involves negotiation of boundaries and safewords for the play to stay within limits that are comfortable for all partners involved in these BDSM play sessions. Following pre-play comes the play session, which is the power exchange play. During the power exchange plays, there are states of transcendence that BDSM practitioners experience, which has played a role in empowering and healing many BDSM practitioners in this study. From transcendent states come the post-play, which is referred to as aftercare that assists in practitioners reflecting on the activities surrounding the BDSM play session, which formed deeper connections between partners. The spatial element speaks to how spaces can affect the way play is experienced. When practitioners play in a public space, they experienced play sessions as shallow and non-sexual (no penetration nor stimulation of genitalia). Public play sessions also adhere to rules/frameworks to keep all practitioners safe. When practitioners play in a private space, they experience the play sessions as deep and sexual (penetration or stimulation of genitalia).

The themes discussed are not mutually exclusive, and overlap is apparent in the discussion (refer to Figure 1 for a thematic map to show the relationship between themes). All the names used in this section are pseudonyms.

4.1. Power Exchange in Play (PEP)

During the interviews, many of the participants spoke of the power exchange they engage in during play. Power exchange in the practice of BDSM is defined by Newmahr (2011) as "the collection of activities that involve the mutually consensual and conscious use, among two or more people of pain,

power, perceptions about power, or any combination thereof, psychological, emotional, or sensory enjoyment" (p. 684). Within the BDSM communities, this exchange is understood as the "centering mechanism through which a host of erotic, sensual, sexual, and spiritual paths may cross" (Prior, 2013, p. 3).

Turely et al. (2018) highlight that it is crucial to consider how one investigates power exchange in play. Either from the viewpoint of a submissive, a dominant or a switch (in this assumed sexual role, it was evident that although they played on both sides, there was a preferred sexual role that they emphasised) as it will differ significantly. During data analysis, it became evident that a distinction should be made between these assumed sexual roles to fully grasp what power exchange means to each role during play and the feelings perceived by each role when during power exchange. These different positions will be examined in the sections that follow.

4.1.1. Power Exchange in Play: Submissive's Point of View

Bratty Bombshell, a switch (predominantly submissive), talks about the feeling of being free when she gives power over. She says:

> *When getting ready to go to the [BDSM] club, the dominatrix would make me run around and get her things and for me, it was super exciting because it was freedom. The power dynamic, giving your power over to somebody else is incredibly freeing"*.

She also goes on to explain the reason for this freedom:

> *You know, you're locked up your whole life, every day. But this, it's freedom when you get the chance to do it*.

Nina (a slave) mirrors the comment of relinquishing power to her Master:

> *Being able to give over of myself, so completely… I give myself to this man completely*.

Little One talks about being a service submissive.

> *I pretty much exist to serve. It's exciting. I will go the extra mile for him specifically. He is the focus of my world and to be in service of that and to have that be, like, essentially what I live for and what I look forward to, that's like the best thing for me*.

The predominant theme here is powerlessness and relinquishing responsibility which essentially contributes to a pleasurable experience. This theme of powerlessness can be contrasted to unconsented acts of torture. In power exchange play, the meanings of the play and boundaries that

need to be kept are mutually defined between parties (Langdridge, 2007). In contrast, in the act of torture outside of the BDSM space, the outcome is violence. This meaning remains static due to the prohibition of open verbal communication in a torture situation that does not allow consent to be given (Langdridge, 2007).

Furthermore, Langdridge (2007), in contrast to the requisite elimination of the victim's agency in the form of non-consensual torture, consent is a tool for creating agency for all individuals involved in a BDSM relationship. Taking responsibility for the nature of a sexual interaction (whether it means momentarily foregoing agency or assuming an implicit role of control within the framework of the interaction) filters the encounter through the nexus of power exchange and can thus only be expressed in the common language of agency (Langdridge, 2007). What was previously incomprehensible, subjective, and confined to the individual's internal environment may now become externalised, objective, and communicable among the participants in a BDSM interaction (Langdridge, 2007). Secondary to this is taking on a role that is an inversion of what is expected of the modern human subject (especially women). According to Newmahr (2006), involving oneself in the practice of BDSM provides opportunities "where collaborative power creates the sense of inequality and where that inequality is eroticised and romanticised" (p. 57).

To further the theme of powerlessness, Nina describes her experience as giving herself over completely. The unknown of what her master has in store for her is an exciting factor. She explains below:

> *I am a slave. A slave obeys. A play session… the onus is on the Master to prepare the play session. He sets the whole thing and he decides what he's going to do and what direction it's going to go in and what he would like to get out of it. The fear factor turns me on… The fear of not knowing how far he's going to go… The not knowing it. Just that pure element for me, it's just such a turn on. It literally is. I am very into CNC [Consensual Non-Consent]. I have consented to non-consent. So in other words, if he wants to rape me tonight, I consented to that. So we're in a CNC dynamic, which is also very exciting. The element of fear is always just sitting there in the back of your mind.*

To emphasise Nina's comment above about "the fear of not knowing how far he's going to go", Turely et al. (2018), refer to this as the "erotic unknown", which refers to the "sexual excitement arising from uncertainty about what is going to happen" (p. 7). On the topic of the unknown aspect of play, Nina reports being "very into CNC" and this type of play it being a turn on. CNC is defined as the dominant

being able to act to look like the submissive relinquished all consent (Kumaresan, 2018).

Rape play is a form of play within this framework and is defined as an experience where a mock rape is acted out in a scene/play session (Hammers, 2013). What is important to note with this type of play is that rape play is consented to and well thought out in advance. Contracts are set up, and open communication is had between partners agreeing to this type of play so that the rape play is done within the boundaries stipulated in the contract (Kumaresan, 2018). This seems counter-intuitive to the definition of CNC/rape play, but it is vital because it keeps the play within limits that the submissive is willing to play in (Anne, 2019). The question is, why do people engage in rape play? In the vanilla world, this type of play would be seen as heinous, violent, aggressive, life-threatening etc. (Seltzer, 2014). However, in the BDSM context, 'rape' is identified as a sexual act that is completely unshackled from any serious possibility of violence; it is the desire to be beyond what is comprehensible (Seltzer, 2014). Chivers et al. (2013) say that this type of play can be erotic because it cancels out the pain associated with such a violent act and focuses on the sensually and physically pleasurable aspects. This mirrors what Nina says about why she agreed to CNC play:

> *I agreed to CNC with my Master because I trust him – having rape plays with a person I trust is just what the doctor ordered … Personally, I don't think that there is any underlying mental problems with me at all in this area because my body reacts immediately, even just discussing rape play or thinking about it … It is a very physical thing for me … I really love feeling small, helpless, at his mercy and love it when he just takes what he wants … The truth is, in that moment, I fear him, but it is a reverent fear … I know that he loves me and will never hurt me beyond what has been agreed upon on the contract.*

It is important to recognise that rape that happens in real life is far from erotic and pleasurable. Being violated by a stranger, holding you down against your will, threatening or actioning bodily harm, and in some instances, death, and forcing themselves on you induces panic and utter fear and not in any way sexual. But there is a contrast to *imagined* rape in that the imagined rape is an idealised, pretend scenario. Seltzer (2014) explained this unrestricted fantasy as follows:

> *So, in such idealised "pretend scenarios," a woman can experience her rawest, most unconstrained sexuality as fully, wondrously, even miraculously expressed—in no way impeded by any viscerally felt sense of peril. Diametrically opposed to actual rape, the fantasy really isn't about losing control as such. It's about willingly surrendering it. And her submission is quite as much to her most profound erotic desires as to the supposed male aggressor* (para.

11).

The key theory about this phenomenon in the seventies and eighties was that it was the product of a patriarchal culture that taught women to behave that way (France, 1984). Interestingly, however, women were sexually aroused about being in a submissive position not only before the inception of radical feminism and the so-called sex wars (Kinsey et al., 1953) but also during this period (Weinberg et al., 1984) as well as after (Wismeijer & Assen, 2013). In looking at power exchange from the viewpoint of submissives, it has been found that within the general population and BDSM practitioners, women are more likely to be sexually aroused in a submissive position than men (Labrecque et al., 2020).

4.1.2 Power Exchange in Play: Dominant's Point of View

AR, who is a switch (predominantly dominant) defines this exchange as not only making the other feel small and vulnerable but also a place where they and their partner can experience each other:

> *We like to make the other feel small… kind of this forced vulnerability. And there's like holding someone in that space and just like witnessing them suffering. And when I talk about suffering, I like to watch you being alive and experiencing your world and experiencing yourself in a different way. This sort of power exchange experience as being like a space that you enter into with each other that is different to your day to day interactions. And there's like holding someone in that space and just like witnessing them suffering.*

Silva (2015) investigated the reasons why pain was desired in consensual BDSM, and the main reasons for wanting to receive pain during play is because (1) feelings of helplessness and submission are increased; (2) pain produces conflicting sensations such that feelings of satisfaction are intensified; and (3) pain is challenging, and painful endurance encourages feelings of accomplishment and pride. The functional value of pain, including its ability to help participants forget the everyday pressures of life and alleviate emotional pain, was also highly acknowledged (Dunkley & Brotto, 2019). Furthermore, when enduring pain during a sexual experience with a trusted person, the positive emotions that come from this type of sexual act could dull painful sensations from rough play, which increases interpersonal bonding between partners who involve themselves in such play (Cohut, 2019).

Liquid Ecstasy, who also identifies as a switch (predominantly dominant) explains the power exchange as a way to feel in control:

> *I think for me, it was the power dynamic. Like, I like knowing where I stand with people and it gives, it provides a massive sense of control on either side of the line, whether I'm a switch, so whether I'm on the sub or the dom side. The level of control is definitely the main driving factor*. *There's a very strong emotional satisfaction that comes with knowing someone's letting you control whether they get to essentially move or breathe.*

To have someone submit complete authority and control over one's bodily movement is not considered normal, and in most cases, quite the opposite of satisfying. Taking away agency from someone can often make one feel less of a person and weak (Deckha, 2011). But in BDSM, a choice is made to relinquish power to satisfy their dominant partner. This assists with reciprocating satisfaction. Pleasure must be reciprocal, but it need not be sexual; instead, it could derive from dominance: absolute power for the dominant, no power for the dominated. Both profit from this opposing polarity: the desire for dominance or the desire to be powerless (Faccio et al., 2014). This is what creates a strong emotional satisfaction for Liquid Ecstasy. He explains:

> *As a dominant, the more your submissive is willing to suffer to submit, the better. And especially when you're someone like me that craves control, where the actual control is the thing that drives the fascination with BDSM. And the more I have, the better.*

Therefore, the more agency the submissive is willing to give up, the stronger the emotional satisfaction is for him.

ME, a dominant sadist, reiterates this statement:

> *It's an incredible aspect… feeling of control. To literally be able to control someone's breathing, their life and death… this is absolute control… It's almost a hyper awareness of yourself. And when you get into it, when you're having an intense BDSM play, it is intense beyond anything that you can imagine otherwise. It's intense, emotionally. It's intense mentally. It's intense physically sometimes.*

Master Tungsten, a Master sadist, says that knowing that he is in control of everything makes him feel

> *on top of the world and like a man. It feels very manly to do this"* and that *"a woman on her knees; I do not see that as degrading… I see it as admiration… the ego boost that you receive*.

