

Beyond the Traditional Sexual Script: How Consent Is Negotiated in Sexual Encounters

Involving Eroticized Pain and/or Power Play

By

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## Abstract

Women are disproportionately the victims of sexual assault, and feminist scholars have partially attributed this disparity to consent dynamics within normative sexual encounters. BDSM/kink sexuality exists outside the norm by involving the erotic manipulation of power and/or pain sensations and emerging research suggests it is predicated upon the explicit negotiation of consent. Using a qualitative research design, we explored the way consent is communicated within sexual encounters that involve BDSM/kink sexuality (i.e., eroticized pain and/or power play). Thematic analysis results revealed that participants communicated about consent across three phases of BDSM/kink encounters: prescene, scene, and postscene. Specifically, results revealed that consent is negotiated verbally before the encounter, communicated in an indirect way during the encounter (e.g., via safe words or nonverbal cues), and discussed verbally again after the encounter. Results also suggest that communication of consent changed in a number of ways over time and context, including from explicit to implicit and from thorough to shorthand. These findings are consistent with prior research that suggests that in BDSM sexual encounters consent is actively constructed based on explicit negotiations of various aspects of the encounter before any activity begins. The model of consent in the context of BDSM/kink sexuality revealed in the present study may bolster comprehensive, skills-based sexual assault prevention programming. Specifically, the results in the present study (a) provide a functional model of consent communication, (b) enable a discussion of risk associated with different approaches to consent, and (c) frame consent dynamics within a broader ecological context.

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## Introduction

Sexual assault is currently in the national spotlight, as one in five U.S. women has experienced rape or attempted rape in her lifetime, and close to half of women have experienced some other form of sexual activity without consent (Breiding et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2018). For men, about one in fifty has experienced rape or attempted rape over the course of his life, and approximately one in four has experienced other sexual activity without consent (Breiding et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2018). Taken together for the purposes of the present study, rape, attempted rape, and any other sexual activity or attempted sexual activity without consent are all forms of sexual assault. Although the particular gender makeup of the perpetrator-victim dyad varies within different types of sexual assault (Breiding et al., 2014), as a whole, women make up the majority of sexual assault victims, and men make up the majority of sexual assault perpetrators (Basile et al., 2011; Cantor et al., 2015). Feminist scholars have partially attributed this disparity to gender dynamics and norms within the broader culture, including those related to consent within normative or typical sexual encounters (Byers, 1996; Frith & Kitzinger, 2001; Murnen, Wright, & Kaluzny, 2002; Yodanis, 2004).

Currently, much advice about consent aimed at preventing sexual assault seems problematic (Muehlenhard, Humphreys, Jozkowski, & Peterson, 2016). The majority of sexual assault prevention programming includes brief educational interventions focusing on distributing knowledge or changing attitudes about sexual assault among learners (DeGue et al., 2014). When consent is included in the discussion, materials often describe what does *not* count as consent rather than what *does* count as consent (e.g., “Wasted ≠ Consent”<sup>1</sup>). Although it may be helpful to establish the boundaries of consent by demonstrating what should *not* count as consent, in an

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<sup>1</sup> <http://studentaffairs.ku.edu/consent>

educational context this leaves the learners without a conceptualization of what they *should* do. Preliminary research regarding the efficacy of sexual assault prevention programs suggests a need for comprehensive, skills-based sex education. Such materials would include discussions of individual skills, risk and protective factors, and factors at multiple ecological levels, such as social norms, institutional, and cultural factors (DeGue et al., 2014).

A discussion of social norms regarding consent in the context of sex education should include the research suggesting gender dynamics and consent practices within normative sexual encounters contribute to the gender disparities in sexual assault. Such a discussion could be expanded by incorporating consent norms within other types of sexualities. Specifically, individuals who engage in BDSM, also called kink, engage in erotic behaviors that involve the direct manipulation of power dynamics, and research suggests this exchange is centered around the explicit negotiation of consent. Thus, the aim of the proposed project is to explore the way individuals communicate consent in the context of BDSM/kink sexuality outside the traditional sexual script. Such information may prove useful in developing comprehensive, skills-based sexual assault prevention programming, a promising approach to sexual assault prevention in need of further development (DeGue et al., 2014).

### **Sexual Consent in the Traditional Sexual Script**

Thus far, most research regarding consent in sexual encounters has predominantly focused on samples of heterosexual college and university students. Apart from the relative ease of data collection in this population, the focus on college students makes sense, given the recent national attention to sexual assault on college campuses. Findings from this line of research suggest that among college students, consent practices are typically gendered according to the traditional sexual script.



Sexual scripts are socially and individually constructed guidelines for both enacting and evaluating sexual behaviors. These scripts both describe and prescribe what is and is not culturally normative or appropriate (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). As with most norms, sexual scripts vary according to gender, race, class, and other cultural variables (Bowleg, Lucas, & Tschann, 2004; Byers, 1996; Stephens & Phillips, 2005). Although there is variability in individuals' sexual attitudes and scripts, larger cultural norms establish a standard sexual encounter to which all sexual encounters can be compared (Frith & Kitzinger, 2001). This prototypical, normative sexual encounter is referred to as the traditional sexual script (TSS; Byers, 1996).

The TSS relies on an assumption of heterosexual and cisgender experience to delineate and prescribe different behavioral and attitudinal expectations for men and women (Wiederman, 2005). Based on traditional gender roles and cultural attitudes toward women's and men's sexuality, the TSS prescribes men's role in sexual encounters as active and women's role as passive (Wiederman, 2005). According to the TSS, men's sexuality is pleasure-centered and fun, whereas women's is relationship-centered and risky. Thus, men are expected to be the initiators of sexual encounters, and women are expected to be the sexual gatekeepers, ultimately responsible for giving or withholding consent (Dworkin & O'Sullivan, 2005; Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003; Tolman, Spencer, Rosen-Reynoso, & Porche, 2003).

Recent research findings suggest the way in which consent is negotiated in sexual encounters is informed by the gendered expectations of the TSS (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013; see Muehlenhard et al., 2016, for a review). For instance, among heterosexual college students, men are more likely than women to cite initiation of sexual activity as a means of communicating their consent whereas women are more likely than men to report responding affirmatively after being asked (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013). Furthermore, both men and

women report that verbal consent is often unnecessary, even if they are still negotiating willingness to engage in sex (Beres, 2010, 2014).

The way consent is communicated varies according to context, including the types of sexual behaviors and the relationship between the two individuals. For example, both men and women are more likely to report using explicit verbal consent for PVI and/or anal sex than for other behaviors such as “fooling around” or intimate touching (Jozkowski, Peterson, Sanders, Dennis, & Reece, 2014). Additionally, there is some evidence to suggest individuals view explicit consent as more important for casual sex or first-time sexual encounters, and less important for sexual encounters between individuals in ongoing or long-term sexual relationships (Beres, 2014; Humphreys, 2004). Furthermore, consent may change over the course of a relationship, with individuals beginning with more overt, explicit forms of communication about consent and then gradually shifting to more subtle, implicit communication styles (Muehlenhard et al., 2016). More research is needed regarding this potential shift, but current findings suggest that individuals most often report relying on implicit, rather than explicit, means of communicating and inferring consent (Muehlenhard et al., 2016).

There is limited research regarding consent dynamics among populations of individuals whose sexuality is not included in the traditional sexual script. In one study, lesbian and gay men were given a list of behaviors that may communicate consent and asked which they used in their sexual encounters with their partners. Participants reported primarily using nonverbal methods to communicate consent, a finding that is consistent with the reliance on implicit methods of communicating consent among heterosexual individuals (Beres, Herold, & Maitland, 2004). However, in another study, McLeod (2015) surveyed both sexual minority and heterosexual Australian university students about how they had communicated sexual consent in first-time

sexual encounters. She found that individuals in same-sex encounters reported using *explicit verbal consent* significantly more than did individuals in heterosexual encounters. She hypothesized that—unlike individuals in heterosexual encounters—those in same-sex encounters could not rely on “sexual scripts to guide socially sanctioned stereotypical sexual behavior” (p. 17).

The traditional sexual script also prescribes power differences within normative sexual encounters between men and women (Murnen et al., 2002). Power in this sense is based on the Foucaultian construct of power as a fundamental social force, permeating social interactions at every level (Foucault, 1998). Dyadic Power Theory continues in this tradition by describing power at the interpersonal level (Dunbar, 2004). First, according to this theory, power is a relational construct, existing in the relationships between individuals (Dunbar, 2004; Halstead, De Santis, & Williams, 2016). Thus, power is relative from one person to another. Second, power is theoretical. It is a perceived trait, either of oneself or another, describing the *ability* to control or influence another within a relationship (Dunbar, 2004; Halstead et al., 2016). Behaviors such as dominance or other attempts to control are manifestations of perceived power, but are not synonymous with the construct (Dunbar, 2004). Furthermore, power in interpersonal relationships is situated within a broader sociocultural context. Thus, power exists between individuals, and is influenced by larger cultural dynamics (e.g. gender; Dunbar, 2004).

In the case of traditional sexualities, interpersonal power is negotiated between women and men within a particular sexual encounter, and that encounter is situated within broader, cultural power dynamics. Overall, norms in the traditional sexual script describe an active male initiator and a passive female gatekeeper (Wiederman, 2005). The TSS not only assumes men’s consent, but also implies that men are “always on” and constantly seeking opportunities for

sexual activity. Although the TSS portrays women as deciding to give or withhold sexual consent to the man, in either case her role is passive acquiescence or rejection; she is always acting *in response to* the male initiator. This dynamic remains, even if the man continues to pursue sex after the woman's initial rejection, at which point the gatekeeping role of women outlined in the TSS requires that she actively resist his advances, yet she still is acting only to counteract him. This dynamic reveals a power difference between men and women within the TSS. While it may appear that there is power to control the sexual encounter within the gatekeeping role, the TSS prescribes a relatively powerless role for the woman as capable of only responding to the man's initiation.

Ultimately, according to the traditional sexual script, sex is something men *do to* women (Dworkin & O'Sullivan, 2005; Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003; Tolman et al., 2003). The gendered roles reflected in the TSS are similar to gendered behavioral dynamics observed in situations of sexual assault, in which, typically, an active male aggressor assaults a nonconsenting female victim. The TSS prescribes the man's role as trying to overcome the woman's resistance as part of a normative, consensual sexual encounter. In instances of sexual assault, a woman's lack of consent and genuine resistance are ignored or written off as part of the normative sexual process. Thus, it is not a far jump to suggest that gendered dynamics that are normalized within the traditional sexual script are conducive to sexual assault.

There has been considerable research regarding the way gendered expectations in the TSS may facilitate sexual assault (Byers, 1996; Frith & Kitzinger, 2001; Murnen et al., 2002). Qualitative research has found striking similarities between the TSS and the rape myth that men cannot control their sexual urges, and once they become aroused they cannot be held accountable for their actions (Ryan, 2011). Several studies have also compared how individuals view

“seduction” according to the TSS and how they view acquaintance rape (Carroll & Clark, 2006; Littleton & Axsom, 2003; Ryan, 1988). According to participants, both seduction and rape involve men manipulating women for sex (Littleton & Axsom, 2003). These ideas conform to traditional sexual scripts, in which “men should initiate sexual activity and work to overcome women’s resistance” (Frith, 2009).

Given that norms within the TSS are similar to instance of sexual assault, it is important to note that many people experience sexuality beyond the narrow definition of sex according to the TSS. Individual sexuality can deviate from the TSS based on a variety of factors, including but not limited to one’s relationship dynamics (e.g., egalitarian heterosexual couples who are respectful of each other’s sexual boundaries), one’s gender and the gender of their partner (e.g., LGBT individuals), the number of one’s sexual and romantic partners (e.g., individuals practicing consensual non-monogamy), or the types of sexual behavior one finds arousing (e.g., individuals engaging in eroticized pain and/or power play). Furthermore, there are many expressions of sexuality wherein consent itself is negotiated differently than as prescribed by the TSS. For example, for individuals who practicing BDSM/kink sexuality, sexual experiences are centered around the manipulation and/or exchange of power dynamics and, research suggests, the explicit negotiation of consent. Thus, individuals who engage in BDSM/kink sexuality, or, more broadly, eroticized pain and/or power play, are in a unique position at the intersection of consent and power beyond the TSS.

Information about the communication of consent in sexual encounters that deviate from the traditional sexual script by incorporating BDSM/kink behaviors may be useful for anti-sexual assault messaging for the general population. In general, the TSS prescribes the implicit communication of consent in the context of gender dynamics that are similar to sexual assault.

Examples of sexualities based on the functional, explicit communication of consent may be useful for enhancing skills-based, comprehensive sexual assault prevention; BDSM/kink sexuality may be one such example.