Kinky Kiepie furthers the explanation of the power exchange he experiences; that it's not only the control but the

sense of power, because, within our D/s scenario, there is the power exchange where she'll give up some of her power and that passes to me. That in itself is part of the thrill. It's the sense of being in complete control, not just over the play but over your partner.

Looking at the experiences from the different sexual roles, it is evident that both roles share in the excitement and pleasure of power exchange in play within their assumed roles in the BDSM context. Why is there still debate in the feminist community (Hopkins, 1994) around dominants being controlling misogynists and 'getting off' on a woman's pain and suffering? This argument around power exchange is embedded in feminist theories and has a focus on the submissive role. Power exchange in play from the submissive's point of view discussed is the feeling of excitement, freedom and turn on when giving themselves over to their dominant partner. The submissives' viewpoints disregard what many feminist theories say about women in a submissive role. Radical feminists or anti-BDSM feminists have strongly opposed the idea of women being in submission because BDSM is simply recreating men's power dynamic used to continue oppressing women (Scott, 2012). But what of choice? It seems that many of these theories dismiss the factor of choice in any BDSM play session. These feminists believe that by women agreeing to play in a submissive role, a woman is damaging the name of what feminism stands for by recreating the power imbalances that we conform to outside of the bedroom (Weiss, 2011).

Investigating power exchange from this angle, one needs to question how this mirrors what can be seen in the broader, normative society. Although participants never mentioned gender and race in their accounts, all the participants who identified as submissives were female. All participants identified as dominant were male, albeit one participant who is female, who identified as a switch but played more in the dominant role. Gender should be questioned in terms of how power is socially structured in the broader sense and how this could still influence why many women tend to walk the line of submission while most men prefer to play the dominant role. When excluded from the private sphere/household jurisdiction, dominant discourses of sexuality remain centred on patriarchal dualities of dominance and submissions and are a tool to maintain social control of women (Cudworth, 1998). In South Africa, in general, both racial and ethnic groups have long-standing views about gender roles. Most are focused on the idea that women in South Africa are less important than men or less worthy of influence (Sathiparsad et al., 2008). Some traditional social organisations in South Africa are male-centred and dominated by males (Connell, 1987). Afrikaner religious traditions also place a heavy focus on the theoretically biblical notion that women's contributions to society should usually be recognised by men or on behalf of them (Sathiparsad et al., 2008).

In some sense, the above stances can still be seen in the BDSM space. In this study, the dominant role was played by males (apart from one participant), and all the submissives were female. But the ideals and expectations of how a woman is seen and treated are somewhat contradictory. Liquid Ecstasy and Master Tungsten shared their view of power exchange with their submissives, saying that

> *it's [control] something that needs to be given. It can't be asked for, and it can't be taken. I firmly believe that BDSM, that submission is something that's donated freely. I can't take your submission from you as a dominant* and *it's something that the top can't just take; like you can't take control. You have to receive it.*

This sheds an interesting view from dominants themselves on how they feel about power and that it *willingly* needs to be given to them by their submissive and not by force. Does this not mean that the submissive *chooses* to give over control? The Rope Bunny says:

> *Your submissive is actually more in control and dominant in your relationship, even though you are giving up the control. You have all the power in your capacity to take that control back. You don't have to give all control*.

Bratty bombshell echoes the same opinion: "you are in charge even though you're the submissive." Therefore, BDSM is a space that gives women the opportunity to stick to a somewhat normative, societal role, but with the freedom of controlling a situation that they would be chastised for outside of the BDSM scene (Prior, 2013).

These statements are in line with modern BDSM practitioners and third-wave feminists. Through debate and technological innovation advancing, there has been a change in understanding intimacy in contemporary society. A consequence of this understanding is the emergence of a term coined by Anthony Giddens (1993), 'plastic sexuality'. Plastic sexuality focuses sexuality under the lens of pleasure and enjoyment instead of focusing on reproduction and fuelling romantic love, which offers the possibility of relationships entering negotiation and individuals in the relationship being equal (Giddens, 1993). Many authors have focused on the above through the lens of fantasy, which ties in with various ways to gameplay (Beckmann, 2007). Due to reproductive control and the way it has liberated women particularly to embrace and pursue their sexualities more openly, even though still bound by social standards, a playful approach to sexuality has become a new kind of norm in many parts of the world (Sihvonen & Harviainen, 2020).

The dominant participants described the sense of their all-powerful status as the main feature of their power exchange experience during play. The eroticism arises from the awareness that they have the ultimate power, status, and control of both the sexual situation and the submissive partner. However, underneath the all-powerful status, the objective of power exchange in a BDSM play session is to obtain mutual pleasure from the scene being played out (Siclait, 2019). However, if the dominant strives for mutual pleasure, why are the submissives saying that they hold ALL the power? A dominant/submissive relationship is based on a contract, whether verbal or written (Dunkley & Brotto, 2019). This is where mutuality comes from; understanding and defining what it is that is and is now allowed (Dunkley & Brotto, 2019). However, who decides on what is and is not allowed? This decision falls on the submissive (Torres, 2017). Even though the dominant has the power to tell the submissive what to do, it is the submissive's choice to obey what the dominant says (Torres, 2017). However, it needs to be stressed that in a power exchange, there is a mutual understanding that both hold power, respectively. This is determined by the structure of the dynamic that has been agreed to during negotiation. Therefore, with this understanding between the dominant and submissive, there is mutual respect of what should and should not be done, and that, in turn, is where the mutual pleasure derives (Dunkley & Brotto, 2019).

Participants (both dominants and submissives) described mutual pleasure as

> *pleasing your Dom, but also experiencing the pleasure… Just as you are giving joy and pleasure to somebody that they are receiving joy and pleasure from you* (Bratty Bombshell); *to make sure that my partner's satisfied… quite often by her achieving that point [orgasm], that helps me to achieve the same goals myself* (Kinky Kiepie); *… it's a very much an US experience* (ME).

Furthermore, it has helped many partners create a deep connection with their partner. ME says:

> *So, when I say it's a sort of spiritual connection, I mean, it's an instinctive connection, a connection with somebody that you couldn't actually put a label and you couldn't describe it. You just kind of connected with them at a level of, something that almost exists between the two of you.*

Kinkiy Kiepie says:

It's about a deeper connection, especially because we are married. We already have that underlying loving another connection. And I kind of just build on top of this to add additional bells and whistles if you want to call it that way.

Little One echoes these sentiments above:

That's the best part about BDSM… The connection you have within a BDSM relationship is irreplaceable. There is nothing stronger than a bond between a dominant and a submissive. It is so fulfilling; it is so empowering. The constant communication, the constant checking in with each other. Like, I was married and I didn't have this with my husband.

Dominants are also the directors of the BDSM play scene; therefore, they can decide on the scenes, themes and sexual acts involved, thereby ensuring their own sexual needs and desires are met and that of their submissive. Nina explains that her master

has got to prepare himself mentally. And he will also prepare, actually put out whatever implements he'll be using during that play session. So he will get that all ready, and he prepares himself mentally and gets everything ready. *The dynamic should always be one of the submissive trusting the dominant with everything and allowing the dominant to make the decisions and knowing that the dominant will make the right decisions for them* (Liquid Ecstasy) and that *everything steering towards the play that I've got in mind* (Master Tungsten).

Getting ready and setting up a play is like getting ready to play a game. Practitioners need to de-centre themselves to welcome another self/character that will enact a role in a BDSM play session and allow for behavioural changes that are different from the inherent, day-to-day self (Beckmann, 2007). The definition of a game by Leary (in Beckmann, 2007) states that a set of behaviours and ideals that are learned culturally, from psychology to religion and politics that are maintained through clearly defined by "roles, rules, goals, jargons and values" (p. 110). However, these sets of rules and behaviours are not as explicit as those set out in BDSM play sessions or even sports. Leary (in Beckmann, 2007, p. 110) says:

Culturally, stability is maintained by keeping the members of any cultural group from seeing that the roles, rules, goals, rituals, language and values are game structures… Cultural institutions encourage the delusion that the games of life are inevitable givens involving natural laws of behaviour. These fixed delusions tend to rigidify behaviour patterns.

A BDSM play session could be a game, and the game of consensual BDSM symbolically points to

game characters that mirror those in the normative world, which, in Foucauldian terms, “is often determined by socio-political relationships of power that turn rigid and thus affect conditions of domination” (Beckmann, 2007; p. 110). All individuals involved in a BDSM play session know that these sessions are a play because of the negotiation phase. This negotiation phase is where rules and guidelines/scripts are discussed well in advance. The BDSM play session focuses on a scenario, which was done by the dominants (Liquid Ecstasy, Master Tungsten). BDSM play can be identified as a game because it allows individuals to start and stop the gameplay when one likes (stipulated in the rules). Furthermore, it allows for flexibility as individuals can swap between roles according to how the fantasy unfolds during a BDSM play session (Sihvonen & Harviainen, 2020).

BDSM and its relation to play, especially play that is non-normative, is separate from the mundane life and normative roles because a dominant expects to ‘give’ pain instead of inflicting pain through humiliation, bondage etc. (Harviainen, 2015). Through this type of gameplay, “the alternative morality of the situation is made clear, and more easily separated from, e.g., domestic violence” (Sihvonen & Harviainen, 2020, p. 9). By negotiating and agreeing to the frame of play, practitioners protect themselves and each other and remove the possibility of interpreting these plays as criminal (Sihvonen & Harviainen, 2020).

The advantage of BDSM is that it uses the same mechanics as a game where one can start and stop a game when one pleases (agreed upon during negotiation of a contract), and the flexibility of the game is ensured by the possibility of switching roles as well as the fantasy and empathy developing within the game (Sihvonen & Harviainen, 2020). But this direction of how the plays will be enacted is directed by what has been consented in the contractual agreements between the dominant and submissive, and the dominant may not stray from this contract as it *“would be a violation of trust”* (Kinky Kiepie).

4.2 Consent in BDSM Play

BDSM practitioners consider consent as central/key in the community and between play partners (Barker, 2013; Taylor & Ussher, 2001; Weinberg, 2006). With consent comes safety measures that need to be considered during the phase of consent. These safety measures are negotiation and safewords.

4.2.1 Negotiation and Safewords

Precautionary measures, such as negotiation and safewords, are central to any relationship within

the BDSM spectrum (Dunkley & Brotto, 2019). Negotiation represents a core element before any play or power exchange relationship (Langdridge, 2007; Moser & Kleinplatz, 2007). All the participants in this study made this point very clear, and most had a planning phase, where negotiation was included, and safe words were discussed. Negotiation centred around what was allowed (soft limits) and what was forbidden (hard limits). The point of the negotiation is to talk through what the expectations are of the play session and that all parties feel comfortable and safe, knowing that at any point, a play session could stop if things get "dangerous" (AR, Bratty Bombshell, Liquid Ecstasy, ME & Nina).

Most of the participants described their negotiation phase as focusing on discussions around what each partner likes, what is acceptable during the play that is being planned out, and ensuring that all boundaries are set and honoured to protect both parties (Langdridge & Butt, 2005). This is another key experience to BDSM play; ensuring that everything is thought through and all clauses in the agreement are maintained to ensure safety and security for all individuals involved in the play session (Simula, 2019). One can identify the negotiation as a form of pre-play. Liquid Ecstasy speaks to this by saying that:

> *I believe that a play starts long before it officially starts. So for me, the experience would begin with getting to know the submissive*.