### **Consent Outside the Traditional Sexual Script: The Case of BDSM/Kink Sexuality**

BDSM is an umbrella term including bondage, discipline, dominance and submission, and sadomasochism. Generally, this acronym describes sexuality that includes eroticized pain (also referred to as intense sensation) and/or power dynamics. Sometimes BDSM is referred to as “kink” among people who practice this type of sexuality (Bezreh, Weinberg, & Edgar, 2012; Simula, 2019). Information about the prevalence rates of BDSM is scarce, and estimates change depending on the definition of BDSM sexuality. For example, estimates from one nationally representative study in Australia found 2% of the sample engaged in “BD” or “SM” behaviors in the past 12 months (Richters, De Visser, Rissel, Grulich, & Smith, 2008). In another study involving Canadian university students, many participants endorsed sexual fantasies involving a range of BDSM/kink behaviors (Bezreh et al., 2012). For example, 58% of women and 72% of men reported fantasizing about being tied up, and approximately 30% of women and 60% of men reported fantasizing about spanking or whipping someone (Bezreh et al., 2012). Such measurements are clearly predicated upon the definition of BDSM/kink sexuality, which has evolved over time.

Introduced to psychology via Richard von Krafft Ebing his 1886 work, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, BDSM was initially medicalized through his conceptualization of sadism and masochism. Sigmund Freud continued this trend, theorizing that such interests represented immature sexual development (Turley, King, & Butt, 2011). Modern conceptualizations of

BDSM center on the experience of the practitioners (Taylor & Ussher, 2001) and represent a variety of constructs ranging from a specific behavior to a sexual identity (Simula, 2019).

When conceptualized as a practice or behavior, BDSM focuses on consensual, erotic activities involving power and/or pain (Barker, Iantaffi, & Gupta, 2007). This definition excludes activities involving power or pain such as battering or controlling a partner without consent. While BDSM/kink activities are usually sexual, they are not limited to sexual encounters. As such, BDSM may be integrated into individuals' lives in different ways, for example within sexual behaviors, daily interpersonal interactions, lifestyle choices, and/or personal or community identity.

For some, BDSM/kink is a focal point of their sexuality, such that their experiences as a sexual being are organized around this part of their sexual identity (Galupo, Henise, & Davis, 2014; Galupo, Mitchell, Gryniewicz, & Davis, 2014). Based on this, BDSM/kink has been recently conceptualized as a sexual orientation (Gemberling, Cramer, & Miller, 2015). Typically, sexual orientation refers to the gender of one's preferred partner in relationship to one's own gender (e.g., same- or other-sex attracted). However, it is possible that people may be oriented to specific dynamics in a sexual context. In this sense,

expressions of a BDSM sexual orientation would revolve around a particular power dynamic: engaging in behaviors that generate a certain power dynamic, experiencing attraction towards acts with a certain power dynamic, and adopting an identity that conveys a certain power dynamic.

(Gemberling et al., 2015, p. 59)

Similarly, van Anders (2015) has attempted to integrate current conceptualizations of sexual orientation and human sexuality into a single paradigm, the Sexual Configurations Theory. In an

effort to move beyond sexual orientation, this theory conceptualizes sexuality as a set of parameters, each consisting of sexual identity, sexual orientation, and sexual behavior (van Anders, 2015). For example, the gender/sex parameter may include a sexual identity as bisexual, a general attraction to all genders, and sexual encounters with men and women. Van Anders (2015) proposed that BDSM sexuality may function similarly as another parameter, such that an individual identifies as kinky, is attracted to eroticized pain and/or power play, and engages in BDSM behaviors. Sexual identity, sexual orientation, and sexual behaviors exist simultaneously, and independently, within the various parameters of an individual's sexuality (van Anders, 2015).

Research regarding BDSM/kink sexuality is on the rise (Simula, 2019). There is emerging evidence to suggest individuals who engage in BDSM/kink sexuality experience stigma and discrimination. Generally, it is hypothesized that a lack of cultural awareness and understanding of BDSM/kink sexuality limits practitioners' disclosure of this aspect of their sexual lives due to feared consequences. These concerns may be warranted, as discrimination against people with BDSM/kink sexuality has been documented in the workplace (Meeker, 2013), in courtrooms (Ridinger, 2006), and in interpersonal contexts (Wright, 2006). Perceived stigma against BDSM/kink sexuality has also been linked to feelings of guilt and shame, as well as thoughts of suicide among some members of BDSM/kink communities (Roush, Brown, Mitchell, & Cukrowicz, 2016).

BDSM/kink sexuality deviates from the traditional sexual script by the inclusion of consensual erotic behaviors that involve the manipulation of pain and/or power. What differentiates BDSM/kink from sexual assault is that BDSM/kink is consensual and sexual assault is not. Both BDSM/kink and sexual assault might involve restraining someone or striking



someone or causing pain, but one is consensual and the other is not. Understanding how consent is negotiated in BDSM/kink encounters could provide additional information about how individuals can negotiate sexual consent (Beres & MacDonald, 2015).

Recent research suggests consent may be negotiated more explicitly and may be more central to sexual and romantic relationships among individuals who practice BDSM/kink sexuality (Beres & MacDonald, 2015; Pitagora, 2013; Simula, 2019). Evidence of the centrality of consent to BDSM/kink practice can be found in both observational and phenomenological studies of individuals in this population. Additionally, consent plays a prominent role in various models of BDSM/kink sexuality put forth by those within BDSM/kink communities.

In a phenomenological study of BDSM/kink sexuality, Taylor and Ussher (2001) interviewed 24 self-identified sadomasochist individuals to understand how they defined their own sexuality. In addition to other factors, consent played a central role in their construction of BDSM/kink sexuality before, during, and after engaging in BDSM/kink behavior. Specifically, participants described the careful construction of BDSM/kink experiences, or scenes, via the explicit negotiation of limits before initiating any activity. Participants used such explicit negotiation of consent to differentiate their experiences of BDSM/kink sexuality from sexual assault (Taylor & Ussher, 2001). Prescene negotiations were the focus of an observational study in which researchers documented scene negotiations at various BDSM/kink events (Kaak, 2016). Several distinct topics of conversation were identified in which aspects of the BDSM/kink activity were negotiated, including the types of props or behaviors, the location of those behaviors on the body, personal limits and boundaries, and how to end the scene when someone wanted to stop (Kaak, 2016).

Beres and MacDonald (2015) interviewed five heterosexual women with BDSM experience. These women emphasized consent as central to their BDSM relationships, both in terms of verbal discussions about consent, and also in terms of being “in tune” with their partners. Their stories revealed a contrast between the explicit negotiation of consent before a BDSM encounter, and the implicit communication of consent during the encounter (Beres & MacDonald, 2015).

There are several models of BDSM/kink practice promulgated by individuals in BDSM/kink communities (Williams, Thomas, Prior, & Chistensen, 2014). As outlined by Williams and colleagues (2014), two models—Safe, Sane, and Consensual (SSC), and Risk Aware Consensual Kink (RACK)—have been used most often to structure BDSM/kink sexuality within communities. The authors themselves also introduced a third a model, Caring, Communication, Consent, and Caution (4 C’s). Importantly, while the details may vary, all three models include consent as a pillar of BDSM/kink sexuality.

In the Safe, Sane, and Consensual model, safe and sane are emphasized, in addition to consent, to contrast BDSM/kink sexuality from the pathological lineage of sadomasochism (SM) (Williams et al., 2014). Historically, medical models of SM characterized individuals interested in erotic pain or power as violent. Taylor and Ussher (2001) found evidence of the SSC model in participants’ narratives, as they made it a point to differentiate their own experience of BDSM/kink sexuality from violence or assault.

Some individuals, however, found the SSC model to exclude more intense BDSM/kink behaviors that may carry greater physiological and/or psychological risk. SSC was then modified, and safe was replaced with “risk aware” to account for a broader experience of BDSM/kink sexuality, in which any behavior involving pain and/or power is understood to

confer certain risks (Williams et al., 2014). Sane was also dropped from this model to even further remove BDSM/kink sexuality from the medical history of SM as a mental illness. Consent, however, remained a pillar, leading to the Risk Aware Consensual Kink model of BDSM/kink sexuality (Williams et al., 2014). Finally, the 4 C's model was introduced in order to account for the qualitative experience of BDSM/kink sexuality while retaining the central components of the prior models (i.e., consent and risk awareness/safety). Specifically, Williams et al. introduced caring and communication as interdependent constructs that reflect respect for others as an ethical position within BDSM/kink sexuality.

The emphasis on consent among individuals who engage in BDSM/kink sexuality does not mean that BDSM/kink communities are devoid of instances of sexual assault. In fact, recent conversations within online communities of people who practice BDSM/kink have turned toward addressing such violations that occur within BDSM/kink spaces (Barker, 2013a). In turn, scholars have begun to explore how instances of nonconsensual sexual acts are addressed in BDSM/kink communities. There appears to be a tendency to handle sexual assault “in-house,” such that information is shared among members in BDSM/kink communities and individuals who violate consent boundaries are marginalized from BDSM/kink activities (Holt, 2016; Taylor & Ussher, 2001). This may serve a protective function, to insulate BDSM/kink communities from further pathologization and discrimination from the normative culture. Unfortunately, while such tactics might protect individuals who are active with BDSM/kink communities from sexual assailants, they leave individuals who are new to or peripherally involved in BDSM/kink communities open for exploitation.

There is little research surrounding sexual assault in the context of BDSM/kink encounters and what, if any, relationship they have to the way consent is conceptualized within

BDSM/kink sexuality. Recent discussions in online communities of BDSM/kink individuals have attempted to approach this issue (Barker, 2013a). Emerging dialogue about the prevention of abuse in BDSM/kink spaces suggests that sexual consent may operate at different levels. Responsibility for consent, for example, simultaneously exists at the interpersonal, community, and cultural level (Barker, 2013b). Consent, as it is negotiated within a sexual relationship, can also be supported at the community level via education and awareness efforts. Furthermore, interpersonal and community consent practices occur in the context of cultural power dynamics related to demographic privilege.

In some BDSM/kink activities, consent is used to create a perception of power differences. Consent can be used to create perceived power differences in consensual non-consent scenes, in which both people agree to role-play rape or sexual assault. Consent can also be used implicitly, as in when one partner commands another to do something as part of a scene, but both people agreed to this dynamic before the scene began (Williams et al., 2014). According to the 4 C's model, these different ways to use consent suggests consent itself may operate in at least three ways in an interpersonal context. First, there is surface consent: a yes or a no. Second, there is consent for the scene including negotiated understandings of what the scene will involve and how it will end. Third, the authors describe *deep consent* as a type of ongoing awareness of or attention to consent throughout the scene. This may include attending to nonverbal cues, using empathy or perspective-taking, and debriefing after the scene ends (Williams et al., 2014). After the scene, some individuals engage in affection (e.g., cuddling) and/or attempts to restore a baseline relationship. This practice is called *aftercare* (Jozifkova, 2013).

### **The Present Study**

Limited research suggests consent may be more salient and more explicitly negotiated among individuals who express BDSM/kink sexuality than among individuals in the general population (Kaak, 2016). Consent is central to theoretical models of BDSM/kink sexuality (Williams et al., 2014), and participants emphasize the importance of consent when discussing their BDSM/kink sexuality in qualitative studies (Beres & MacDonald, 2015; Taylor & Ussher, 2001). However, the way in which consent is communicated in BDSM/kink sexual experiences remains unclear from the existing research. If, as recent research suggests, individuals in BDSM/kink communities have developed functional, explicit ways to negotiate consent, then knowing more about this process could be useful for informing anti-sexual assault messaging for the general population (Beres & MacDonald, 2015).