Kinky Kiepie explains his negotiation phase as follows:

> *Usually in our plays, we will discuss and agree beforehand what tools will be involved. So usually I have a list of these are the toys we will be using, certain other ones that will be put away. And there's usually some kind of something to build up to how do we want to get to this? What kind of play are we actually going to have? Is it going to be more of a sensual play? More of just a sexual play, more of an aggressive play. So, because the whole idea of the play is to go within the set boundaries and you can do anything within those boundaries as long as you stay within those boundaries that kind of a thing. And then my partner would go like ouch you know and I first have to rub it better and then you continue with the play. So it's important for us to have our safe words*.

These boundaries mentioned by Kinky Kiepie clarify the boundaries of a person on what sexual practices they feel comfortable engaging in (Kinkly, 2016). Boundaries mean a collection of personal rules put in place to protect an individual from mental, physical, or emotional damage or discomfort that may cause them to encounter events or circumstances (Simula, 2019). Based on their personal interests, tastes, and past experiences, each person will have a different set of boundaries (Simula, 2019).

To Kinky Kiepie's point, there is an understanding and acknowledgement that although the submissive is giving power over in the play session to the dominant, the submissive does not abandon that power either because of these safewords that ultimately hold power over a play (Seltzer, 2014). Seltzer (2012) says:

> *Even in submission, to feel her dominance or affirm her erotic will, rather than simply being subjugated to another's. For, ultimately, choosing to forfeit control may not be to lose it ... but to powerfully assert it* (para. 18).

The use of safewords in BDSM play helps the submissive feel a sense of ease and comfort, knowing that they will never be forced into a situation beyond what they agreed to is comfortable. Kinky Kiepie explains safewords and describes those that he and his partner conform to:

> *So standard safe words within the lifestyle is orange and red. Orange is: OK, I'm not comfortable with what's happening here. Now let's discuss it. And it's almost like you're playing in the area of a soft limit. So then, if your partner uses orange, depends on what you discuss, what are we doing? Is this working for you? How can I change it that it will work for you? Whereas Red is: the play stops and stops immediately. There is no: Oh, one more hit or one of this or one of that. If my partner uses the word red, that is the end of the play.*

These safewords are not only reserved to indicate if a submissive is overwhelmed but can indicate emotional distress as well (Simula, 2019). When under emotional distress, instead of staying quiet or being aggressive towards a partner, one should use the safewords agreed to during the negotiation phase to communicate that the submissive is suffering and that care is needed (Langdridge & Butt, 2005). Since a safeword lacks emotional charge of accusation, our partner might be less aggressive and might gently help us find out what is wrong with a curiosity mindset (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2007). Our nervous system will only leave danger mode once we feel supported and cared for so that we can engage in critical thinking and nonviolent communication once again (Dunkley & Brotto, 2019). The experience of consent is fundamental and is a prerequisite to ensuring that all BDSM play sessions are kept within boundaries that are comfortable for the partners involved and that the goals of the BDSM play session are met (Dunkley & Brotto, 2019).

Liquid Ecstasy speaks in the same vein as Kinky Kiepie, commenting that he would want to

> *have a discussion about hard limits to make sure that there's nothing that's going to be damaging for the submissive because the overall objective is for everyone to have fun.*

According to Prior and Williams (2015), “playfulness appears to be, in fact, a key factor for many BDSM practitioners” (p. 6).

Further to the above, practitioners do not drink and play (AR, Liquid Ecstasy) (Marks, 2019). AR explains that messing around with

> *alcohol and drugs because I think the experiences that you have in bondage or, you know, BDSM play scenes are so intense, and if you add alcohol to that, it can be really overwhelming. But also the whole consent thing. You know, you don’t want to, like, agree to a play with somebody who then later on backs out of it, or didn’t really want it and you don’t want to agree to something that you don’t actually really want.*

BDSM practitioners are distinguished from clinical groups by their willingness to participate in consensual sadomasochism rather than coercive sadomasochism (Sandnabba et al., 2002). Consent also differentiates between the mutual gratification of sadomasochistic behaviour and abuse and violence (Connolly, 2006; Moser & Kleinplatz, 2007). Ideally, practitioners participate willingly with a pre-established agreement based on a shared understanding of what activities may occur (Pitagora, 2013). Consent is an ongoing collaborative and complex mechanism involving a range of precautionary steps, including play agreements, transparent communication of expectations and limitations, mutually defining words, the notion of accountability and openness, and ensuring that expertise and skills protect against harm (Holt, 2016). Furthermore, practitioners are committed to discussing the terms of the play session and monitoring the sessions' results, ensuring continuous and empathic contact and sensitivity to the partner's experiences (Faccio et al., 2020).

> *Very often, in conventional sexual relations, people are reluctant to acknowledge what they are really seeking or hoping to attain via their sexual contacts. Among some SM practitioners, emotional and erotic transparency is valued so that at least in theory, particular motives and goals are to be divulged and shared rather than hidden obliquely* (Kleinplatz 2006, p. 341).

The above statement implies that consent is made more explicit in a BDSM relationship, which allows for transparency and the potential to test the limits of explicit consent instead of the naturally understood norms of vanilla sex and the implicit meanings behind vanilla sex (Holt, 2016). Liquid Ecstasy speaks of transparency and testing limits by saying:

> *anything that they might want to experiment with but that they’re a little bit cautious around so that I know what I could use to push the boundaries a bit, but within what they are comfortable*

with. The aim of the course of the experience is to be allowed to push your sub's boundaries without pushing in places where you're not allowed to.

AR believes what's important to be transparent about is

your intentions are for this phase. What do we want to achieve? Like, do you just want to, like, put on some rope and have a few cute photos? Or do you want to, like, have an experience where you want to feel humiliated and whiny and vulnerable? Or do you want to have experience where you feel, like strong? And if people can't communicate what they want, it's a grey area that makes it a little bit difficult to navigate.

Bratty Bombshell believes that consent is important to ensure that "everything is above board" and Kinky Kiepie say that once the "guidelines in place, it makes it a lot easier to say we know what we want to do."

Although there is a negotiation of divulging and sharing desires and the play session's outcome, a lot of the pressure falls on the dominant than the submissive (Seltzer, 2012). Ogas and Gaddam (2011) note that the pressure falls mostly on the dominant's shoulders because the dominant needs to be attentive and extremely aware of the submissive's experience and the dominant ends a play if they feel that the submissive may be reaching their limit and not calling out on a safeword. Nina believes that the

onus is on him [her Master] to see that I don't get hurt. To see that I don't die. You know. But I have that trust in him and the faith in him that you know, that everything will be fine.

Bratty Bombshell

depended on her [her dominatrix] and trusted her to call it quits when she could see I couldn't do anymore. You put your faith in the dominatrix to look and feel your heart rate and check your eyes and your dilation of your pupils and everything and check to see that you are okay or if you have gone too far than to stop the play.

What Nina and Bratty Bombshell mentioned above contest the idea that the submissive needs to call out the safeword and stop the play should the play go beyond the stipulated boundaries. This raises the question of what exactly consent is and how would one know if their consent has been breached? Would consent be in the form of a verbal or written contract? Is it the individual's body posture or a look that one gives? According to Williams et al. (2014), one should consider consent more broadly,

according to three distinct levels. The first is referred to as surface consent. Surface consent resembles the kind of consent exemplified by the words "no means no" and "yes means yes" in several respects (Williams et al., 2014). When at a play party and someone asks if you would like to be in a scene, you could respond with this kind of surface consent: "yes, I'm interested" or "no, I'm not" (Williams et al., 2014). Scene consent is a second degree of consent, and it is the one most closely associated with BDSM (Williams et al., 2014). Here, consent involves the dominant and submissive discussing and negotiating what will happen in the scene, especially how the bottom will convey to the top that he or she is withdrawing consent (in the middle of the scene), generally using a safeword or gesture (Williams et al., 2014). However, even though these consent methods are relatively simple and transparent, the fact that these kinds of obscuring mechanics are used at all points to the fact that BDSM primarily operates on the basis of "blurred lines" (Williams et al., 2014, p. 4). This leads to a third, even more, vague degree of consent, which can be referred to as deep consent. This is more than a submissive's willingness to use a safeword or gesture here. For example, one might wonder to what extent the scene is affecting the submissive's thoughts and mental capacity to yell out "red" or participate in cognitive consent at all while crying and in apparent distress and maybe completely in subspace—but hasn't yet called "red" (Williams et al., 2014)? This points back to Bratty Bombshell's comment on trusting her dominatrix to end the scene should she not be able to do it herself.

Furthermore, even though the submissive can think, they might not be conscious of whether or not they are consenting (Williams et al., 2014). In such situations, it seems that the issue of consent is something that must be resolved after the fact. As the bottom replays the scene over the next few hours, days, and weeks, he or she can conclude: "I consented" or "I didn't," or "I think I just don't know" (Williams et al., 2014). Moreover, 4/10 aftercare and subsequent conversations (especially between the dom and sub) could change the submissive's interpretation of a scene and, as a result, his or her perception of consent (Williams et al., 2014). All participants who spoke about aftercare said that communication helps unpack what happened in the scene and evaluate how the play went and what could be done better next time.

> *We'll unpack what she went through and what I thought and how this looked and how this felt. We are constantly unpacking our emotions together, which is wonderful* (AR).

When AR is playing the dominant role, she believes it's important to receive

> *reassurance that I don't break you and I need to be told that I did good and, you know, that you felt safe and know that you had a good time. Those kinds of things are very validating to*

me.

ME appreciates it when his submissive

> *understands that I'm also not at my full capacity right now and I also need a bit of TLC*.

Little One and Nina describe their communication with their dominant/Master as evaluating the play in detail:

> *to discuss the play, what you enjoyed, what you didn't, things you'd like to do differently, what you like more of, what you like more intensity of; he will sit us down and say, okay. How was it? How was it you? How did you experience it? What could I have done differently? You know, and he'll discuss it with me*.

Beckmann (2007) found that participants who play in the submissive role can better release their high-level self-awareness when playing with a dominant that they trust. The dominant also needs to be capable of holding a safe space for this release to occur (Beckmann, 2007). The combination of the negotiation process and the consent that comes with that and trust built from these processes opens the opportunity to experience transcendence that is not often experienced in vanilla sexual experiences (Pitagora, 2017). The building of trust and ease of negotiation opens the possibility of individuals being able to let down their guard and push boundaries to reach an optimal experience and eventually lead to feelings of transcendence (Pitagora, 2017). The complexities of negotiation vary significantly depending on the degree of relational familiarity between practitioners and the activities' risky nature. The need for comprehensive negotiation is also minimised by a solid base of emotional closeness and trust, based on a history of positive BDSM interactions with the partner in question. Similarly, light play with little risk necessitates less negotiation than heavy play (Holt, 2016).

Trust is not easily gained, and one needs to consider whether this trust is gained from the first interaction or there should be a history between individuals (Simula, 2019). Liquid Ecstasy explains below:

> *Especially in a club setting, I would want to first get an idea of what their likes and dislikes are... a conversation, much like this one, actually—just a nice casual conversation with a few questions posed back and forth. Once I had a good idea of what I'd be working with, I would want to have a discussion about hard limits to make sure that there's nothing that's going to be damaging for the submissive because the overall objective is for everyone to have fun and then anything that they might want to experiment with but that they're a little bit cautious*

around so that I know what I could use to push the boundaries a bit. Um... But within what they are comfortable with.