To date, researchers have explored the topic of consent within BDSM/kink sexuality from a theoretical perspective, finding consent salient to participants' conceptualizations of their own BDSM/kink sexuality. The present study expands current research efforts by investigating how consent is communicated in sexual encounters that involve BDSM/kink behaviors. To this end, individuals who engage in BDSM/kink sexuality were asked to describe how they negotiated consent within sexual encounters involving BDSM/kink sexuality, eroticized pain and/or power play. Prior research also suggests consent may change with repeated sexual encounters (Beres, 2014; Humphreys, 2004; Mitchell & Muehlenhard, 2019). Therefore, participants were asked about two recent sexual encounters: one in which they were engaging in a *new behavior* for the first time with a partner, and another in which they engaged in a *repeated behavior* that they had their partner had done together before,

Qualitative data were collected to facilitate an exploration of consent in BDSM/kink sexual encounters that focuses on the subjective, lived experiences of people who engage in

BDSM/kink sexuality. Participant data will be presented in the context of the theoretical literature regarding consent both within and beyond the traditional sexual script. The following research questions were addressed:

1. How is consent negotiated in BDSM/kink sexual encounters?
2. How, if at all, did approaches to consent change within an encounter? For example, did communication about consent change from prescene to during the scene to postscene?
3. How, if at all, did approaches to consent change across repeated encounters with the same partner?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Individuals were recruited for the present study using online sampling. We requested permission from online community moderators to post recruitment announcements (Appendix A) with a link to the online survey to various websites, as well as to various social networking forums and listservs (see Appendix B). Some of these online spaces are dedicated to individuals who have engaged in eroticized pain and/or power play (e.g., FetLife); others are open to individuals with general interests in human sexuality related topics (e.g., Sex and Psychology blog by Justin Lehmiller). Recruiting via FetLife, “a Social Network for the BDSM, Fetish & Kinky Community,” proved particularly challenging as the site is comprised of many smaller subgroups of users, organized by topic and location. We first searched for the most populous subgroups focusing on general BDSM interests in all 50 states. Groups dedicated to specific fetishes (e.g., cuckholding, nylon stockings, etc.) or classified/personal ads were not contacted for recruitment. Beginning with the most populous groups on our list, we then contacted the

moderator(s) to request permission to post the announcement. Of the 93 group moderators contacted, 35 (38%) did not respond to our message, and four (<1%) denied permission to post. Recruitment announcements were also posted to social networking sites that were not specific to any one particular group (e.g., Facebook).

We also formed a research advisory committee of stakeholders to assist with several elements of the research project, including recruitment. The creation of this committee was based on the principles of community-based participatory research. Our goal was to incorporate the perspectives of individuals connected to a BDSM/kink community throughout the research process (Lazarus et al., 2012). Ultimately, three individuals who identified as a part of a BDSM/kink community formed our advisory committee. They were given the survey link to be forward to individuals in their social networks who met the inclusion criteria. All participants were encouraged to forward and share the recruitment announcements with individuals who may be interested in taking the survey.

Recruitment language was intended to sample a diverse group of individuals with at least two sexual experiences that involved BDSM/kink. “BDSM” and “kink” are umbrella terms used generally to describe bondage, discipline, dominance and submission, and sadomasochism, or generally erotic behaviors that involve pain and/or power dynamics. These terms are used in communities of people who possess a wide range of identities, engage in a multitude of behaviors, and experience a variety of attractions. Conversely, there are individuals who engage in BDSM/kink behaviors but do not necessarily identify with those labels. To recruit individuals who did NOT identify as BDSM/kink, but nevertheless engaged in BDSM/kink behavior our recruitment announcement mentioned both “BDSM/Kink sexuality” AND “eroticized pain and/or power play.

The final sample ( $n = 164$ ) represented 37% of all individuals who had accessed the online survey ( $n = 440$ ), and excluded 246 individuals who did not answer questions about at least one sexual encounter and 30 individuals who resided outside the US or Canada. Of the 97 participants who indicated how they heard about the study, the largest group were recruited from FetLife (40%), followed by email/listservs (20%), research websites/blogs (18%), Facebook (13%), forwarded link from a friend (7%), and professors (2%). Given the low response rate, however, data regarding recruitment method may not be generalizable to the entire sample.

Demographic information for the final sample is located in Table 1.

Table 1

*Demographic Information*

	N (164)	%
<b>Gender Identity<sup>a</sup></b>		
Woman	79	48.6
Man	71	43.3
Non-binary/Genderqueer/Genderfluid <sup>b</sup>	12	7.3
Trans*/transgender	6	3.7
No Answer	1	0.6
<b>Sexual Orientation<sup>a</sup></b>		
Straight/heterosexual	77	47.0
Bisexual	39	23.8
Pansexual	19	11.6
Queer <sup>b</sup>	12	7.3
Lesbian	7	4.3
Gay	4	2.4
Heteroflexible <sup>b</sup>	3	1.8
Asexual/demisexual	2	1.2
Something not listed	1	.06
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
European American/White	139	84.8
Biracial/Multiracial	9	5.5
African American/Black	4	2.4
Hispanic American/Latina/Latino/Latinx	3	1.8
Native American/American Indian/Alaskan Native	3	1.8
Asian American/Asian	2	1.2
No Answer	2	1.2

<sup>a</sup>Percentages do not total 100% because participants were allowed to select more than one identity.

<sup>b</sup>These responses were provided by participants who reported an identity not listed in the survey.



Table 2 demonstrates the diversity in participant's BDSM/kink desire and behavior, as well as their connection to a BDSM/kink community.

Table 2

*Diversity within Participants' BDSM/Kink Sexuality*

	N (164)	%
<b>Kink Desire</b>		
Does nothing for me	3	1.8
Take it or leave it	11	6.7
Prefer occasionally	61	37.2
Strongly prefer	69	42.1
Required for gratification	13	7.9
Something not listed	5	3.1
No answer	2	1.2
<b>Kink Behavior</b>		
Every time	7	4.3
Usually (90%)	37	22.6
Frequently (70%)	32	19.5
Sometimes (50%)	27	16.5
Occasionally (30%)	39	23.8
Rarely (<10%)	16	9.6
Never	2	1.2
Something not listed	4	2.4
<b>Involved in a BDSM/Kink Community</b>		
Highly involved	28	17.1
Somewhat/casually involved	94	57.3
Not involved	36	23.0
Something not listed	5	3.1
No Answer	1	0.6
<b>Part of a BDSM/Kink Community</b>		
Agree*	89	54.3
Neither Agree nor Disagree	17	6.4
Disagree*	54	32.9
No Answer	4	2.4
<b>Bond with a BDSM/Kink Community</b>		
Agree*	79	48.2
Neither Agree nor Disagree	34	20.7
Disagree*	48	29.3
No Answer	3	1.8

\*Includes *Strongly [Dis]Agree*, *Somewhat [Dis]Agree*, and *[Dis]Agree* responses

## Survey

Participants were first directed to a welcome page, which welcomed potential participants to the study—“Welcome to our study!—and which summarized key points from the information statement (e.g., “this survey is anonymous”; “you can quit anytime, and you can skip questions you don't want to answer”). The next page contained the more detailed information statement (Appendix C), which informed them of their rights as participants, including their right to informed consent and the voluntary, anonymous nature of the survey. Additionally, participants were informed that they can click “No Answer” or write “Not Applicable” for every question contained in the survey.

After answering demographic questions, participants were prompted to think about two recent sexual encounters that involved BDSM/kink sexuality and/or eroticized pain or power play:

In this survey, you will be asked about TWO sexual encounters involving eroticized pain and/or power play:

- A “NEW-BEHAVIOR” encounter, where you and another person did a sexual behavior together for the first time.
- A “REPEATED-BEHAVIOR” encounter, where you did a sexual behavior that you and the other person had done together multiple times before.

The two situations could have involved the same or different people.

Participants were then directed to answer questions about each of these encounters. The order of questions was counterbalanced such that 51% ( $n = 84$ ) of participants answered questions about a new-behavior encounter first and a repeated-behavior encounter second, and

49% ( $n = 80$ ) of participants answered questions about a repeated-behavior encounter first and a new-behavior encounter second.

For each type of encounter (i.e., the new- and repeated-behavior encounters), participants answered questions about details of the encounter, their own and their partners' feelings about the behaviors in the encounter, and how those feelings were communicated and inferred. We consulted with our research advisory committee throughout survey development. We chose to ask participants how they and their partner knew whether the behavior was "OK with" each other rather than how they and their partners asked for "consent." In doing so, we wanted to avoid any legal connotations associated with the word consent. Additionally, many individuals regard the word consent as irrelevant to their ongoing relationships, despite negotiating willingness to have sex with their partner (Beres, 2014). We wanted to capture such negotiation among people who may not relate to the word *consent*. Finally, consent is portrayed narrowly in the popular media and in sex education programming as requiring an enthusiastic, verbal yes. We did not want participants' responses to be limited to answers that would have fit such narrow consent scripts. Thus, we first asked participants whether or not they were "OK with" trying the new behavior and whether or not they were "OK with" doing the behavior that they had done together before. Then we asked them how they communicated whether or not they were OK with the behaviors to their partner throughout the encounter:

New: "*What, if anything, did you do or say [BEFORE, DURING, OR AFTER THE ENCOUNTER] to let your partner know how you felt about trying the new behavior?*"

Repeated: “*What, if anything, did you do or say [BEFORE, DURING, OR AFTER THE ENCOUNTER] to let your partner know how you felt about doing the repeated behavior?*”

Participants were then asked whether their partner was “OK with” the new- and repeated-behavior, and how their partner let them know this. Participants were asked separate questions about four time points in the encounter: before, as the encounter was beginning, during, and after the encounter. They were also asked if there were “OTHER ways you knew how your partner felt” about engaging in the behavior.

The questions above were designed to capture a broad range of experiences, as well as to minimize imposing researchers’ assumptions on participants’ answers. For example, by including the words “*do or say,*” we hoped to capture *both* nonverbal and verbal communication. However, we also tried to avoid language that suggested *specific* forms of communication. For example, we avoided saying, “How did you ask for consent?” To minimize our own assumptions in the questions, we included the words “If anything,” to convey that we understood participants may not have had the experience described in the question. We hoped to make them feel comfortable if their answer was “nothing.” Finally, by asking about communication at various time points across an encounter, we hoped to convey that we were interested in communication whenever it occurred, not just immediately before a specific sexual behavior happened.

In the last section of the survey, participants answered a series of open-ended questions comparing the two encounters. They were asked to describe how, if at all, the encounters were similar or different. They were asked if communication during sexual encounters changes depending on the situation and what factors might influence communication across sexual

contexts. Finally, to investigate what, if any, scripts are used in BDSM/kink sexual encounters, we asked participants to describe how encounters that involve BDSM/kink sexuality and/or pain or power play “usually go,” as if they were telling this to a friend:

*“Suppose a friend of yours is interested in exploring eroticized pain and/or power play. They ask you how such encounters usually go. How would you respond?”*

Framing this question in terms of giving a friend advice was designed to avoid socially desirable responding about any potential norms or scripts within BDSM/kink contexts.

Finally, participants also had the opportunity to express any feedback or concerns about the survey or their answers via open-ended comment boxes available at the bottom of every online page of the survey (Appendix D). Following completion of the survey, participants were directed to a debriefing statement (Appendix E).

### **Thematic Analysis**

Participant data regarding the way in which consent is communicated and inferred in the context of BDSM/kink sexual encounters were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a recursive process that requires the researchers to read the data, discuss the themes, re-read the data in the context of the proposed themes, and revise the themes as needed to capture what participants have said. The research team included the graduate student in Clinical Psychology, the professor of Psychology and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, and several undergraduate research assistants.

The research team used a grounded theory approach, in which the data were not coded for particular, a priori themes. Rather, the data were read with the intent to understand how participants communicated and inferred consent in a recent sexual encounter involving eroticized pain and/or power play, as well as differences and similarities across encounters involving new

and repeated behaviors. When conceptualizing the way in which participants communicated consent, we attended to both overall approaches to consent, as well as specific techniques and/or strategies used to communicate or infer consent in the context of the current data, as well as themes mentioned in the literature or identified in previous studies. Altogether, themes were used to identify sexual scripts (i.e., broad norms and expectations) within BDSM/kink encounters.

## Results

### Overview

We identified multiple sexual scripts regarding the communication of consent within the context of BDSM/kink sexual encounters. These scripts varied as a function of several factors. First, participants described communicating and inferring consent differently across three phases of BDSM/kink encounters: *prescene*, *scene*, and *postscene*. Second, participants described communicating and inferring consent differently in new and repeated encounters with the same person. Furthermore, the way consent was communicated within the three phases depended on whether or not it was a new or repeated encounter. Thus, there were some scripts associated with a particular phase that appeared more applicable to new than to repeated encounters; these distinctions will be noted in the descriptions that follow.

### Negotiating Consent as a Function of the Phase of the Encounter

**An overview of changes within the encounter: Prescene, within-scene, and postscene communication.** In general, participants described negotiating consent across three distinct phases of their recent sexual encounters involving BDSM/kink behavior. *Prescene communication*: Before the BDSM/kink behavior took place, participants described negotiating initial consent in a prescene discussion or exchange. *Within-scene communication*: Following this, the sexual encounter involving BDSM/kink behaviors (the scene) took place. This was

sometimes referred to as “play” in which the participants suspended their disbelief and enacted the roles and behaviors previously discussed in the prescene exchange. *Postscene*

*communication*: Once the BDSM/kink activity was over, participants described engaging in postscene discussions or behaviors to debrief after the scene and/or engage in aftercare.

Sometimes postscene discussions occurred immediately following the scene, but they also occurred at other points between sexual encounters. Table 3 provides a summary of consent communication across these phases.

Table 3

*Summary of Typical Communication About Consent as a Function of the Phase of the Encounter*

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**Prescene Communication**

Mostly verbal communication focused on establishing initial consent, particularly in first-time encounters

- Establishing requests/interests and limits/boundaries

- Discussing logistics of desired behavior

- Establishing safe words or signals to use during the scene

Can involve erotic communication (e.g., fantasy sharing) and dom/sub dynamics (e.g., commands), particularly with multiple encounters

**Within-Scene Communication**

Communication is largely nonverbal and is focused on monitoring for ongoing consent

- Can involve verbal questions and answers and/or safe words

- Nonverbal cues include vocalizations, signs of arousal, idiosyncratic cues, and active participation

Dom/sub dynamics involved

- Dom more often asks/checks in, sub more often answers

- Dom listens for safe words, sub utters safe words if necessary

- Dom actively monitors or maintains awareness of the sub’s nonverbal cues

**Postscene Communication**

Explicit verbal communication

- Focuses on reactions to the scenes, expectations for the future, and any boundary crossings that occurred

Sometimes includes nonverbal behaviors (e.g., cuddling)

Can take place immediately following the scene, or in casual communication between encounters

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The prescene phase generally involved explicit communication about what was OK or not OK. Typically, in this phase, the participants did not make assumptions about what was OK or not OK until consent was communicated. They took an *opt-in* approach to consent. In this approach, consent is determined via an affirmative response, some positive action (verbal or nonverbal) to communicate consent for a particular behavior. This has been referred to elsewhere as a “yes means yes” approach to consent. During the scene, communication tended to change to monitoring ongoing consent, either verbally or nonverbally. Participants tended to adopt an *opt-out* approach to consent, such that continued consent is assumed unless otherwise specified: a “no means no” approach. Afterwards, in the postscene, participants described returning to explicit communication including conversation and overt behaviors to communicate their feelings about the encounter. As one participant explained,

*most all of the communication about what is ok or not ok for us takes place before hand and then after it is over. Beforehand it is more about guidelines of what we want from the experience. Once the scene starts especially when she is in the Dominant role things flow.*  
(#291, man, heterosexual, switch)

This participant’s description of the shift from explicit, initial discussions of consent, to letting things “flow”, and back to explicit communication after the scene ends is typical of BDSM/kink sexual encounters described by participants in this study. In another example this dynamic was explicit between partners:

*We have a general, explicit policy that we will gain verbal consent to begin an encounter, but will not ask for continued consent (other than feedback) during the encounter in order to escalate things without pausing. We use safe words and also check in before each encounter about how we would like to proceed (E.g., saying things like "I want you*



*to continue without asking for consent. I will tell you when you do something I do not like.*") (#346, woman, heterosexual, switch).

The following sections will delineate the specific ways in which consent is negotiated across each of the three phases of a BDSM/kink sexual encounter.

**Prescene negotiation of initial consent.** Prescene exchanges between participants and their partners centered on establishing initial consent for the forthcoming BDSM/kink behaviors. Participants described negotiating the behaviors to be included in the scene by discussing their *requests/interests* and *limits/boundaries*. Prescene negotiations also covered the *logistics* of the scene, as well as *safe words/signals* to be used within the scene. Participants described using *verbal* and *nonverbal communication* to negotiate these topics; they also indicated that prescene negotiations can occur within the context of *eroticized communication* and *dominant/submissive (dom/sub) dynamics*.

**Requests/interest and limits/boundaries.** Participants frequently described negotiating the BDSM/kink behaviors both they and their partner were interested in, as well as the behaviors they were not willing to engage in. Requests/interests and limits/boundaries were often discussed in a single conversation. This conversation varied in style. Often it began with a general expression of interest, and then moved into more detailed requests or limits. One woman explained, "*I had expressed that I liked rougher sex*" before the encounter, and as it was beginning she "*told him what he could or couldn't do. If I wanted my hair pulled I let him know. If I wanted anything else I would tell him.*" (#52, woman, heterosexual, n/a). Another participant said her partner first expressed that "*she wanted to be completely dominated before having sex*" and that she and her partner "*had talked about what we both expected out of it (choking, spanking, and holding her down)*" prior to the encounter. Just before the encounter, the

participant “*just asked if at that time she was interested in [being dominated]*” then confirmed “*what expectations she had from me*” (#30, woman, lesbian, n/a).

In other contexts, the prescene discussions were more formal face-to-face meetings, as in the case of this participant’s prescene exchange leading up to a three-way BDSM/kink encounter:

*During dinner the three of us discussed likes, dislikes, curiosities, hard and soft limits. For instance, I informed her open defiance was a hard limit for me and would end our encounter. She told me she had a previous bad anal sex experience, and very much wanted to have a positive anal experience with me.* (#184, man, heterosexual, dominant/owner)

Other couples generated lists of interests and limits, such as “*a want/will/won't list of various kinks and fetishes we knew about*” (#76, non-binary, bisexual, beginner) and discussed them together. One couple constructed their lists independently at first and then discussed them together after they were completed:

*We had a discussion about limits. Things that were ok, maybe ok if discussed, and never ok. We created a list of interests and asked each other, in person. Before each time we renegotiate if needed. Gave a verbal ‘yes’* (#240, woman, bisexual, switch).

**Logistics.** Many participants used the prescene negotiation to discuss the logistics of the upcoming Scene. One participant explained, “*We spent an hour beforehand talking exactly about what we wanted and how we wanted to do it*” (#17, man, bisexual, respectful dom). Depending on the particular BDSM/kink behaviors, participants described varying degrees of logistical detail in the prescene negotiation: “*We discussed the process before we started including doing some preliminary prep work like giving myself and enema, and laying a towel on the bed to reduce cleanup efforts*” (#262, man, heterosexual, switch). Often, discussing the logistics of a

BDSM/kink scene was intertwined with the discussion of requests/interests and limits/boundaries. For example,

*“The most recent new kink we introduced was wax play, which I introduced outside of the scene first. Initially [my partner was] cautious and we discussed limits and boundaries (using the wax first on myself to test temperature, buying low heat candles)” (#43, woman, lesbian, domme).*

One participant explained his limits were informed by the logistics of a particular scene: *“I texted him everything I wanted to do. There was negotiation over the option of lite bondage, but I stated that would take too much time to prepare. He texted back saying he agreed” (#264, male gay, novice boy/submissive).* In these examples, participants referred to the mechanics of enacting particular behaviors (e.g., wax temperature in wax play and set-up time for bondage) when negotiating willingness with their partner.

**Safe words.** Participants also established specific words and/or signals to use within the scene to communicate their proximity to their own limits, often referred to as *safe words*. These words and systems could also include an expected, corresponding behavior change from the individual’s partner. Saying the word could simply mean a boundary had been reached and their partner should stop, or inversely, in the absence of the word activity should continue. For example, one participant said to her partner, *“The safe word is socks. I’m ready. No matter what I say, unless I say the safe word keep going” (#158, woman, bisexual, submissive).* Another couple *“had code words such as (computer desktop) which meant we weren’t comfortable” (#112, man, heterosexual, n/a).*

Many other participants used a traffic light system, explained by one participant below:

*“We used the light system, so he would periodically check in and ask how I was doing and I'd give him a light color (green for continue, yellow to slow up a bit, and red to stop) to indicate how to proceed.”* (#270, genderfluid, pansexual, sub-leaning switch)

Some participants used more complex systems that included a combination of verbal and nonverbal indicators of desired behavior agreed to by both individuals:

*We also agreed on using a combo of a traffic light and tapping system for signaling we wanted a behavior to change or stop (tapping or red to stop, yellow or a couple light taps to slow or not go further).* (#76, non-binary, bi, beginner)

In this case, the participant and their partner had both a verbal and nonverbal means of signaling two different types of behavior change.

***Verbal and nonverbal communication in prescene negotiations.*** Participants described using verbal and nonverbal means to communicate about the prescene topics described above. Generally, in new-behavior encounters, the communication was explicitly verbal. The depth and breadth of the conversation varied. Some participants reported that they *“discussed everything in finite detail,”* (#421, male, heterosexual, sub), while others indicated they *“talked briefly about what she wanted to have done”* (#269, man, bisexual, switch). For others, their prescene discussions took place throughout the course of their relationship, such as *“We have general conversations about what pain feels good and bad”* (#278, man, heterosexual, partial sadist). Another participant explained, *“We have had many conversations over the years, especially when sex is NOT going to happen in the very near future. We have talked specifically about “would it be okay if I try XYZ next time?” on both sides.* (#307, woman, pansexual, n/a).

Nonverbal indicators of consent in prescene negotiations occurred almost exclusively in the context of repeated-behavior encounters. Participants indicated that they communicated their

consent for particular behaviors by “[bringing] *out the restraints and toys with a lot of excitement*” (#291, male, heterosexual, switch) or being the one who “*brought the supplies*” (#4, woman, bisexual, experimental). Other times they used nonverbal communication in the form of routines:

*We had established "play protocols" which involved her bringing me the toys she wished to have used on her. I would then confirm that those were the items she was interested in. I would place out any items that I was interested in adding to the play, she had the opportunity to remove them from the table at this time. If she allowed them to stay on the table, they would be added to the play scene.* (#208, man, heterosexual, dominant/primal)

Some participants incorporated nonverbal behaviors during the prescene phase in new-behavior encounters, but not to the exclusion of verbal discussion. For example, one participant indicated that they and their partner “*talked about interest in trying it, watched porn together about it, [and] talked about safe words*” (#111, woman, bisexual, switch) while they were negotiating consent before a particular BDSM/kink scene.

***Eroticization of prescene negotiations.*** Participants, particularly in repeated-behavior encounters, sometimes described their prescene negotiations as erotic. For example, one couple shared their requests and interests with each other in a way that incorporated flirting, reminiscing about previous sexual encounters, and sexual text messaging: “*We flirted and teased one another verbally and via text messages, mostly communicating shared fantasies and reliving past sex.*

*She flirted with me, said what she'd 'like to do to' me”* (#2, woman, lesbian, kinky switch).

Another participant indicated his partner “*knew [cuckholding] turned me on a LOT because we shared the fantasy verbally many times* *We've whispered our fantasies to each other usually as foreplay before other sexual encounters.* (#14, man, heterosexual, dominant).

*Dom/sub dynamics in prescene negotiations.* Occasionally, prescene flirtations took on dominant/submissive dynamics, particularly in repeated-behavior encounters. For example, one dyad used online messaging to plan a scene to occur at a conference they were both attending: “We discussed it repeatedly. I teased her playfully about her upcoming punishment session for several days” (#110, man, heteroflexible, master). Others incorporated dom/sub dynamics in prescene negotiations occurring face-to-face. In these cases, the pair were still establishing what would occur in the upcoming scene, but they were doing so in a way that incorporated dominant and submissive behaviors such as commands:

*He would tell me to go the dungeon, to strip, and wait for Him. then He would come to the dungeon and inform me of the scene we were going to do, and ask if I was ready and thank me for my submission. (#185, woman, bi, submissive & little)*

In this example, the participant was commanded to do some behaviors (go to the dungeon, strip, and wait) and also given the chance to indicate if other planned behaviors were OK or not OK (“ask if I was ready”).

Prescene negotiations appear to occur on a spectrum ranging from formal explicit discussions (most often in new-behavior encounters), to flirty/erotic fantasy sharing, to no prescene negotiations at all (most often in repeated-behavior encounters). There were rare examples, however, of participants foregoing prescene negotiations in new-behavior encounters. Participants who did not engage in prescene negotiation for new behaviors almost always had an established sexual history with the other person: That is, it was a *new behavior* but *not a new partner*. For example, one participant described a sexual encounter with someone they were sexual with before. This participant said “*nothing*” prior to the scene, but rather “*reached my hand up to her throat and I could feel her respond positively and encouragingly*” (#5, man,

heterosexual, n/a). In this case, there was no prescene discussion; the participant initiated a new BDSM/kink behavior and observed his partner's reaction to determine if it was OK or not OK.

**Consent within the scene.** Participants described two types of consent negotiations within the scene itself: ongoing consent for behaviors discussed in the prescene negotiation, and initial consent for new behaviors not previously discussed. Participants identified both the specific verbal and nonverbal techniques for communicating and inferring both types of consent within the scene. Verbal techniques included *asking/answering questions* and *using safe words*; nonverbal strategies involved *nonverbal vocalizations, physiological arousal, idiosyncratic cues,* and *active participation*. Participants also described their overall process or approach to determining consent as ranging from *passive awareness* of consent cues to *active monitoring* of ongoing consent. For many participants, their approach to consent within the scene was directly linked to the role they took (i.e., dominant or submissive).