Therefore, it seems that there needs to be a 'history' between BDSM practitioners to gain enough trust to consent to another individual, no matter the setting. It is not clear how deep the history between individuals needs to be, but getting to know a person before a play, as described by Liquid Ecstasy, can be identified as the start of understanding the person and gaining trust. This type of pre-scene negotiation can build a foundation of trust for a play to be successful, even between strangers (Holt, 2016).

4.3 Transcendent States Experienced during Play

Transcendent states or altered states of consciousness can be described as ordinary mental functions that have been altered, and each alteration is subjective (Lee et al., 2016). These altered states are referred to as subspace and domspace.

4.3.1 *Subspace*

Subspace is defined as an "altered state or states of consciousness experienced by a BDSM 'bottom,' which is someone who is the recipient of pain, humiliation, restraint, or intense sensations within a BDSM interaction" (Greenberg, 2019, p. 4). Pitagora (2017) defines this further, adding that it is a state characterised by "activation of the sympathetic nervous system, the release of epinephrine and endorphins, and a subsequent period of non-verbal, deep relaxation" (p. 46). Ludwig (1966) states that it may include feelings of being detached from the self and reality that are generally positive and pleasant and may deepen the connection and intimacy with partners.

It's the adrenaline and endorphins that are being pumped through your body at that moment in time. It's like someone jumping out of an aeroplane. You get that endorphin rush, adrenaline rush. And it's like any drug. You have a high and then you drop, you have a low. And it's the same with this that we have this natural high in our body (Nina).

The majority of participants spoke about these altered states during a play session. Some participants likened the experience to a feeling of being on a

high and so you experience this high and then you don't have the ability and that feeling to say no more" (Bratty Bombshell); *it's like a BDSM high where your mind clicks over and you're in such a pleasure state that like some people can't even talk, they even forget English* (Little One).

Other participants likened the experience to being on drugs. AR describes her experience (when in a submissive position) as being on MDMA.

> *I think MDMA is probably the closest approximation I can sort of ascribe to this… I think it's like maybe a rush of dopamine or serotonin or I don't know. It's, I feel high, like I feel like I've just popped an ecstasy pill and I'm like feeling so deeply in my body… Just feeling and presence and like horniness, sometimes, but not always and like just pleasure man. Just pleasure. Yeah. And freedom.*

Nina explains her experience as being better than smoking weed.

> *It is a high. I do smoke weed and it's better than that [laughs]. You actually space out. I lose, I lose myself completely and then I just want more more more as well. That's when Master has to know, OK she's had enough now. She doesn't know that she's had enough because she's now spacing and the Master needs to know that she's now had enough because you know what? I don't know that I've had enough, I just want more and more and more. [laughs]. But that's while I'm spacing. So it's a drug. As I say, why does someone jump out of an aeroplane? For that same rush. We get it in the bedroom or in the playroom or wherever*.

This high is not unique in the context of BDSM. It can be compared to a runner's high, where runners also experience euphoria and liken this to the feeling of having an orgasm (Chin, 2016). In the most recent research to date investigating the relationship between BDSM experiences and altered states of consciousness, the transient hypofrontality was associated with the submissive role, resulting in decreased stress in these individuals and increased sexual arousal (Ambler et al., 2017). These effects of reduced stress, increased intimacy between partners and increased sexual arousal when experiencing subspace make it evident that BDSM play positively impacts individuals and their relationships (Ambler et al., 2017). However, what follows from such an exhilarating experience is a sudden drop in a submissive's mood. This is referred to as sub drop.

4.3.2 *Sub drop*

According to Dexter (2012), sub drop is an after effect of the hormones and chemicals produced during a play session that causes the trance-like state. When a play ends, the submissive's body stops producing these hormones creating the high, and the parasympathetic nervous system comes back, which may cause symptoms such as exhaustion, hunger, a sudden drop in temperature and disorientation, among other physical symptoms (Dexter, 2012). Dahl (2021) states: "The higher you

fly, the harder you drop" (para. 1). There are also emotional symptoms as well, the most notable one being a similar effect to depression. This is because depression and sub drop comprise of deficient levels of happy hormones, but sub drop occurs over a shorter time period than depression (Golden, 2020). Liquid Ecstasy associates their sub drop to their *"personal demons"* which can affect someone's sub drop.

> *I have serious abandonment issues. So, the worst thing you can do is the day after a play is leave me alone, I'll be psychotic by nighttime. I don't like being left alone. And on days like that, when I'm already feeling emotionally fragile, I need a lot of support. So, for me personally, my anxiety about being alone comes back and haunts me. But I think if you're someone who is insecure about your physical appearance, you'd probably feel ugly that day. And if you were someone who was insecure about your emotional well-being, you'd feel insecure. I think it's very dependent on what your personal demon is.*

For Liquid Ecstasy, BDSM has been a healing mechanism for them. BDSM has given them a way of dealing with personal issues that they could not deal with previously.

> *I think BDSM taught me more about myself and my own psychological state of being than my almost 15 years of psychotherapy* (Liquid Ecstasy).

They have found people to support them and show them comfort and kindness when they feel low, especially after a play session.

> *The community is absolutely overwhelming. You can't imagine if I made a phone call now to one person at the club and told them, listen, shit's gone down badly, I need help now, probably 15 people will be here before the end of the day. There's a definite sense of camaraderie there that doesn't really exist in many places anymore. It is a definite part of the allure to the whole scene as well"* (Liquid Ecstasy).

Little One says that her sub drop feels like she is getting

> *flu symptoms... from a head cold through to like a bad flu. That's essentially what sub drop is, and it's usually like two or three days after the play*.

Sub drop should be carefully monitored. Care for the submissive needs to be communicated during the negotiation phase to indicate what the submissive will need after a play session. Liquid Ecstasy explains how sub drop can be minimised through aftercare (will be discussed in more detail later):

So if a play lasts two hours, there'll normally be a full body massage and a long bath and maybe an hour of cuddling to end all of that off because there's a lot of psychological tension that builds. And it's important to me to release it before the sub needs to go home because it minimises that sub drop situation, whether you have that depressive swing in the morning after a play. And I tried to keep that to a minimum just because people have normal lives that they need to get back to the next day and you don't want them being couch locked and eating ice cream the next day.

ME shares the same views as Liquid Ecstasy:

Sub drop is when those endorphins wash each out of your system because it's hormonal. You know, any sudden depletion of hormones is going to leave you depressed. It's going to leave you weepy, sensitive and so on and so forth. Hence the term after care. Quite so simply looking after your sub through that sub drop that they don't... Because people can drop badly and people can drop suicidally badly. Which which is where BDSM becomes dangerous. So, you know, keeping them warm, wrapping them in blankets, hugging them, feeding them dark chocolates; there is a recipe for that. You know, to make them to get them out, because, as I said, it's not just it's not just a BDSM term that people throw about. It's an actual hormonal physiological thing.

There is also a different kind of drop that submissives encounter. This drop results from a contradiction between people's morals taught from infancy and 'rules' by which they live by and the sexual pleasures people get from experiencing BDSM play (Sprott & Randall, 2016). However, even with this contradiction, people will often continue to pursue what makes them happy, and feelings of guilt often arise from this contradiction of moral codes and these sexual activities that make them happy. This aspect of drop combined with other physical or emotional symptoms of sub drop can lead to someone feeling abandoned by their dominant, wondering about themselves and questioning their worth after a play session (Sprott & Randall, 2016). These feelings come about because of one escaping the mundane life outside of this BDSM space (Langdridge & Barker, 2007; Weinberg, 1995; Wiseman, 1992). Baumeister (1988, 1997) believed that BDSM served as a means of escaping the self. He hypothesised that sexual masochism "is an all-out attack on the self, an attempt to remove the main features of the self. Masochism represents an unusually powerful and probably effective means of escape from self" (Baumeister, 1989, p. 30). A few participants spoke about this kind of escape. Bratty Bombshell was

looking for an escape from my dreary life to be honest. I think I was looking for excitement

and fun in my life and I did not know much about the scene. So, for me, the whole thing was just fascinating and fun.

Liquid Ecstasy shared the same view:

It's about the fact that you get to leave everything else behind. And you get to be this person for a few hours. It's to an extent, it's a little bit of escapism.

Beckmann (2007) further describes escapism as detachment that allows individuals to disengage from the outside world and enter into the world of the scene to explore non-normative activities and free themselves from the shackles of normative sexual practice. This type of escape can be a healing mechanism for many people and helps them deal with issues that they could not have dealt with otherwise in the real world (Barker et al., 2007).

A drop is experienced by submissives in the BDSM scene and by anyone who has just gone through an intense performance or activity. It is believed the same process occurs in the aftermath of an intense performance or activity. Actors and directors often feel this drop when finishing a theatre production (Attanasio, 2015) and athletes who feel a drop or depression after partaking in the Olympics (Florio & Shapiro, 2016). Furthermore, subspace and sub drop do not only occur in submissive partners but also in dominant partners. Their altered states are referred to as domspace and dom drop.

4.3.3*Domspace*

Domspace refers to this altered/transcendent state experienced by the dominant partner, the power wielder or the partner who controls what is done to the submissive, from humiliation to administering pain or intense sensations during a play session (Greenberg, 2019). Csikszentmihalyi (1991) refers to flow, which is an altered state that encompasses focused attention on the task at hand and performing the task to the best of the dominant's ability. Kinky Kiepe and ME describe their domspace as psychological:

I think euphoria might be slightly overstated. But that feeling of being in control. Even though, you know, it has previously been agreed to still within the play. When I tie her up, we both know that she's completely helpless and can't do anything. But that sense of power...

ME describes his transcendent state as having

a huge amount of adrenaline that flows during, during a session like that, obviously. And

sexual energy. And once again, you know that the Dom is also just a human being.

Formal research on domspace is lacking, but dominants who have shared their experiences on forums experience domspace as feeling high and having out of body experiences (Kinkly, 2017). It has also been reported that dominants feel a stronger bond and connection with their submissive partner, and that time seems to be lost when in this altered state (Kinkly, 2017). Domspace is often compared to subspace, but there is a slight difference. While submissives feel like they are *"*floating*"* (Kinky Kiepie) and describe their experience *"*as being heavenly*"* (Kinky Kiepie), dominants need to stay in control during a play session so that they can be responsive to safewords that may be called out during a session or to perform a *"*check-in*"* as confirmed by Little One, AR, Bratty Bombshell and Rope Bunny to ensure that the submissive is still well and comfortable (Kinkly, 2017). Kinky Kiepie comments that

> *you have to be completely aware of what you are doing… So many people get carried away on these power trips.*

However, dominants still let go in the sense that they forget about the outside world and channel all their focus on the tasks that need to be performed in the play session.

4.3.4 *Dom Drop*

Although not as well recognised as sub drop, dom drop is felt and should also be considered. Because of the energy that dominants spend to focus on the task at hand and to ensure that no boundaries are crossed, it is taxing on the dominant *"*and when that adrenaline leaches out of your body, it affects you. Hormonally it affects you.*"* (ME). Liquid Ecstasy describes dom drop as "more a sensation of fatigue where you're just totally wiped from the night before… it becomes emotionally draining".