**Verbal and nonverbal communication.** To determine ongoing consent regarding behaviors discussed in prescene negotiations, many participants described talking to one another during the scene. Many participants asked their partners about their state of being, and their partners replied or volunteered such information independently from a question. For example, one participant asked her partner "*How are you doing? On a scale of 1-10 where is your pain level?*" (#203, woman, heterosexual, domme). Another described their partner's response "*She confirmed with a Yes, each time when I periodically asked her if she was still 'okay'*" (#253, man, heterosexual, dominant). In many cases, the individual taking a dominant role in the encounter asked questions or checked in and the individual taking a subordinate role responded.

There were no examples of participants uttering safe words during the encounters they reported to us. One participant described how her partner created an opportunity for her to use

their safe word: “*he put his hand on my cheek, looked me in the eyes, and said, ‘I am going to hit you now.’ And then gave a really long pause for me to use a safe word if needed*” (#408, woman, heterosexual, switch). Other systems, such as the traffic light system, were described more regularly in the sample—for example, “*I encouraged him to give me color feedback throughout and he did*” (#304, woman, pansexual, switch). Again, in most cases the individual taking a dominant role listened for safe words or inquired about their partner’s status using the established system, while the individual taking a subordinate role delivered the information.

Participants also described relying on nonverbal communication to communicate and infer ongoing consent for previously agreed-to behaviors. Many participants reported that their partner could have known they were OK with a particular behavior because of their own physiological arousal. Use of physiological signs to communicate consent spanned gender identity and genitalia. For example, “*I had an erection during the entire encounter signaling to her how much I was enjoying myself*” (#8, man, heterosexual, submissive) and “*I was wet, which to him and myself indicated I was enjoying the behavior*” (#15, transman, queer, sub/slave). Some participants mentioned their orgasm and proximity to orgasm as ways their partner could have known they were OK with the behaviors: “*He is generally aware of when I orgasm and when I am getting close, so he may have noticed that I came closer to/reached orgasm when he was doing those things*” (#284, woman, heterosexual, masochist).

Participants reported relying on nonverbal “*pleasurable sounds*” (#67, woman, heterosexual, n/a) to communicate and infer consent during the scene. Sometimes to the exclusion of verbal communication, “*I don't say much in the affirmative, maybe "yes" but I am vocal with happy moans*” (#127, woman, heterosexual, submissive). More often nonverbal cues were used in combination with other means of communication, such as “dirty” talk:



*We'd often play back and forth with dirty vocalizations ("Tell me you're my slut" / "I'm your little slut", "Tell me what you want me to do" / "Hold me down and make me cum").*

*I also relied extensively on her body language and nonverbal sounds (#250, man, heterosexual, n/a).*

and/or physiological cues:

*I also relied extensively on her body language and nonverbal sounds. Tying her up, blindfolding her, and holding a vibrator to her clitoris resulted in pretty predictable gasps, moans, panting, shuddering, and whole-body spasms. (#250, M, het, n/a)*

Using a combination of verbal and nonverbal methods to both communicate and infer consent was common within the dataset. In new-behavior encounters, active participation was a commonly used nonverbal signal of consent. One participant explained that she knew her partner was OK with the behaviors because *"they continued to participate in the making and shaping of the fantasy that we were participating in"* (#317, woman, pansexual, switch). Another indicated her partner could infer her own consent because *"I played along, as in I was an active participant in the wrestling"* (#194, woman, heterosexual, sub). In repeated encounters with the same person, participants said their partners could rely on their unique body language to infer consent: *"He's familiar with my body language if I like something or not"* (#92, woman, heterosexual, n/a) and *"he reads my body language very well and usually knows before I do that somethings on my mind and/or need to talk"* (#189, woman, heterosexual, switch). Prior experience with their partners facilitated the use of idiosyncratic nonverbal cues to communicate and infer consent within BDSM/kink scenes.

***Approach to determining consent within the scene.*** Participants attention to consent within a BDSM/kink scene ranged from actively monitoring to maintaining awareness of consent

cues. Some individuals reported routinely engaging in periodic check-ins during their scenes, using the verbal and nonverbal strategies described previously—for example, “*We use a thumbs up/down system and check in every few minutes. Constant communication so boundaries are not overstepped*” (#240, woman, bisexual, sadomasochist switch). For others, this type of communication was limited to unfamiliar behaviors. One participant explained that when using a strap-on with her partner for the first time, “[I] Asked: *Less pressure, more pressure, give me feedback. I wanted to do it, but was inexperienced and needed lots of verbal feedback from him*” (#189, woman, heterosexual, switch). Others described paying close attention to consent cues, “*I watch my partner closely for any sign of displeasure*” (#248, man, heterosexual, daddy/dom), or knowing that their partner pays attention to them, “*he takes good notice in my body language. And he also listens to me carefully in case I safe word at any point*” (# 358, woman, heterosexual, sub). One participant explained that in the absence of verbal check-ins they maintain awareness of other consent cues:

*very little is said during the encounter, however we do listen for the particular moans the other makes, we are aware as to sounds are for pain and pleasure. We also pay attention to body language, is the person moving closer to ease the tension of the pull, or pulling away to intensify it.* (#262, man, heterosexual, switch)

In addition to ongoing consent, participants also reported determining consent for new behaviors initiated within the scene itself. Sometimes participants and their partners would ask for a particular experience, such as “*she had asked me to choke her during sex and I did*” (#292, trans FTM, queer, n/a) or “*telling him that i wanted him to have to give me permission to cum*” (#303, woman, bi, sub). At other times behavior, such as choking, was initiated nonverbally during the scene, “*We we're having sex on his bed in missionary, and I put his hand on my neck,*

*indicating I wanted him to choke me, and he did”* (#13, woman, bisexual, sub/masochist). Once initiated, participants tended to engage in similar processes for determining ongoing consent:

*first time choking her was communicated non-verbally during the encounter--I briefly put slight pressure on her neck and she clearly responded with increased arousal, then later in the encounter move my hand to her neck while I was fucking her--and verbally afterwards.* (#275, woman, queer, top/switch)

This case exemplifies a common pattern: a new behavior was initiated nonverbally during the scene, consent cues were monitored at the time of initiation, and the interaction was verbally discussed after the encounter.

***Dom/sub dynamics in consent communication within the scene.*** Participants discussed their approach to consent within the BDSM/kink scene as being connected to the dominant and submissive roles they played. In many cases, participants who took a dominant role described how they inferred consent in greater detail than in how they communicated consent. The inverse was true for participants who took a submissive role. Several participants made this distinction explicit:

*As the Domme, it is primarily my responsibility to check in before, during, and after the scene to make sure everything is going well and no boundaries are being crossed* (#43, woman, lesbian, domme).

*I would presume with hindsight that my consent was implied by taking the active role.*  
(#97, man, heterosexual, dominant)

Participants suggested the dynamic of doms seeking consent and subs giving or withholding consent is connected to the general behavioral expectations of doms vs. subs. For

example, one participant explained that the submissive individual sets the limits to the encounter because they are the one receiving the action:

*I think because I take a submissive role and am the receiver of the pain/power play, it is up to me to establish the boundaries of play. My physical and mental limitations are going to be reached more easily than those of my dominant. My dominant waits for my cues as to what behaviors are or are not okay to engage in, and generally does not initiate new behaviors. (#13, woman, bisexual, submissive/masochist)*

Both doms and subs explained that, as the person performing the behavior, the dominant partner could stop if they did not consent to something:

*I was in charge and i wouldnt do something im not into. (#33, man, heterosexual, n/a)*

*As a Dominant, if I don't want to be doing a particular activity, I'm not gonna do it!*

*(#110, man, heteroflexible, master)*

*As the Master, if he didn't want to do it or had mixed feelings about it, I guarantee he wouldn't have done it or we would have had a conversation about it before he agreed to do it. (#384, genderfluid, pansexual, owned slave)*

The examples above suggest the dominant individual's consent is deterministic; their consent is implied by engaging in the BDSM/kink behavior. The submissive partner's consent, on the other hand, is ascertained.

This consent dynamic can be problematic when the submissive partner introduces a behavior that makes the dominant partner uncomfortable. In one such example, the participant explained they felt ambivalent about engaging in dominant behavior during this particular scene, *"mostly due to the fact that she's been super bratty recently. She keeps saying she wants to be [dommed] but then will do everything in her power to resist it"* (#129, non-binary, attracted to

women, switch). During the encounter, their submissive partner appeared to assume that bratty behavior was OK with the dominant participant and said “*Are you even trying to top me?*” The participant indicated to us that their partner “*was joking and flirty but I took it too hard.*” As the dominant, once the participant became uncomfortable they stopped the scene: “*We stopped in the middle because I felt upset or like I wasn't doing well enough.*” However, the behavior they were uncomfortable with (brattiness) had already occurred; the dominant individual’s limit had already been reached. They then “*Re initiated sex, had relatively vanilla sex (which I know isn't her favorite but is what I needed).*” In this example, and in many examples in the dataset, the dominant partner’s consent was assumed and both participants focused on the subordinate individual’s consent (either communicating or inferring). However, on this occasion, the dom/sub consent dynamics appeared to result in the submissive individual crossing the dominant individual’s boundaries.

**Postscene communication.** Many participants described postscene communication with their partner. Participants reported discussing their *reactions* to the scene, *expectations* for future scenes, and any *boundary crossings* that took place. The type of postscene discussion varied and included conversation immediately following the scene, *casual communication between encounters*, or *no postscene exchange* at all. Participants also described engaging in *nonverbal behaviors* after scenes, usually in combination with the verbal discussions mentioned above.

**Reactions, expectations, and boundary crossings.** In postscene discussions, participants often expressed how they felt about the scene, including what they liked and didn’t like. One participant said “*We discussed it. I let him know that it felt good... that I loved feeling powerless. out of control as I was being controlled*” (#12, woman, heterosexual, switch). For some, this was part of a typical encounter with their partner, “*We usually discuss things we loved, things that fell*

*flat, if anything we didn't enjoy happened, and what we would like more of - this happens after every single encounter*" (#43, woman, lesbian, domme). This often led into a discussion of expectations or desires for future encounters, "*We talked about what we would do next time differently, what we liked about this time, talked about every aspect*" (#30, woman, lesbian, n/a). Few participants described boundary crossings in the sexual encounters they reported to us yet many mentioned that after the scene would be the time to discuss any that did occur. In one instance, a limit was reached during a scene and the partners stopped for a mid-scene debriefing:

*There was a time when I hit a limit that I didn't know was there before. My partner called me "trash" during a scene and that triggered me, so we stopped and engaged in some after care (midplay care?) and processed it together. We decided not to use that word anymore during scenes and were fine continuing after that.* (#270, non-binary, pansexual, sub-leaning switch)

***Casual communication between encounters.*** Conversations about a scene sometimes occurred in-between sexual encounters but not immediately following them. For example, one participant indicated they know how their partner feels about cock and ball torture because "*She initiates conversation about it from time to time*" (#168, man, heterosexual, sub). Others expressed their feelings about an encounter in a flirtatious way between encounters or as foreplay for future encounters: "*She kept bringing it up to flirt and to initiate further sexual contact later on*" (#2, woman, lesbian, switch). For some participants, no formal postscene discussion took place. Generally this was in the context of repeated-behavior encounters, where "*it's common enough at this point that we don't need to discuss each time*" (#408, woman, heterosexual, switch) or "*Nothing out of the ordinary [was discussed]. He was happy I enjoyed myself*" (#460, man, gay, humiliation sub).

***Nonverbal postscene communication.*** Participants also described engaging in nonverbal behaviors following a scene, for example “*lots of hugs and snuggles for aftercare*” (#374, woman, bisexual, submissive). Sometimes nonverbal behaviors were combined with the discussions mentioned above, as in “*we discussed the scene and then decided to watch a movie for longer cuddles*” (#1, woman, heterosexual, switch) or “*She cuddled close and told me how it felt and how she'd like to do it again*” (#2, woman, lesbian, switch). For many participants, affectionate nonverbal behaviors after the scene functioned to both communicate and infer comfort with BDSM/kink behaviors that occurred previously. At least one participant suggested another purpose of such behaviors. This individual and his partner “*Engaged in comforting behavior to re-enter 'normal' interaction*” (#46, man, bisexual, physical sub). This participant appeared to be contrasting his interactions with his partner during the scene, which included BDSM/kink dynamics, with “normal” interactions before the scene. He further suggested that the purpose of postscene behavior was to return to prescene (non-BDSM/kink) dynamics.