The BDSM community tends to frame the conversation and analyse the experience of transcendent states around that of the submissive, and very rarely is this state spoken of as a parallel experience for dominants (Fennell, 2018). Despite this lack of information from an academic perspective, informal discussions on forums with dominants and personal experiences posted on blogs reveal that their transcendent states are similar to their submissive counterparts (Fennell, 2018). Dominants have explained that they feel vulnerable and can feel the same sense of guilt that submissives do, except the guilt would come from hurting the person they most care about (Anonymous, 2016). Furthermore, this guilt also stems from them performing actions that are not morally right or accepted socially and having to fight through this is taxing on the dominant and can enhance the feelings of anxiety and shame (Lorimer, 2020). For example, Master Tungsten explained that one of his slaves

was into age play, regression and she would go back very far. If I would ever find a paedophile, I'll probably kill the person. Now you having sex with a person that regressed to the age of 3 by herself, not by any means of coaxing her there, it's mentally straining. I mean, it sets off all the red flags in your head. But, you love this person and you know you're in it for the journey.

The playful crossing of the boundaries of childhood and adulthood, with the ideological and moral issues that entails, remains rife with conflict, even when performed among willing adults. Age-play as a field of practice taps into a variety of questions about the reasons for acting as a nurse, parent, or caregiver for an infant, toddler, or pre-teen (Tiidenberg & Paasonen, 2018). In reality, the ominous shadow of paedophilia never seems to be far away. The opinions from Bigs/Daddys/Dominants around this function of play and morals is limited. Still, many Littles (a submissive who is a child-at-heart and takes advantage of their childish nature [Information BDSM, 2016]) have explained their experience of age play which can give us a sense of why practitioners such as Master Tungsten would push past the *"red flags"* to go on the journey with the Little:

> *I am a little, but I am perfectly happy with my age. I don't want to be younger. I am, however, turned on by innocence, the contrast between innocence and maturity, the power dynamics, submission, roleplay, bondage, S/m, abuse, rape play and much more. I'm a strong and very smart woman. DD/lg allows me to feel weak, or small, or feminine, or silly and emotionally young, when I want to. My kink allows me to find and enjoy the young, innocent, feminine and weak within myself through my play* (Tiidenberg & Paasonen, 2018, p. 386)

Since it reminds people of real-life incest or paedophilia, age play is often known as edgeplay, and for some practitioners, this taboo element is precisely why they love it (Tiidenberg & Paasonen, 2018). In age-play, consenting adult sexual partners act a different age than they are for several reasons: those who act younger may want to be cared for, disciplined, or simply play an age in which they are most comfortable (Wagner, 2019). Those who gravitate toward older ages may have instincts to serve as caregivers or protectors for their spouses or to satisfy their partners' need for discipline (Wagner, 2019). Ageplay can be classified into two types: simply regressive with no romantic overtones, in which the partners enjoy reliving their childhood (also known as inner child); or sexual, in which the partners perform sexual roles with people of pretend ages. Daddy/girl (also known as Daddy/daughter), Mummy/boy (or son), teacher/student, aunt/nephew, and uncle/niece are all popular roleplays in either group (Tiidenberg & Paasonen, 2018).

4.3.5*Aftercare*

BDSM play can be powerful and exhausting due to the release of endorphins and adrenaline (Easton & Hardy, 2001). Wiseman (1996) defines aftercare as the time after a BDSM play session where the dominant takes care of the submissive and brings them out of a sub drop by praising them for enduring during the play session and handling themselves the way that they did. Although the dominant is identified as the partner to do the caring, dominants should be cared for as well by their submissive as they also need healing from the play session that they directed (Thorn, 2020). All participants agreed that this step is crucial so that a bad sub drop or dom drop can be avoided and their partners are not left to feel confused or guilty about their actions (Thorn, 2020). Aftercare is important because “it minimises that sub drop situation, whether you have that depressive swing in the morning after a play” (Liquid Ecstasy).

There are ways that participants mentioned that helped reduce the effects of the drop. Replenishment/snacking is an important aftercare routine that helps to replenish the natural sugars that may be depleted after a play session; “anything that'll just boost the endorphins, serotonin levels” (Liquid Ecstasy). Chocolate was the popular snack for participants who spoke about their aftercare routine. Nina says: “I know how to know when I'm dropping and all I need to do is go and grab a glass of coke or go and grab myself a chocolate.” Another step is to comfort and have physical contact. AR (if being a dominant in the play session) likes to “hold her [her submissive] and just tell her how beautiful she is and how much I love her; generally a lot of holding and a lot of reassuring”. Bratty Bombshell likes to “cuddle up”. Liquid Ecstasy treats their submissives to a “full body massage and a long bath and maybe an hour of cuddling to end all of that off”. Because Little One is a service submissive, she likes to give her dominant “a massage” and then “do snuggle so he'll hold me” and she’ll get “sub-kisses”. Nina believes that it is a two-way street:

> *He's already put so much into the play. I think I could do a little bit of aftercare for both of us. But he will even hold me and we'll chat and you'll ask me if I'm OK and that's always the nice part about it*.

ME, being a dominant “likes to go sit in the sun by myself and I get over it”. Another method that came up was communication (for more detail, please refer back to the negotiation and safeword section).

Simply put, aftercare requires the willingness to remain for a sufficient period of time with your play partner so that they can feel safe, recover their emotional balance, and no longer feel the need to cling to you. “Bottom provides an opportunity to discuss any misunderstandings or problems that may

have arisen during the scene" (Dunkley and Brotto, 2019, p. 6). It is equally necessary to understand that aftercare is for both dominant and submissive. If any individual leaves too soon, then their partner can feel abandonment or disappointment far exceeding the play session's obvious dimensions. Engle (2019) says: "Aftercare is an opportunity to show affection and say: This was a good, healthy experience, and we are here together in this moment" (para. 7). It should be noted that even if there is negotiation and consent beforehand, misunderstandings do happen when in the moment, and it needs to be noted that plays can be dangerous if not monitored carefully (Holt, 2016). Nina comments on this by saying: "I mean, you were doing things that we both enjoy but it's also dangerous" but in the same vein talks about going into a "dangerous situation safely." That is why aftercare is a key experience to play; it allows for practitioners to unpack the activities that took place during the play, how it made them feel and how to further negotiations if something were out of place or if there was something that could be further explored (Dunkley & Brotto, 2019).

Ludwig (1966) discusses ways in which altered states of consciousness have long been used in various healing practices with goals of meaning-making, emotional catharsis, and rejuvenation. These are the same goals that are important to many BDSM practitioners who seek out subspace experience (Baker, 2016; Langdridge, 2007; Yost, 2010). For example, Ludwig (1966) describes certain religious ceremonies where individuals attain altered states of consciousness to gain temporary freedom from their usual identities or act out sexual conflicts or desires in a socially acceptable context. Through these rituals, the individual's stress and fears are replaced by feelings of security and confidence (Ludwig, 1966). This psychological freedom is also experienced in BDSM practitioners. Bratty Bombshell spoke of BDSM healing her, giving her the confidence she never had; Little One spoke of her overall living experience bettering because of BDSM.

Moreover, these altered states of consciousness are important in BDSM as they form deep personal relationships between practitioners (Solenzol, 2021). Therefore, it is not so much a matter of whether we release certain hormones and what this release does to the individual, but of the importance to the lives of BDSM practitioners that the scene brings, which is the confidence, freedom and deep connections made that are often found in vanilla relationships (Solenzol, 2021). BDSM is understood by more and more people as a process of self-discovery and personal improvement that enriches our lives and makes us happier and more self-fulfilled (Beckmann, 2007). In Solomon's (1967) research, one of the participants mention that the outcome of transcendental experiences is the 'unplugged mind': "Not the 'id', no dark, evil impulses. These alleged negative 'forces' are, of course, part of the game, being simply anti-rules. What is left is something that Western culture knows little about: the

open brain, the uncensored cortex-alert and open to a broad sweep" (Leary, in Solomon, 1964, p. 106).

In conclusion, the above transcendent states experienced by both dominants and submissives can be achieved through various play sessions. Depending on the perspective of practitioners involved, it can be achieved either through sexual plays, where penetration of genitalia is involved, or non-sexual plays, such as bondage (involving physical restraint that either does or does not include pain), sadomasochism (involving physical or mental suffering on another to gain sexual pleasure) or power exchange (receiving and giving over of power during a play session) (Kolmes et al., 2006; Newmahr, 2010 Weinberg, 2006). Furthermore, these play sessions can be enacted in different settings, which will be discussed below.

4.4 Public vs Private Play

BDSM play can also be distinguished by its location, and, in turn, this changes the way a session is played out. Participants made it clear that there is a different dynamic when playing in a public space versus that of a private space.

4.4.1 *Public Plays*

A public space can be defined as a space where the community comes together and shares in their knowledge, experience and even perform play sessions on a stage for everyone to enjoy (Easton & Hardy, 2001). This indulges exhibitionists and voyeurs proclivities without being judged by the normative society who, yet, does not understand the joys it brings these individuals (Easton & Hardy, 2001).

Participants who played publicly would describe the experience as not being very deep and immersive: "The result of that ends up being that we don't actually play very deeply when we play publicly" (AR); pushing boundaries to gain gratification from the community:

> *Public plays were ego gratifying. So when people cheered for you, when people came up to you afterwards and said, wow, you're so amazing and so strong, that was the pleasure you got from it on a very much more of an ego oriented way. So social praise, social gratification, social acceptance* (Bratty Bombshell);

and just the thrill of it and the intensity of plays:

> *I did find the experience quite exhilarating. My wife is more on exhibitionist side, where it*

comes to those kinds of things. So it was quite a thrill for her as well. And the fact that obviously it's such a thrill for her kind of like elevated the whole experience for me as well" (Kinky Kiepie); *"...the act of being watched makes the experience more intense"* (Liquid Ecstasy).

Public plays also played a role in building confidence in some participants:

> *helped me get over my worry about my body issues, my worry about being a slightly plump girl, you know. You know that I didn't look this way, I didn't look that way brought me a lot of self-confidence. The naked part for me was key to my confidence in public. You suddenly start feeling like an incredibly sensual, sexy woman. So when you're walking around in public, you have this sensual aura. So that was interesting to see the play on how you feel about yourself and how that transmits this energy to other people* (Bratty Bombshell).

Bratty Bombshell's view of play helping her get over the worries of her body issues can be connected to the idea that BDSM play is a transcendence of the normative. She was able to love her body within the BDSM space instead of the world outside because of the societal expectations of how women should look and what the "perfect" body should be to fit in (Pitagora, 2017).

Furthermore, the public play sessions were solely based on non-sexual play. Non-sexual play encompasses physical play, which consists of activities that do not involve penetration of genitalia (Greenberg, 2019). "There's not a heck of a lot of sexual play" (ME). Nina says: "public plays are for people to watch and enjoy; they're not normally sexual". When the researcher asked the participants what non-sexual meant in this context, AR said that non-sexual play consisted of

> *rope bondage but also humiliation. I tend to not penetrate or do any, like oral sex in public. I would say like genital stimulation, but I won't, like, finger her.*

Bratty Bombshell said:

> *It was a much more sort of a fun play, a very much more like an exhibition play. So she [her dominatrix] would deliver pain to me in the form of flogging and whipping and crops and that sort of thing. So I got pleasure when my brain switched over from pain to pleasure*.

Newmahr (2010) noted that in most public play settings, sexual intercourse is not allowed, and in many play sessions, it is not often seen because it is not key to this kind of play; it is not the "driving factor" (Liquid Ecstasy). *"BDSM is not about sex"* (Nina); it is about the community sharing knowledge and skills of BDSM techniques (ME). The reason for sex not being permitted in a public setting comes from the rules that come from the establishment where the party is happening, the organiser of the event's preferences, and local laws around sex in public (Marks, 2019). Furthermore, according to

many establishments' rules, BDSM is not equated to sex and can make other individuals uncomfortable, which is not why people go to clubs. ME states that:

> *BDSM are gathering places where people have fun and show off their skills and learn from other people. BDSM are also pathological about bodily fluids. A lot of the time, the intended BDSM type plays do result in blood. A severe caning, whipping, whatever will definitely draw blood or anything that kind of involves any spread of bodily fluids is frowned upon in the BDSM clubs particularly because of the danger. The blood, semen, and vaginal secretions and so forth in this day and age of STDs and STIs is quite dangerous. So for that reason, they simply ban it in public plays.*

Further to the above, ME stated that "BDSM people are almost pathological in their protestations that they nothing like swingers. I guess that is part of the deep psychology behind why BDSM people don't do the whole sex in public thing." Nina shares the same sentiments by saying: "BDSMers do not swing. Not at all."

This rule and other rules of engagement need to be adhered to for public plays to be successful. These rules also ensure practitioners' safety and comfort in these public settings so that everything is kept within frameworks of BDSM play (Simon, 1994). These frameworks fall within the negotiation spectrum of BDSM, as described under the theme of consent and BDSM. Practitioners mentioned that there are frameworks in different public settings that ensure that everyone is safe and all practitioners' consent is respected (Marks, 2019). The most common frameworks discussed were SSC (safe, sane, and consensual) and RACK (Risk Awareness Consensual Kink). These frameworks allow for a shift of responsibility, moving away from the individual to the community (Barker, 2013). Understanding consent collectively creates a culture of mutual understanding, shifting the notion of "no means no" to "yes means yes" and the "yes" is communicated and negotiated before the inception of any play (Meeker et al., 2019).

These frameworks clearly contradict popular portrayals of BDSM as dangerous, pathological and coercive (Barker et al., 2007). Liquid Ecstasy explains SSC as follows:

> *So it needs to be safe, meaning that we are in a space where we can safely physically perform this activity. I'm not trying to whip you in the broom closet. It's sane, meaning that both of us are 100 percent sober and able to make the decision that we want to engage. And it's consensual, meaning that we have both given permission and there are other systems.*

Kinky Kiepie explains RACK as follows:

> *Risk Aware Consensual Kink does more things like blood letting those kinds of things, things*

that could potentially have a health impact, but not necessarily. The one RACK play, we saw people literally had metal hooks put through their skin on the back and they were doing tug of war with a chain and things like that. It can get pretty intense and really rough. Whereas the SSC stuff, it can get very kinky, very much fun, some of it can consider dangerous if it's not done properly or in a safe manner. But then you start going away from SSC more towards RACK again.

The above two primary models of consent are used by BDSM participants but are contrasting in their meanings of consent. The first, "Safe, Sane, and Consensual" (SSC), states that all BDSM practices should be physically and emotionally safe, sane, and consensual (Simula, 2019). Some participants, on the other hand, point out that what one person considers "sane" might appear to be "insane" to another and that what one person considers "healthy" may be "unhealthy" to another (Simula, 2019). As a result, many BDSM practitioners are now following the RACK (Risk Aware Consensual Kink) model. The RACK model, like the SSC model, emphasises consent in all facets of BDSM experiences. The RACK model, on the other hand, prevents categorising behaviours as safe or dangerous and sane or not (Simula, 2019). It serves as a model that stresses the importance of being informed and mindful of possible harms and individuals assessing their own degree of risk tolerance (Simula, 2019).

4.4.2 *Private Play*

Private plays were regarded as play sessions that happen between the dominant and the submissive, in a private capacity, with no one watching. These play sessions are enacted in their private homes. When discussing private plays, most of them were defined as "more sexual" (AR, Bratty Bombshell, ME), "more serious; more pleasurable" (Bratty Bombshell), but still not the driving factor of these types of play sessions. The act of sex is secondary and is not the defining element of play (Faccio et al., 2014). When asked what sexual meant in this context, it was defined as "genital contact" (AR) and "oral sex; a lot of physical sex" (ME); "vaginal or anal sex" (KK). The common reason why private plays is more sexual is because of the act's personal nature (Newmahr, 2010).

Furthermore, private plays played a role in creating deep connections between partners, allowing them to explore and experience each other more intensely. AR says: It's about like a sense of embodiment and about presence; her absolute presence in the moment, absolute presence in your body, just feeling your sensations and like feeling alive and meaning you're here"; KK says it's about "a deeper connection I've made with my partner; to add additional bells and whistles". Master

Tungsten echoes Kinky Kiepie's statement, commenting that "it connects me to the other person on every conceivable level possible. It connects mentally, physically, I think I can go as far as saying spiritually with that person. The trust thing is it's a very important part in this".

In summary, public play is associated with exhibitionistic behaviours encompassed by non-sexual practices, and private play is more intimate and sexual. From a social stance, one needs to put on a show in public to receive the gratification that increases an individual's confidence and sense of belonging to the group. In contrast, private plays are done more for the self and not needing to prove anything to anyone but yourself and the play partner (Newmahr, 2010). Psychologically, people get an ego boost, whereas privately, it is more about the journey of self-discovery (Pitagora, 2017). The experiences are both intensely pleasurable and erotic in both instances, even though not all practices involve genital penetration or the erogenous zones. Examples of erotic practices/plays not involving penetration are bondage, suspension and exposure to either a partner or to a group in a public space (Faccio et al., 2014; Greenberg, 2019).

4.5 BDSM Play as Empowering and Healing

An interesting point that came out of the interviews was how BDSM has helped many participants heal and increase their sense of self and confidence or a sense of freedom from everyday life. Recent studies have indicated that participating in the BDSM can provide significant psychological and social benefits, including feelings of pleasure or enjoyment, fun, an escape from the stresses of daily life, personal development, enhanced relationships, and self-expression (Hébert & Weaver, 2015; Taylor & Ussher, 2001). For example, Bratty Bombshell got into BDSM because of a devastating break up that she could not cope with:

> *And because of that, I lost the ability to feel emotion. So, I literally became completely numb. And the only way I found for myself to be able to feel something was to get pain from a play. Then I could release pain and then I could cry. And so, for five or six years, I went through that sort of non-pleasurable meaning, non-sexual feeling plays. And that healed me. That actually healed my ability to start feeling again and to become. It's given me the facilities to heal.*

BDSM became a healing mechanism for Bratty Bombshell. She was able to feel emotion again and gain confidence in herself to move forward in her life. Wismeijer and Van Assen (2013) found that BDSM practitioners were less sensitive about others' opinions, were more willing to try new experiences, and increased their overall sense of wellbeing. The latter was true for Little One in that BDSM was healing in the sense that it helped her overall living experience:

I have never been in a better state outside of a BDSM relationship, I've lost weight. My health is better. My my personal hygiene is better because you must understand, I was a depressed person. I've lost 14kgs in the last 10 months. My therapy has moved to every six weeks and instead of every three weeks. I make my own appointments. I don't need anybody else to do that for me. I have a routine for my hair. So my hair's grown five centimetres in 10 months, which is like, it's never done that. I want to give him the best submission and to give him the best, I need to be my best. In my relationship, I was self-harming. So with my Dom, he stepped in and it's under instruction now that I'm not allowed to cut. And it's just so motivating.

BDSM taught Liquid Ecstasy a lot about themselves and for them, play was the best therapy:

Play is the ultimate therapy. Nothing heals like play does. I think that would be my lead statement. I've seen people get over trauma, addiction, self-hatred, things that psychiatrists wouldn't even touch with a barge pole. And they got through it just by having a little bit of fun with the right person who understood their limits. And it's been very therapeutic, I think of it in the same way as going to a spa day or having your nails done or going for a haircut or a facial or something. It's just a therapy.

BDSM also helped many participants overcome challenges that they had to deal with in their lives. Nina explains that she used to be claustrophobic:

One of the first things he did in one of our first plays, he put one of those big masks on me, you know those masks, those breathing mask things. I panicked and he looked at me and with this soft, kind, gentle voice, he said to me: "just breathe. I'm here. Nothing's gonna happen". Now he can put the mask on me and I've been claustrophobic my whole life. But he managed to get me to overcome that. You know... And I don't know if I would be as relaxed or calm with someone else. With him I know I'm safe.

Rope bondage helped AR find her "voice and authority as a more dominant person" as well as "overcoming shame and taboo."

The shame and taboo that AR was referring to was dealing with her sexuality and growing up in "a very religious household… masturbation is evil… going to hell for homosexuality and any like sexual deviance is like demon possession." Ibrahim (2015) states that the "role of some religious organisations, and other bodies have been the predominant harbingers of scrutiny and discrimination for homosexuals, and other sexual minority groups such as the LGBT" (p. 270). BDSM has helped AR find something to

obsess about and like, immerse myself in that also gave me like this power, a sense of power was really cool. Yeah, and it gave me like a way to experience topping people in a in a way that it just really spoke to me just really... It's [rope bondage] such a beautiful art form and it's so complex and layered.

BDSM has empowered AR to embrace herself as a queer individual and has allowed her to be open and confident about herself as opposed to being oppressed, as she was at home.

BDSM also helped participants deal with the mundane of everyday life:

It's freedom from the prescriptions of day to day existence. Like, you know, there's no script really. You write the script, you make the script yourself. And that's really liberating and freeing. You get to experience yourself and your body and your partner or whoever you're playing with, like in a totally different way to the normal prescribed way of living. It's completely outside of that scripted bullshit (AR).

It is important to note that there is a difference between what individuals prescribe for themselves and freely own themselves versus society's prescriptions. BDSM is another, more alternative social script that is formed by the BDSM practitioners. Many play sessions offer a chance to experience things that are rare and not likely found in the everyday world (Easton, 2007). It allows practitioners to bring out their inner and often forbidden villain/victim (Easton, 2007). The practitioner can choose to be a child, a hero, a brat, a bully etc. (Easton, 2007). There is no end to what practitioners can enact. It also allows practitioners to feel certain emotions: anger, sadness, helplessness etc., all in a safe space, with no one to judge or rebuke individuals for feeling what they choose to feel and not what society deems appropriate (Easton, 2007). Whereas traditional sex research has asserted several views about women's sexuality and sexuality in general, both implicitly and explicitly (Fahs & McClelland, 2016). Traditional research has framed sex as heterosexual, reasonably simple to quantify, and biologically dependent, based on the idea that sex is normal and that people participate in sex not because of sociosexual and sociopolitical scripts but because of their "natural" impulses (Brody & Weiss, 2015; McGraw et al., 2015).

Under the themes of power exchange play, negotiation of play and transcendent states allowed partners to create deeper connections with partners and open up deeper communication with partners. Some even mentioned that this deep connection is better than any vanilla relationship they had, because the vanilla relationships become

stagnant and you become a more boring married couple and you've got kids, and that's life

> *and maybe the sex goes out the window later on. Where the BDSM brings an aspect of playfulness into that relationship and trust. With that trust comes serious responsibility and loyalty and honesty with each other* (Rope Bunny).