### **Typical Changes in Consent Scripts Over Repeated Encounters**

The norms and expectations about the communication of consent in BDSM/kink encounters appeared to shift across multiple encounters with the same person. As their sexual relationships evolved over time, participants reported changes in the consent scripts associated with each phase of the encounter (prescene, scene, and postscene). Participants also described changes in their overall approach to consent within the encounter, an approach that was independent from the three phases, as their sexual relationships developed. Participants offered several explanations for these changes over the course of a relationship. A summary of these changes is provided in Table 4 below.

Table 4

*Summary of Typical Shifts in Consent Scripts Between New and Repeated Encounters*

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**Shifts in Expectations Associated with Phases of the Encounter**

Prescene

Communication is more flirtatious in repeated-behavior encounters

Greater use of heuristics and short-hand in repeated-behavior encounters

Scene

Reliance on idiosyncratic cues available in repeated-behavior encounters

Postscene

Less formal communication in repeated-behavior encounters

More nonverbal behaviors in repeated-behavior encounters

**Shifts in Overall Approach to Consent**

Opt-in approach with new encounters shifts to opt-out approach in repeated encounters

Communication is more thorough in new encounters;

more shorthand used in repeated encounters

**Why Consent Scripts Shift**

Partners developed routines with multiple encounters

Partners become more familiar with each other's preferences and boundaries with repeated encounters

Partners have figured out the logistics of their desired behaviors with repeated encounters

More careful communication about and enactment of any new behavior in both first-time and repeated encounters

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**Shifts in expectations for the three phases of an encounter.** Participant responses suggested that the three-phases described above (prescene, scene, postscene) remained present in repeated-behavior encounters with the same person. However, the norms and expectations, or scripts, associated with each phase change across multiple encounters. In a typical new-behavior encounter, consent is communicated via verbal discussion before the scene, monitored/maintained during the scene, and verbally discussed again after the scene. Over time,



these conversations become part of a larger pattern of interactions in which information from previous encounters informs subsequent encounters. Thus, with repeated encounters, the style of communication shifts within the three phases.

Over time with the same partner, prescene negotiations appear to become more flirtatious and couples begin to rely on heuristics and short-hand communication. Within the scene itself, partners can monitor each other's unique, idiosyncratic consent cues that they learned over repeated encounters. Finally, the type and style of postscene communication shifts. Participants reduce the amount of formal debriefing and begin to rely on nonverbal behaviors, and casual communication in-between encounters.

**Shifts in the overall approach to consent.** In addition to consent scripts associated with each phase of the BDSM/kink encounter, participants described overall approaches to consent that were not linked to a particular phase. These approaches mirrored those taken within each phase but were applicable to the entire encounter. Namely, overall approaches took one of the two forms of consent described previously: *opt-in* or *opt-out*. For example, this participant described an opt-in approach to consent: *"I asked if we could try this new thing outright and we had an in depth discussion before deciding if it was all good with both parties"* (#165, woman, bi, masochist). Other participants mentioned taking an overall opt-out approach: *"I always felt comfortable because he clearly expressed that if I didn't like anything to tell him"* (#52, woman, heterosexual, n/a), and *"I make it known beforehand that if I don't want to continue in a scene, I will make it abundantly clear verbally"* (#218, woman, heterosexual, sadomasochist).

Many participants indicated that their approach to consent shifted across multiple encounters with the same person. Consent shifted from an *opt-in* to an *opt-out* approach. Participants initially used an opt-in approach with a new partner or when engaging in a new

behavior with an established partner, then shifted to an opt-out approach with repeated behavior with the same person. The style of communication also shifted from *thorough to shorthand*. Participants began with in-depth discussions of their consent, and over time with the same person began to use shorthand means of communication.

In comparing new-behavior encounters with repeated-behavior encounters, several participants clearly outlined the shift from opt-in to opt-out:

*With the new behaviors we tend to have significantly more talking before, during and after. This way we know how the other person is doing and what we need to change when you have done the same/similar activities with the same person for over a decade verbal communication becomes less necessary as you have a better feel as to the threshold of pain and pleasure. (#262, man, heterosexual, switch)*

Another participant wrote,

*the repeated encounter was experienced while in a serious long term relationship, which made communication seem more effortless and fluid (like we could talk about it anytime and we already knew each other pretty well before starting it so we knew the other's sexual language and way of expressing desire, etc. The new encounter was with someone I had just started dating about 2 months before, and we still didnt know each other that well so the conversation was stiffer (but no less great and comfortable) and more like "lets talk about this right now, how do you feel, what else do you want?" (#196, woman, pansexual, sub)*

Participants suggested that the transition from opt-in to opt-out occurred based on establishing a relationship with the same person. For example, in new-behavior encounters, “*Knowing the other*

*partner less requires more formal and regular check ins” (#192, man, heterosexual, dom).*

Another participant explained,

*We feel comfortable with each other usually and since it is a repeated behavior that we both know we like, we don't feel a need to communicate about it. That's not to say we don't observe each others' bodies and body language. If we do not see enthusiastic interest in the action, we stop. She has asked me to not choke her at times and she knows I will comply immediately if she asks me to stop. So it's more about staying present in the moment and watching and paying attention to your partner's non-verbal cues when it's a repeated behavior than it is about using safe words. We do have a standing safe word though so if I say banana, she knows to stop. (#304, woman, pansexual, switch)*

The style of communication also shifted over the course of a relationship. Participants began with thorough, complex communication and transitioned to more efficient shorthand with multiple encounters. This transition was independent from the approach to consent. For example, one participant explained that they always communicated explicitly with their partner, but the style of communication changed:

*Our negotiations remained as explicit as they had before but they became shorter in duration as we became more comfortable with each other. We didn't say anything specific before our encounters that we hadn't said before. Usually we would say something like 'I love you and I want to tie you up fuck you.' (#187, non-binary, queer, queer non-linear switch)*

In another example, a participant explained that in a first-time encounter, he and his partner “talked through the scenario in detail prior to meeting” (#192, man, heterosexual, dom). In a repeated encounter, which he described as involving “regular sexual activity with this specific

person,” both he and his partner used several shorthand phrases: “*She initiated through touch and asking, ‘wanna do naked stuff?’ I asked if she wanted me to be mean?She said, ‘I want you to be mean daddy.’*” The meaning of “naked stuff” and “being mean” are known to the participant and his partner and require no negotiation between the two of them.

**Why consent scripts change with repeated encounters.** Participants offered several explanations for why their overall approach to consent shifts across multiple encounters with the same person. *Establishing routines, acquiring knowledge* about the particular BDSM/kink behavior and/or the other person, and being *careful with new behaviors* were all mentioned by participants as reasons communication can change over the course of a relationship. These reasons were not mutually exclusive, and several participants described the way they worked together to inform communication in a relationship over time.

Some participants described routines with their partners in terms of things they usually, typically, or normally did within BDSM/kink encounters. One participant explained, “*I usually texted my partner to put his chastity cage on*”; “*I usually would return home from work and my boyfriend at the time would be locked up*”; “*He usually would kiss my feet and say thank you Mistress*” (#1, woman, heterosexual, switch). Another described, “*This time I am thinking of, as is pretty typical for us, we had decided to use the whips in his living room, where there is more space*” (#277, woman, queer, submissive). In this case, the participant indicated that her partner could determine her consent based on “*The fact that we have engaged in this behavior before, that he is familiar with what I enjoy.*” For this participant, her routine with her partner was established based on feedback from previous encounters.

Participants also explain that consent changes as participants gain knowledge over the course of multiple encounters with the same person. One participant explained, “*We’ve done it*

*many times over the period of several times, so we already knew what to expect. We always enjoy it*” (#14, man, heterosexual, dom). More explicit communication in new-behavior encounters was often tied to not knowing the person as well as in repeated encounters. For example, one participant indicated they were *“More vocal in new bc did not know person. Did not know kink, what they like, how far they wanted to go. If stranger need to be much more vocal, as people have varying degrees of comfort”* [sic] (#33, man, heterosexual, n/a).

Other participants explained that new behaviors require careful and slower enactment to allow for closer monitoring of consent:

*I think it's worth mentioning that he is super careful when we try new stuff to make sure I'm OK. if anything looks or sounds "off" he checks in to make sure he isn't hurting me and that I want to continue whatever we're doing.* (# 307, woman, pansexual, n/a)

Another participant explicitly compared this to repeated behaviors: *“We were much more detailed about the new behavior because the new behavior had potential to cause harm and was much more complicated than the repeated behavior”* (#288, woman, pansexual, switch). In this case, more detailed communication was required in the new-behavior encounter partially because the behavior itself was more complicated (pegging vs. biting and impact play), but also because it was their first time doing it together.

Occasionally, all of the above factors in combination were relevant to the way consent was communicated between new and repeated encounters:

*We have established a comfortable pattern of behavior with the repeated activity, where I generally know how hard to scratch/bite/etc in order to elicit the most pleasurable reaction. If we want to switch things up from that routine (e.g., add a new scratching instrument), I ask first and check in more frequently during the encounter. For the new*

*behavior, not only was is potentially more emotionally consequential should either of us feel uncomfortable , but there were also new technical details to work out. (#346, woman, heterosexual, switch)*

In this case, the participant has an established routine based on prior knowledge of her partner's reaction to a particular behavior, engendering an opt-out approach. When they want to introduce a new behavior, they revert back to an opt-in approach in order to execute more caution and care while sorting out the logistics of the new behavior.

Many participants also mentioned the communication of consent as being influenced by the setting of the encounter. Individual versus group settings were mentioned frequently in the data:

*“Personal or public spaces, who (else) is involved” (#271, man, bisexual, switch)*

*“public versus private scene/encounter” (#189, woman, heterosexual, switch)*

However, participants did not explain *how* this would impact communication, only that it *could*.

### **BDSM/Kink Experiences Requiring Further Investigation**

There were several examples of circumstances that do not generally fit the norms and expectations outlined above. Some individuals described taking the *same approach to consent* regardless of the circumstances. Others in *24/7 BDSM relationships* developed dynamics unique to that relationship configuration and did not seem broadly applicable to individuals with different BDSM/kink experiences. Additionally, *paid or otherwise professional BDSM/kink sex work* challenged the norms and expectations outlined above. Each of these populations were represented in the sample, but were few enough to preclude a complete analysis of their data. Further investigation into the consent dynamics within these groups is warranted.

**Approach to consent did not change.** Several participants indicated that their communication of consent did not change, at least between the two encounters they described in the present study. In some cases, it did not change because “*Both scenes were negotiated beforehand Because that's safety protocol*” (#128, man, heterosexual, top). In another case, it was the same person both times and the style of communication did not change:

*I don't find them to be different We had the same time frame, planning, schedule, and prior discussion both times. It was with the same man I'm in love with. We communicate consistently My boyfriend and I always communicate about if it is okay or not.* (#19, woman, heterosexual, n/a)

In at least one case, communication did not change because it didn't occur before the BDSM/kink behavior in either encounter. In the new-behavior encounter the participant “*didn't say anything. I knew she was in to rough sex when she let me bite her neck in a non soft manner*” and in the repeated encounter he “*Told her I wanted to fuck on her parents bed. Didn't tell her I'd be kinky*” (#69, man, heterosexual, n/a). For most participants in the present study, their approach to consent changed depending on whether they were engaging in a new behavior or a repeated behavior. Future research should investigate the consent dynamics among individuals who report taking the same approach to consent regardless of the circumstances.

**24/7 BDSM/kink relationships.** In the case of 24/7 BDSM/kink relationships, some participant described what appeared to be a fully-immersive dom/sub experiences: “*She told me to come over to her place. She commanded me to strip when I arrived. She collared me, and commanded me to worship her feet. She described the tortures that she would inflict*” (#152, man, heterosexual, painslave). In this case, the participant was engaging in an oft-repeated dynamic with his wife wherein they told him the contents of the upcoming scene while engaging

in their respective roles. Other participants alluded to taking a submissive role in the planning of BDSM/kink activity. For example, “*My Wife made the rules that we were operating under*” (#150, man, heterosexual, sub in 24/7 relationship) and “*I had a general idea of what he intended on doing. It was more fun not to know*” (#218, woman, heterosexual, sadomasochist). In these instances, submissive participants in a 24/7 BDSM/kink relationships allowed their dominant partners to determine the content of the scenes.

**Paid or professional sex work.** Communicating consent in the context of professional sex work also seems to fall outside the model described above. One participant explained “*In an encounter with a dominatrix [communication] does not change This a paid for service with clearly established rules*” (#8, man, heterosexual, sub). For this participant, the service nature of professional sex work engenders specific guidelines for enacting BDSM/kink behaviors. A professional submissive also described how he and his co-worker communicated consent to their client “*My co-worker was also aroused so the customer knew we were over-all accepting of the behaviors she had planned for us*” and indicated that they inferred their client’s consent because of the transaction that followed: “*She paid my coworker and I tips after the encounter*” (#79, man, heterosexual, sub).