Rope Bunny brings on a notion that BDSM helps one to be non-normative. However, one needs to look at it from the stance of vanilla versus kinky sex. Vanilla individuals find excitement and pleasure from normative sex, such as the missionary position, whereas BDSM practitioners find excitement and pleasure from being bound and humiliated (Prior & Williams, 2015). In context, both of these acts are normalised, and no harm comes to any individuals. Further to what Rope Bunny said, BDSM play brings about another element of fun and playfulness into the relationship that a vanilla dynamic cannot achieve (Prior & Williams, 2015).

In the above accounts, BDSM play has been experienced in a way that helps participants deal with personal dilemmas and helped people find themselves in a positive way. BDSM play is a way for people to take themselves out of the everyday experiences of stress, lack of confidence and anxieties to feeling in control and sure of themselves as well as being able to manage and cope with issues that they could not cope with in the past (Barker et al., 2007).

Research done by Connolly (2006) and Wismeijer and van Assen (2013) compared BDSM practitioners and non-BDSM practitioners on psychological disorders and major personality traits. The outcomes of both studies were that BDSM practitioners showed favourable results compared to non-BDSM practitioners. BDSM practitioners showed lower levels of depression, anxiety, psychological sadism/masochism, borderline pathology and paranoia (Connolly, 2006). Furthermore, BDSM practitioners scored higher in extraversion, conscientiousness, openness to experience and subjective well-being (Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013). These findings mirror the comments made by the participants. However, one must caution in assuming that everyone practising BDSM is doing this because something is wrong with them or they need help psychologically. Barker et al. (2007) state that although one would want to go against the belief that BDSM is pathological (still exists in the DSM-V but only if it causes significant distress or is not consented), arguing that BDSM can be used as a way for healing can come across as suggesting that everyone who practices BDSM needs healing. This is not a notion that should be generalised as it comes across that everyone who practices BDSM is broken and has gone through traumas (Barker et al., 2007). This is not the case. During interviews with participants, some believed that play was the ultimate therapy (Liquid Ecstasy) and that it gave them the platform to heal (Bratty Bombshell), and others believed that BDSM is not

the place to look for healing. Nina made the following statement:

> *I never used it as a crutch and I've never leant on it. BDSM doesn't help injured people and a lot of people think that it does. No, it doesn't. You need to sort yourself out first, then go into the lifestyle and have fun. BDSM isn't a magic cure. If anybody uses BDSM to fix them, they're going to get more hurt because they're looking in the wrong place to get fixed.*

BDSM play, like any other play or activities that require focus and attention on the present moment (e.g., video gaming, chess), often force practitioners to be in the present moment and only focus on that (Newmahr, 2008). As a result, some BDSM practitioners claim psychological benefits like those found in meditation, hobbies, and sports, such as increased focus, decreased mental activity, immersion in the present moment, and relaxation (Easton & Hardy, 2001). Therefore, BDSM play may be a way of achieving meditative or relaxed states of mind (focusing on the self, the here, and the now) (Labrecque et al., 2020).

BDSM play has also been compared to leisure activities, which scholars define as "intrinsically motivated, freely chosen and is associated with psychological benefits, such as producing pleasure or enjoyment, positive emotions, reduced stress, sense of adventure, and expressing important parts of the self" (Prior & Williams, 2015, p. 12). Leisure practices can be divided between casual and serious (Stebbins, 1997). Casual leisure requires little training to enjoy it, provides immediate rewards that are pleasurable for a short time, are fun and is natural (Stebbins, 1997). Serious leisure, on the other hand, necessitates perseverance; is career-like (with phases and turning points); necessitates considerable personal effort based on acquired experience, preparation, or skill; offers long-term benefits and rewards; is linked to identification with the activity; and has its own ethos and social world (Stebbins, 1997). Prior and Williams' (2015) suggest that BDSM play may be a reflection of casual leisure, in that it is playful, in the moment, and natural and can bring psychological benefits, such as freedom, healing and escape (as mentioned by participants in this study). Therefore, "BDSM may be thought of as a recreational leisure, rather than the expression of psychopathological processes" (Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013, p. 1943).

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The BDSM phenomenon has been regarded as a non-normative form of expressing desires and sexuality and has varying degrees of play/activities that encompasses what BDSM entails (Chivers et al., 2013). Some writers (Faccio et al., 2014; Taylor & Ussher, 2001) say that the most important aspect of non-normative sexualities is that it shows a certain dynamic in an intense and caricatural way of relationship and power among the individuals in these play scenes.

The purpose of this study was to take a phenomenological approach to the investigation of BDSM play by offering compelling insights into the lived experience of BDSM practitioners in South Africa and how they view play, and how dynamic and complex the phenomenon of BDSM play is for them. Interpretive phenomenological analysis was utilised because it analyses the data based on the participants' experiences as opposed to explaining their experiences using a prescribed theory (Smith & Osborn, 2014). This study contributed to the South African landscape of BDSM as the focus was on subjective experiences of play of BDSM practitioners. It also focused on the psychology of these experiences and the rich detail of the experiences of BDSM play without hindering the meaning behind these experiences. All other studies of BDSM within South Africa were focused on the violent nature of BDSM (Noyes, 1998), online constructions of sexual intimacy (Wolfaardt, 2014), comparing feminist theories and what those mean in the BDSM scene (Van Reenen, 2014) and linguistics used in BDSM (McCormick, 2018). In this study, the experiential highlights for all participants were the power exchange plays, achieving altered states of consciousness, and how BDSM play healed and empowered the practitioners in the study. Another element of the experience of BDSM play was how the dynamics of the above three highlights differed when playing in a public space versus that of a private space.

Most scholars define BDSM as activities that create relationships through foregrounding, manipulating, and enacting scripts that delineate consent and power, whether practitioners or outside observers (Weinberg et al., 1984; Weiss, 2011). Practitioners use BDSM archetypes, vocabulary, and props to converge social constructs such as race, gender, sexuality, class, and age through fantasy and activity, resulting in radical intimacies (Weiss, 2011). These tools are based on three tenets that use an informal framework of interpersonal accountability to connect individual BDSM practitioners to a group.

Firstly, most practitioners believe that BDSM practices can only occur amongst willing, non-coerced

adults (Weiss, 2011). The findings showed that what is fundamental to BDSM play is that all play is consented to and contracted, be it verbal or written. Boundaries are reported to always set to ensure that partners know the limits of the BDSM play session and are guided by those limits to ensure safety and enjoyment for both partners. Once consent has been reached through negotiation of these limits, the BDSM play can begin.

Secondly, BDSM practitioners usually designate physical (private or public) and imaginary spaces to cultivate and contain an imbalance of power, which can be described as the ability to create an intended transcendent state in one's partner (through actions, commands, or emotional expressions) (Pitagora, 2017; Weiss, 2011). All the participants engaged in a power exchange play dynamic where roles of dominance and submission were adopted, with some switching between these two predominant roles. The theme of relinquishing power came through when the submissive participants were talking about their experience. Being in this position was freeing and exciting for them. When the dominant participants spoke of their experiences, it was all about being in control but ensuring that there was a mutual pleasure between both parties, so they do not take away from what the submissive is willingly giving to the dominant. It was noted that the dynamic of power exchange play differed between a private and public space. When participants played publicly, they reported that their plays were not very deep, meaning that participants would not reach a full state of transcendence and the plays were not sexual, meaning that there was no penetration of genitalia (due to club rules, vulnerability in partners and general health and safety in public spaces). Whereas in a private setting, participants reported that the plays were deeper (transcendence was more likely to occur because they could let their guard down) and more sexual (penetration of genitalia and oral sex).

The transcendent states the participants experienced are known in the BDSM community as subspace and domspace. The experience was likened to being high and having a sense of hyper-focus on the task at hand. Turley et al. (2011) suggested that authentic fantasy and escapism enable practitioners to temporarily escape the realities of the human experience while allowing them to explore various emotional and sexual possibilities, as well as the possibility of existing in an infinite universe. This was true for some participants in the study. They said that these transcendent states allowed them to temporarily escape the mundane of their lives and become another person for a while and allow them to experiment with aspects of their own world and explore new worlds.

But with such an increase in the endorphins comes the crash that is called sub/dom drop. The feelings used to describe the drop were depression, guilt and confusion, to name a few. To counter these

feelings, aftercare (which is the third tenet) was required, which is a post-play activity to get individuals to normalise after such a play session and evaluate the power exchange that occurred. Some of the techniques that the participants described were communication (reassurance), replenishment/snacking (chocolate being the popular snack of choice) and physical contact (cuddling). According to the participants of this study, aftercare was an opportunity to relieve the intense feelings evoked by scenes by cuddling, rehydrating, troubleshooting, or recounting the scene's achievements.

BDSM not only helped participants explore themselves in non-normative ways, but it healed and empowered them in their lives. It helped participants discover themselves in a constructive way and helped them cope with personal dilemmas. BDSM play was a way for participants to escape their daily lives, build trust with partners, forget anxieties, and feel in control and confident of themselves, and manage and deal with problems they previously could not handle. This type of healing and empowerment drew many of the participants to continue experiencing the power of BDSM play and exploring new avenues of BDSM that could help continue this journey of growth and self-discovery.

It was important to investigate the lived experiences of BDSM play from the viewpoint of BDSM practitioners, specifically within a South Africa context. The research was limited to viewing BDSM as a violent act towards partners (Noyes, 1998), online constructions of sexual intimacy (Wolfaardt, 2014), feminist viewpoints on the critique of Fifty Shades of Grey (James 2012) (Van Reenen, 2014) and the linguistics used in BDSM and how this language shapes practitioners' activities (McCormick, 2018). What this study provides is not only a psychological perspective on the experience of BDSM play but also a sex-positive stance towards activities that are encompassed in BDSM play and the practitioners involved in the lifestyle. This study will contribute to academic work in sexuality in South Africa and hopefully allow for more people to venture into this kind of study in future.

5.1 Limitations

The results of this study are limited to a specific demographic and their subjective views of the topic. All the participants in this study were white and did not include the views of other racial groups. The participants' views could have influenced and created a racialisation of BDSM play and the dynamics that were not balanced by a more racially diverse community of participants. Furthermore, by conducting individual interviews with research participants, the researcher co-produced the data analysed and explored in the current report. As a result, since the researcher is both the co-creator and the observer of the data, the researcher's own subjectivity and positionality could be a constraint

because she does not practice BDSM and can hinder a deeper conversation with the practitioners for more information on the subject. But it can also be a resource as her analysis of the data will be mostly free from a biased opinion towards these practitioners. She does not have experience in this sexual practice to make unwarranted opinions of the practice or the practitioners. Another constraint is the researcher's position in the BDSM community, which is an outsider. This may have resulted in the participants not fully opening up to their experiences due to being worried about being judged by someone who is an outsider since there is still a stigma against these individuals and the world outside of this space.

5.2 Recommendations

A potentially valuable opportunity for further research is looking into phenomenological work that focuses on other demographics of BDSM practitioners. The sample in this study was adequate for phenomenological work (Giorgi, 2012). However, it was not diverse in sexuality (two participants identified as bisexual and one as queer), and all participants were white and all able-bodied. Research on race in BDSM will add value to academic work around non-normative sexual practices. The subjective experiences of BDSM play of other ethnic groups could divulge other aspects of BDSM play and their experiences as black BDSM practitioners in predominantly white spaces.