## Discussion

To date, there has been limited research exploring the role of consent in the context of BDSM/kink sexuality. Findings from prior research suggested that consent may be central to the way some individuals who engage in BDSM/kink sexuality conceptualize their sexuality (Taylor & Ussher, 2001). There was also observational evidence that individuals engaged in BDSM/kink sexuality explicitly negotiated many aspects of BDSM/kink encounters, as well as relied on implicit nonverbal cues (Beres & MacDonald, 2015; Kaak, 2016). This research has been



limited, however, to theoretical conceptualizations of consent among individuals who engage in BDSM/kink sexuality, experiences of consent in general, or researcher interpretations of BDSM/kink encounters. Previously, there has been no research exploring the ways that individuals who engage in BDSM/kink sexuality understand their own communication of consent in the context of real-life examples of sexual encounters. The current study is the first to ask individuals who engage in BDSM/kink sexuality how they negotiated consent in two recent sexual encounters involving eroticized pain and/or power play: one involving new sexual behavior with a partner, and another involving repeated sexual behavior with a partner.

Results in the present study supported prior research which suggested that consent is central to BDSM/kink sexuality (Beres & MacDonald, 2015; Kaak, 2016; Taylor & Ussher, 2001). Participants described negotiating consent across three different phases of BDSM/kink encounters: prescene, scene, and postscene. The type of negotiation varied across the encounter. Typically, prescene negotiations were often verbal and participants took an opt-in approach to consent, making no assumptions about what was OK or not OK before they discussed it. During the scene, consent shifted to an opt-out approach and participants described relying on nonverbal cues to monitor for ongoing consent. After the scene, participants returned to explicit communication and often reflected on the scene verbally. These shifts in approaches to consent are consistent with prior research in which individuals with BDSM experience describe both explicit and implicit means of communicating consent (Beres & MacDonald, 2015).

Dividing an encounter into three phases—prescene, scene, and postscene—corresponds well to some BDSM/kink experience. In other cases, however, these phases are not clearly demarcated. Sometimes the transitions between phases of the encounter are more blurred than they are described in the present study. For example, in some instances, prescene negotiations

may include erotic fantasy sharing and/or power dynamics that blur the line between prescene and scene. In other instances—especially for repeated behaviors—prescene communication about consent is minimal or nonexistent.

Findings also suggest the way in which consent is negotiated changes over the course of multiple BDSM/kink encounters with the same person. Participants described taking a more opt-in approach to consent in encounters involving new behaviors and/or new partners. Over repeated encounters, participants indicated their approach to consent shifted to opt-out. Participants attributed this shift to many factors, including establishing routines, getting to know the other person, and being more careful when introducing new behaviors. These findings are consistent with research in the general population, suggesting consent may change over the course of a relationship (Beres, 2014; Humphreys, 2004; Muehlenhard et al., 2016).

### **Implications for Sexual Assault Prevention**

Findings from the proposed project may have several implications for sexual assault prevention messaging. To date, anti-sexual assault education has focused on distributing knowledge or changing attitudes about sexual assault (DeGue et al., 2014). Comprehensive, skills-based sexual assault prevention including information about how to communicate consent is lacking. Incorporating examples and models of BDSM sexuality, such as the one described above, into mainstream sexual assault prevention programming may prove useful in providing a realistic and functional model of consensual sex (Beres & MacDonald, 2015; Pitagora, 2016).

Facilitators could present examples of ways to communicate consent before, during, and after sexual encounters. Specific advice could be to first establish general interest in sexual activity; then discuss the specifics. Instructors could offer some flexibility in ways to negotiate consent in repeated encounters with the same person. Being more specific about consent

communication at first seems safest. Then as we get to know our partners' preferences and boundaries, we can carry our knowledge of the other person forward. It may not be necessary to keep asking "Is this OK?" *if* we have already discussed our own and our partner's preferences and boundaries beforehand. However, it is important to pay attention to verbal and nonverbal signs of consent or nonconsent, and to be prepared to stop if the other person gives any indication of discomfort.

In addition to providing a functional model of consent outside the context of the traditional sexual script, BDSM/kink sexuality can also provide a way to discuss risk in the context of sexual assault prevention. The Risk Aware Consensual Kink (RACK; Williams et al., 2014) model of BDSM/kink sexuality is based on the understanding that BDSM/kink behaviors confer certain risks. Findings from the present study suggest risk awareness could also be applied to consent communication. Different approaches to consent may engender different levels of risk of sexual assault. For example, taking an opt-out, or "no means no", approach in which consent is assumed unless otherwise specified carries risks, but does not always lead to sexual assault. Similarly, incorporating erotic fantasies and/or power dynamics in consent negotiation, or initiating new behaviors after negotiations have ended, is also risky, but not always problematic. Both taking an opt-out approach and/or blurring the lines between prescene negotiation of initial consent and engaging in sexual behaviors could lead to boundary violations. However, the risk may be lessened if these approaches are based on prior experience and knowledge between partners.

Finally, it may be helpful to expand sexual assault prevention education to include information about the ecological contexts of consent and sexual assault (DeGue et al., 2014). Prior research suggests that the way consent is constructed within traditional sexual scripts is

conducive to sexual assault. Cultural norms within traditional sexual scripts prescribe implicit communication of consent in a scenario in which men initiate sexual activity and women either accept or refuse such advances. In the present study, individuals who engaged in BDSM/kink sexuality developed a functional model of consent independent from the traditional sexual script. Sexual assault prevention efforts may be bolstered by discussing the unique dynamics of consent within both the traditional sexual script and in the context of BDSM/kink sexuality. Such a discussion could enable students to position themselves and their sexual encounters within a broader ecological context. By understanding their relationship to large social dynamics, students may develop further agency regarding how they negotiate consent at an interpersonal level.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Findings from the present study are based on data collected online via self-report survey. Demographic information for the sample are consistent with other online studies in which White participants are overrepresented. This is also a trend among samples of BDSM/kink individuals. It is unclear what the racial and ethnic demographic makeup of BDSM/kink communities is given the dearth of research in this area (Simula, 2019). Online data collection was used to recruit participants for the present study because it enables sampling of hard-to-reach and underrepresented populations (in this case, individuals with BDSM/kink experiences; Birnbaum, 2004). This technique could also be used to recruit racial minority individuals with BDSM/kink experiences. Specifically, websites such as FetLife have subgroups dedicated to people of color and future research may benefit from sampling such online spaces. Findings in the present study should be interpreted within the context of the demographic profile of the sample.

Current findings shed light on the way in which consent is negotiated in the context of BDSM/kink encounters. Results are consistent with and expand current research regarding

consent in the general population. Future research could explore consent in other contexts. Research regarding consent in the context of traditional sexual scripts (heterosexuality) as well as other nontraditional sexualities (e.g., LGBT sexuality, consensual non-monogamies, etc.) would expand current consent research. Furthermore, there are likely many factors other than relationship history that contribute to the way in which consent is communicated within a particular sexual encounter. Future research could explore such factors, including consent in private vs. public spaces.

### **Conclusion**

Traditional sexual scripts prescribe implicit communication of consent in a way that mirrors sexual assault dynamics. Sexual assault prevention messaging may benefit from understanding the way in which consent is constructed in the context of BDSM/kink sexuality. Acknowledging the complex lived experiences of individuals who engage in partnered sexuality may promote more acceptance of anti-sexual assault education. Knowledge about alternative sexualities can help provide tangible guidelines for the consideration of consent in everyday sexual encounters.

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## Appendix A

**Recruitment Announcement**

**Do you have experience with BDSM/Kink sexuality (e.g., eroticized pain and/or power play)?**

We are looking for volunteers to fill out an online survey about how people communicate in sexual encounters that involve BDSM/Kink sexuality.

We are looking for individuals who:

- are age 18 or over,
- have had at least two sexual encounters that involved BDSM/kink experiences and/or eroticized pain or power play, and
- who are interested in filling out a short (less than 30-minute) anonymous online survey.

This study is being conducted as graduate student research at the University of Kansas and has been approved by the university's institutional review board (IRB). [Note to the IRB: This Recruitment Announcement will be sent only once this study has been approved by the IRB.]

Please click on the below link if you are interested in filling out a survey about your experiences with BDSM/Kink sexuality:

--- Insert Link/QR Code Here---

Sincerely,  
Rena Mitchell, M.A.  
Charlene Muehlenhard, Ph.D.  
University of Kansas

## Appendix B

### **Online Recruitment Sources**

1. Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality, Listserv
2. Online Sex Research Bulletin, Listserv
3. Reddit Group r/BDSM
4. Association for Women in Psychology Facebook Page
5. Bisexual.Org Facebook Page
6. FetLife, Social Networking Site
7. National Coalition for Sexual Freedom Website
8. The BDSM Events Page, Blog
9. Sex and Psychology, Blog
10. Individual Research Assistants Facebook Pages



## Appendix C

### Information Statement

The Department of Psychology at the University of Kansas supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research. The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty.

We are conducting this study to better understand communication during sexual encounters. If you choose to participate, this will involve completing an online questionnaire that will ask about demographic information (e.g., age, race/ethnicity) and about two recent sexual encounters with a partner. Your participation is expected to take less than 30 minutes. You can complete this questionnaire on any computer. Because the questions involve sexual experiences, you might want to complete the questionnaire in a private setting. The content of the survey should cause no more discomfort than you would experience in your everyday life.

Although there will not be a direct benefit to you, we believe that the information obtained from this study will help us gain a better understanding of everyday sexual experiences of adults engaged in BDSM/kink sexuality. Your participation is solicited, although strictly voluntary. The survey will not ask for your name or any other identifiable information. However, if you DO provide any identifiable information in the open-ended survey questions, then your identifiable information will not be shared unless (a) it is required by law or university policy, or (b) you give written permission. It is possible, however, with internet communications, that through intent or accident someone other than the intended recipient may see your response. Make sure not to include your name or other identifying information in your answers.

The data will be used by Professor Charlene Muehlenhard and Professor Muehlenhard's students to better understand individuals' experiences in sexual encounters and could be used at any time in the future.

If you would like additional information concerning this study before or after it is completed, please feel free to contact us by email, phone, or mail.

Completion of the survey indicates your willingness to take part in this study and that you are at least 18 years old. If you have any additional questions about your rights as a research participant, you may call (785) 864-7429 or write the Human Research Protection Program (HRPP), University of Kansas, 2385 Irving Hill Road, Lawrence, Kansas 66045-7563, email [irb@ku.edu](mailto:irb@ku.edu).

Sincerely,

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## Appendix D

### Survey

Q1 Welcome to our study!

On the next page you will find more information so you can decide if you would like to proceed.

Briefly,

this survey is anonymous. Do not mention your name or any identifiable information

you can quit anytime, and you can skip questions you don't want to answer.

you can contact us if you have questions.

We appreciate your help!

---

### THE FORMAL INFORMATION STATEMENT GOES HERE

---

Q3 Please answer the following questions about yourself.

Q4 What is your current age?

Q5 What is your gender identity?

Woman

Man

Transgender/Trans\* \_\_\_\_\_

Non-Binary \_\_\_\_\_

Other \_\_\_\_\_

No Answer

Q6 What is your primary sexual orientation identity?

Straight/Heterosexual

Lesbian

Gay

Bisexual

Pansexual

Asexual/Asexual spectrum

Other \_\_\_\_\_

No Answer

Q9 What is your relationship status?

---

Q10 Where do you currently live?

- United States of America
- Canada
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- No Answer

Q11 Region? (USA)

- Northeast
- Midwest
- South
- West
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- No Answer

Q12 Region? (Canada)

- Atlantic
- Central Canada
- Prairie Provinces
- The West Coast
- The North
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- No Answer

Q13 What is your race/ethnicity? (USA)

- African American/Black
- Asian American/Asian
- European American/White
- Hispanic American/Latina/Latino/Latinx
- Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander
- Native American/American Indian/Alaskan Native
- Biracial/Multiracial \_\_\_\_\_
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- No Answer

Q14 What is your race/ethnicity? (Canada)

Q15 What is your highest level of education completed?

- 8th grade or less
- High school diploma or GED
- Vocational School
- Associate's Degree
- Bachelor's Degree
- Post-graduate degree (e.g., MA, JD, PhD)
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- No Answer

Q16 What is your household income before taxes?

- Less than \$25,000
  - \$25,000 - \$49,000
  - \$50,000 - \$99,999
  - \$100,000 - \$149,000
  - \$150,000 - \$200,000
  - Greater than \$200,000
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_
  - No Answer
  -
- 

Q17 We are interested in understanding your experiences as someone who has practiced eroticized pain and/or power play, also known as BDSM or Kink. The following questions are about how you understand this part of your sexuality.