Another interesting avenue to pursue is investigating the effects and therapeutic benefits of dom space as this research was lacking, and all information sourced was informal. It should be noted that phenomenological research aims to investigate a small group of BDSM practitioners' lived experiences, not to be reflective of the entire BDSM population. The number of participants used is less important than the quality of the data and the work done to elucidate it.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Permission Letter

PSYCHOLOGY
THE SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT (SHCD)

Private Bag 3, Wits, 2050 • Tel: 011 717 4541 • Fax: 011 717 4559 • E-mail: psych.SHCD@wits.ac.za

Permission Letter to Advertise Research on Online Forums and Websites

University of the Witwatersrand,
The School of Human and Community Development; (011) 717 8335

[Name of Organisation]
[Date]

Dear Sir/Madam,

Re: Permission to gain access to members of the website for research purposes

My name is Sónia de Loureiro

I am studying for a Masters in Social and Psychological Research at the University of the Witwatersrand. I am seeking permission to gain access to members that are involved in your website/forum.

I am researching the accounts of the experience of play by individuals practising in BDSM. The reason for undergoing this research is because of the knowledge gap that has been discovered. Little research was found around the practitioners perspective on their experience of play and what potential benefits come from being involved in these experiences. Your organisation was chosen for this study because acquaintances of mine referred me and spoke highly of the members that are part of it. My acquaintances mentioned that the members are professional and are helpful to other members when there are questions that need answers. I was hoping that this helpfulness will extend to a research study.

I will invite individuals from your organisation to participate in this study. I am looking for participants

who are actively involved in the BDSM community and who are regular practitioners of consensual BDSM and have been practising BDSM for more than six months to get the enjoyment of the practice. Furthermore, the practice of BDSM should be their preferred means of sexual arousal. Practitioners also need to be over the age of 18.

If they agree, they will be asked to participate in an interview that will be conducted via online communication platforms of the participants choosing with the researcher conducting the research. Participants will need to set aside 45 – 90 minutes of their time for the interview. The time will be scheduled with participants once an agreement has been made to participate. The participants' responses will be audio recorded. The costs of data during the interview will be incurred by the participant and not the researcher.

Participants will be asked to give their written and verbal consent before the research begins. Their responses will be treated confidentially, and identities (their names and the name of the organisation) will be anonymous unless otherwise expressly indicated. Individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

The results will be communicated in my research report as a partial fulfilment to my master's degree. The research participants will not be advantaged or disadvantaged in any way. The participants will not be paid for this study. They will be reassured that they can withdraw their permission at any time during this project without any penalty. There are no foreseeable risks in participating in this study. If the participant feels that the questions have brought on discomfort and feel distressed, the interview will be stopped or will be resumed at another time. If the participants need some support or counselling services following the online interview, they should please contact Lifeline - a toll-free helpline. The number for Lifeline South Africa is **0861 322 322**. Another toll-free service that can be utilised is the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG). The number for SADAG 24h helpline is **0800 456 789.**

All research data will be preserved anonymously for five years, after which the data will be destroyed. I, therefore, request permission in writing to conduct my research at your organisation. The permission letter should be on your organisation's headed paper, signed and dated, and explicitly referring to myself by name and the title of my study.

Please let me know if you require any further information. I look forward to your response as soon as

is convenient.

Yours sincerely,

Sónia de Loureiro
2144259@students.wits.ac.za

Professor Brett Bowman
(011) 717-8335
Brett.Bowman@wits.ac.za

Appendix B: Signed Permission Letter from FetLife Caretakes

July 1, 2020

FetLife

Dear Sónia de Loureiro,

I am writing to express my support for your research study, “Accounts of experiences of playby individuals practising BDSM” to be conducted by you on the FetLife website.

Please ensure that you adhere to the following requirements below:

- I recommend that you post your research proposal information in both the “About Me” section of your profile and in writing. That gives our members a place to ask you questions in addition to group posts and private messages.
- You may post your proposal in groups, but please contact the group owner for permission first. In general, FetLife’s privacy policies are very strict, so we don’t normally tell one member about another. In this case, if a group owner contacts us for confirmation, we will confirm that you have our permission.
- Please limit posting your proposal to three groups every 24 hours.
- Please send us a link to the profile you create for this research.
- Please send us links to each group thread you start.

We look forward to learning the results of your

research.With kind regards,

Signature: 

Name of FetLife Caretaker: James Huesmann

Date: July 3, 2020

Appendix C: Interview Schedule

Opening

A. (Establish Rapport) My name is___and I am a Masters student at the University of the Witwatersrand and it is a pleasure to meet you and I am very excited to be talking to you today.

B. (Purpose) I would like to ask you some questions about your experiences in the community and your views and experiences of play and what it means to you.

C. (Motivation) I hope to use this information to help acknowledge the gap in research about the experiences of play and practitioner views.

D. (Timeline) The interview should take between 45 - 90 minutes.

(Transition: Let me begin by asking you some questions about you as a practitioner)

First set of questions are to get a feel for the interviewee and general information about the interviewee

1. How old are you?
2. How long have you been involved in BDSM?
3. How did you get into your interest in fetish/kink/sex in general?
    - *Probe: Was there a point in your life where you said to hell with vanilla I want rocky road?*
4. How do you personally identify within the BDSM spectrum?
    - *Probe: Dom/sub/switch? Sadist? Masochist?*

(Transition: Thank you for sharing some information about yourself. Now I would like to ask you a few questions about BDSM play and the views you have of this)

The second set of questions will focus more on the study, which goes into the dimensions of play. It will cover the research questions the researcher is investigating.

5. In BDSM, there are typically play sessions. Could you please describe your experience when in a play session? How do you achieve an optimal experience?

- *Probe: What does it entail? Are there phases of a play session in order to reach a level of optimal experience? If so, what are they?*

6. Could you describe what the key experiential dimensions of play would be for you?
    - *Probe: Have your experiences of play changed the longer you have been a BDSM practitioner?*
7. Can you tell me what it is that is most appealing about engaging in play for you?
    - Does this change in the course of a session?
    - Has this changed over time for you?
8. What has been most challenging for you about engaging in BDSM play and how do you understand this?
9. If you were to describe to someone who has never engaged in BDSM play why it is so meaningful to you, what would you say?
10. Is there anything about playing with someone else or other people in BSDM settings that is important for you?

(Transition: Thank you so much for everything you have shared with me today. It has been a pleasure finding out more about you).

A. (Maintain Rapport) I appreciate the time you took for this interview. Is there anything else you think would be helpful for me to know that would add value to the research?
B. (End Interview) I should have all the information I need. Thanks again. I look forward to including this insightful information in my research report.

Appendix D: Participation Information Sheet

PSYCHOLOGY
THE SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT (SHCD)

Private Bag 3, Wits, 2050 • Tel: 011 717 4541 • Fax: 011 717 4559 • E-mail: psych.SHCD@wits.ac.za

Participant Information Sheet

Good day Madam/Sir

My name is Sónia de Loureiro, and I am a Masters student in Social and Psychological Research at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. As part of my studies, I have to undertake a research project, and I am investigating play in BDSM practitioners. This research project aims to explore the experience of play by individuals practising in BDSM.

As part of this project, I would like to invite you to take part in an online interview (Zoom, Skype, Whatsapp, etc.). This activity will involve a once-off interview where you will be answering questions around the aim of the research and can take between 45 - 90 minutes. The costs of data during the interview will be incurred by the participant and not the researcher.

With your permission, I would also like to record the interview using a recording tool (voice recorder or the online platforms' recording tool). The interview will ask questions around your subjective experiences of play, the dimensions of play that are crucial during a session and your thoughts around the meaning of play that are important to you and should be highlighted in this study.

You will not receive any direct benefits from participating in this research, and there are no disadvantages or penalties for not participating. You may withdraw at any time or not answer any question if you do not want to. The online interview will be completely confidential and anonymous as I will not be asking for your name or any identifying information. Any information you give me will be held securely (on a laptop that is password protected and the transcriptions are encrypted) and not disclosed to anyone else, besides my supervisor. I will be using a pseudonym (false name) to represent your participation in my final research report. If you experience any distress or discomfort at any point in this process, we will stop the interview or resume another time. If you need some

support or counselling services following the online interview, please contact Lifeline - a toll-free helpline. The number for Lifeline South Africa is **0861 322 322**. Another toll-free service that can be utilised is the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG). The number for SADAG 24h helpline is **0800 456 789.**

If you have any questions during or afterwards about this research, feel free to contact me on the details listed below. If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the ethical procedures of this study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), telephone +27 (0)11 717 1408, email hrec- medical.researchoffice@wits.ac.za

Yours sincerely,
Sónia Alexandra Ribeiro de Loureiro

Researcher: Sónia Alexandra Ribeiro de Loureiro, 2144259@students.wits.ac.za
Supervisor: Brett Bowman, Brett.Bowman@wits.ac.za, (011) 717-8335

Signature of Supervisor



---------- 2020/06/22 ----------

Professor Brett Bowman Date

Signature of researcher



---------- 2020/06/22 ----------

Sónia de Loureiro Date

Appendix E: Consent Form for Conducting the Interview

PSYCHOLOGY
THE SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT (SHCD)

Private Bag 3, Wits, 2050 • Tel: 011 717 4541 • Fax: 011 717 4559 • E-mail: psych.SHCD@wits.ac.za

Consent Form for Conducting an Interview

Title of project: Accounts of experience of play by individuals practising in BDSM
Name of researcher: Sónia Alexandra Ribeiro de Loureiro

I, ……., agree to participate in this research project. The research has been explained to me and I understand what my participation will involve. I agree to the following:

(Please circle the relevant options below).

I agree that my participation will remain anonymous	YES	NO
I agree that the researcher may use anonymous quotes in his / her research report	YES	NO
I agree that the interview may be audio recorded	YES	NO
I agree that the information I provide may be used anonymously after this project has	YES	NO

ended, for academic purposes by other researchers, subject to their own ethics clearance being obtained.

- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.
    - Researcher: Sónia de Loureiro; 2144259@students.wits.ac.za
    - Supervisor: Prof. Brett Bowman; Brett.Bowman@wits.ac.za; +27 (0)11 717-8335

…… (signature of participant)

…… (name of participant)

…… (date)

Appendix F: Ethics Clearance Certificate

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

Research Office

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)
R14/49 de Loureiro

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE	**PROTOCOL NUMBER: H20/05/06**
PROJECT TITLE	Accounts of experience of play by individuals practising BDSM
INVESTIGATOR(S)	Miss S de Loureiro
SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT	Human and Community Development/
DATE CONSIDERED	22 May 2020
DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE	Approved Permission letters are required before data collection can commence Risk level: Minimal
EXPIRY DATE	24 June 2023

DATE 25 June 2020 **CHAIRPERSON** J. Knight
(Professor J Knight)

cc: Supervisor : Professor B Bowman

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR(S)

To be completed in duplicate and **ONE COPY** returned to the Secretary at Room 10004, 10th Floor, Senate House, University. Unreported changes to the application may invalidate the clearance given by the HREC (Non-Medical)

I/We fully understand the conditions under which I am/we are authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I/we guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/we undertake to resubmit the protocol to the Committee. **I agree to completion of a yearly progress report.**

_____ _____/_____/_____
Signature **Date**

PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER ON ALL ENQUIRIES

Figures

Figure 1