Q19 How, if at all, do you identify within the BDSM/Kink umbrella? Please describe your BDSM/Kink identity below.

---

Q20 How often do your sexual encounters involve eroticized pain and/or power play?

- Never
- Rarely - In less than 10% of my sexual encounters
- Occasionally - In about 30% of my sexual encounters
- Sometimes - In about 50% of my sexual encounters
- Frequently - In about 70% of my sexual encounters
- Usually - In about 90% of my sexual encounters
- Every time
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- No Answer

Q21 How would you describe your sexual desire for eroticized pain and/or power play?

- It is required for my sexual gratification
- It is strongly preferred
- I prefer it occasionally
- I could take it or leave it
- Does nothing for me
- It turns me off
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- No Answer

Q22 Which of these best describes your involvement with a BDSM/kink community?

- Not involved
- Somewhat/casually involved
- Highly involved
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- No Answer

Q23 Please rate the following items:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No Answer
I feel a part of a BDSM/Kink community	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel a bond with a BDSM/Kink community	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q24 Comments, if any:

---

Q25 People communicate in different ways about what they are willing or unwilling to do sexually.

In this survey, you will be asked about TWO sexual encounters involving eroticized pain and/or power play:

A “NEW-BEHAVIOR” encounter, where you and another person did a sexual behavior together for the first time.

A “REPEATED-BEHAVIOR” encounter, where you did a sexual behavior that you and the other person had done together multiple times before.

The two situations could have involved the same or different people.

Q26 Think about a recent **NEW-BEHAVIOR** sexual encounter in which you engaged in eroticized pain and/or power play with another person and the two of you did a sexual behavior together for the first time.

Q27 In the **NEW-BEHAVIOR** sexual encounter, who was the other person? That is, what was your relationship with the other person at the time of the encounter?

Q28 What was the gender identity of the other person?

- Woman
- Man
- Transgender/Trans\* \_\_\_\_\_
- Non-Binary \_\_\_\_\_
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- No Answer

Q29 How old was the other person?

- Younger than me
- About the same age
- Older than me
- I don't know
- No Answer

Q30 What was their race/ethnicity? \_\_\_\_\_

Q31 What was their household income, compared to your own at that time?

- They earned far less than me
- They earned a little less than me
- They earned about the same as me
- They earned a little more than me
- They earned far more than me
- I don't know
- No Answer

Q32 Compared to you, how interested were they in eroticized pain and/or power play?

- Less interested than me
- Equally interested as me
- More interested than me
- I don't know
- No Answer
- 

Q33 Briefly describe the NEW-BEHAVIOR encounter below, including what led up to the encounter and generally what happened. Be as specific as you feel comfortable with.

Q34 In what type of setting did the sexual encounter take place?

Q35 When did the sexual encounter take place (i.e., about how long ago)?

Q36 How would you describe your sexual relationship with the other person in this encounter?

- This was our first time being sexual together.
- We had been sexual a few times together, but it was still new.
- We had been sexual together many times before.
- Other (please explain) \_\_\_\_\_
- No Answer

Q37 What role did you take in the encounter?

- Dominant/dom/top
- Submissive/sub/bottom
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- No Answer

Q38 Briefly describe the behavior that you did together for the first time in this encounter:

Q39 Had your partner consumed alcohol?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know
- No Answer

Q40 Had your partner consumed any other mood-altering substance(s)?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know
- No Answer

Q41 Did your partner seem to be affected by the alcohol or other substance(s)?

- They did not seem affected
- They seemed slightly buzzed or tipsy
- They seemed drunk/under the influence
- They seemed wasted
- They blacked out (could not remember actions later)
- They passed out/lost consciousness
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- No Answer

Q42 Had you consumed alcohol?

- Yes
- No
- No Answer

Q43 Had you consumed any other mood-altering substance(s)?

- Yes
- No
- No Answer

Q44 Were you affected by the alcohol or other substance(s)?

- I did not feel affected
- I felt slightly buzzed or tipsy
- I felt drunk/under the influence
- I felt wasted
- I blacked out (could not remember actions later)
- I passed out/lost consciousness
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- No Answer

Q45 Comments, if any:

Q46 Usually there are parts of sexual encounters that are OK with both people involved, and sometimes there are parts that are not OK with one or both of them. The following questions are about YOUR experience during the NEW-BEHAVIOR sexual encounter.



Q47 Was trying the new behavior OK with you?

- Yes, I was OK with trying the new behavior.
- No, I was not OK with trying the new behavior.
- I had mixed feelings about trying the new behavior.
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- No Answer

Q48 Comments, if any:

Q49 Below, please describe what, if anything, you did or said to let your partner know how you felt about trying the new behavior with them (whether you felt OK, not OK, or mixed). Describe what you did and said. Use exact words if possible.

Q50 What, if anything, did you do or say BEFORE THE ENCOUNTER to let your partner know how you felt about trying the new behavior?

Q51 What, if anything, did you do or say AS THE ENCOUNTER WAS BEGINNING to let your partner know how you felt about trying the new behavior?

Q52 What, if anything, did you do or say DURING THE ENCOUNTER to let your partner know how you felt about trying the new behavior?

Q53 What, if anything, did you do or say AFTER THE ENCOUNTER to let your partner know how you felt about having tried the new behavior?

Q54 If you did not let your partner know how you felt about trying the new behavior, why was that?

Q55 Comments, if any:

Q56 Were there OTHER ways your partner could have known how you felt about trying the new behavior? If so, please describe them below:

Q57 Comments, if any:

Q58 Please answer the following questions about YOUR PARTNER'S experience during the same sexual encounter.

Q59 Was your partner OK with trying the new behavior with you?

- Yes, my partner was OK with trying the new behavior.
- No, my partner was not OK with trying the new behavior.
- My partner had mixed feelings about trying the new behavior.
- I don't know how my partner felt about trying the new behavior.
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- No Answer

Q60 Comments, if any:

Q61 Below, please describe what, if anything, your partner did or said to let you know how they felt about trying the new behavior with you (whether they felt OK, not OK, or mixed). Describe what your partner did and said. Use exact words if possible.

Q62 What, if anything, did your partner do or say BEFORE THE ENCOUNTER to let you know how they felt about trying the new behavior?

Q63 What, if anything, did your partner do or say AS THE ENCOUNTER WAS BEGINNING to let you know how they felt about trying the new behavior?

Q64 What, if anything, did your partner do or say DURING THE ENCOUNTER to let you know how they felt about trying the new behavior?

Q65 What, if anything, did your partner do or say AFTER THE ENCOUNTER to let you know how they felt about having tried the new behavior?

Q66 Comments, if any:

Q67 Were there OTHER ways you knew how your partner felt about trying the new behavior? If so, please describe them below:

Q68 Comments, if any:

---

Q69 We've asked you about a NEW-BEHAVIOR encounter, now we will ask you the same questions about a REPEATED-BEHAVIOR encounter.

Q70 Think about a recent **REPEATED-BEHAVIOR** sexual encounter in which you engaged in eroticized pain and/or power play with another person, where everything you did with that person, you had done together before.

Are you thinking about the same person you described in the new-behavior encounter?

- Yes
- No
- Something Not Listed \_\_\_\_\_
- No Answer

Q71 In the **REPEATED-BEHAVIOR** sexual encounter, who was the other person? That is, what was your relationship with the other person at the time of the encounter?

Q72 What was the gender identity of the other person?

- Woman
- Man
- Transgender/Trans\* \_\_\_\_\_
- Non-Binary \_\_\_\_\_
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- No Answer

Q73 How old was the other person?

- Younger than me
- About the same age
- Older than me
- I don't know
- No Answer

Q74 What was their race/ethnicity? \_\_\_\_\_

Q75 What was their household income, compared to your own at that time?

- They earned far less than me
- They earned a little less than me
- They earned about the same as me
- They earned a little more than me
- They earned far more than me
- I don't know
- No Answer

Q76 Compared to you, how interested were they in eroticized pain and/or power play?

- Less interested than me
- Equally interested as me
- More interested than me
- I don't know
- No Answer
- 

Q77 Briefly describe the REPEATED-BEHAVIOR encounter below, including what led up to the encounter and generally what happened. Be as specific as you feel comfortable with.

Q78 In what type of setting did the sexual encounter take place?

Q79 When did the sexual encounter take place (i.e., about how long ago)?

Q80 How would you describe your sexual relationship with the other person in this encounter?

- This was our first time being sexual together.
- We had been sexual a few times together, but it was still new.
- We had been sexual together many times before.
- Other (please explain) \_\_\_\_\_
- No Answer

Q81 What role did you take in the encounter?

- Dominant/dom/top
- Submissive/sub/bottom
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- No Answer

Q82 Briefly describe the repeated behavior in this encounter (the behavior you had done together before):

Q83 Had your partner consumed alcohol?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know
- No Answer

Q84 Had your partner consumed any other mood-altering substance(s)?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know
- No Answer

Q85 Did your partner seem to be affected by the alcohol or other substance(s)?

- They did not seem affected
- They seemed slightly buzzed or tipsy
- They seemed drunk/under the influence
- They seemed wasted
- They blacked out (could not remember actions later)
- They passed out/lost consciousness
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- No Answer

Q86 Had you consumed alcohol?

- Yes
- No
- No Answer

Q87 Had you consumed any other mood-altering substance(s)?

- Yes
- No
- No Answer

Q88 Were you affected by the alcohol or other substance(s)?

- I did not feel affected
- I felt slightly buzzed or tipsy
- I felt drunk/under the influence
- I felt wasted
- I blacked out (could not remember actions later)
- I passed out/lost consciousness
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- No Answer

Q89 Comments, if any:

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Q90 We are going to ask again about what was OK or NOT OK during your sexual encounter. The following questions are about YOUR experience during the sexual encounter.

Q91 During this encounter, were you OK with doing the behavior you had done together before?

- Yes, I was OK with doing the behavior we had done together before.
- No, I was not OK with doing the behavior we had done together before.
- I had mixed feelings about doing the behavior we had done together before.
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- No Answer

Q92 Comments, if any:

Q93 Below, please describe what, if anything, you did or said to let your partner know how you felt about doing the repeated behavior with them (whether you felt OK, not OK, or mixed). Describe what you did and said. Use exact words if possible.

Q94 What, if anything, did you do or say BEFORE THE ENCOUNTER to let your partner know how you felt about doing the repeated behavior?

Q95 What, if anything, did you do or say AS THE ENCOUNTER WAS BEGINNING to let your partner know how you felt about doing the repeated behavior?

Q96 What, if anything, did you do or say DURING THE ENCOUNTER to let your partner know how you felt about doing the repeated behavior?

Q97 What, if anything, did you do or say AFTER THE ENCOUNTER to let your partner know how you felt about having done the repeated behavior?

Q98 If you did not let your partner know how you felt about doing the repeated behavior, why was that?

Q99 Comments, if any:

Q100 Were there OTHER ways your partner could have known how you felt about doing the repeated behavior again? If so, please describe how else they might have known this.

Q101 Comments, if any:

Q102 Please answer the following questions about YOUR PARTNER'S experience during the same sexual encounter.

Q103 Was your partner OK with the behavior you had done together before?

- Yes, my partner was OK with the behavior we had done together before.
- No, my partner was not OK with the behavior we had done together before.
- My partner had mixed feelings about the behavior we had done together before.
- I don't know how my partner felt about the behavior we had done together before.
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- No Answer

Q104 Comments, if any:

Q105 Below, please describe what, if anything, your partner did or said to let you know how they felt about doing the repeated behavior with you (whether they felt OK, not OK, or mixed). Describe what your partner did and said. Use exact words if possible.

Q106 What, if anything, did your partner do or say BEFORE THE ENCOUNTER to let you know how they felt about doing the repeated behavior?

Q107 What, if anything, did your partner do or say AS THE ENCOUNTER WAS BEGINNING to let you know how they felt about doing the repeated behavior?

Q108 What, if anything, did your partner do or say DURING THE ENCOUNTER to let you know how they felt about doing the repeated behavior?

Q109 What, if anything, did your partner do or say AFTER THE ENCOUNTER to let you know how they felt about having done the repeated behavior?

Q110 Comments, if any:

Q111 Were there OTHER ways you knew how your partner felt about doing the repeated behavior? If so, please describe them below:

Q112 Comments, if any:

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**SOME RESPONDENTS WILL SEE THESE SETS OF QUESTIONS IN COUNTERBALANCED ORDER: First the questions about the REPEATED behavior and then the questions about the NEW behavior**

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**THEN, THERE WILL BE THESE FINAL QUESTIONS:**

Q200 We asked you questions about how you and your partner(s) knew what was OK during two different sexual encounters that involved eroticized pain and/or power play:

- a NEW-BEHAVIOR encounter
- a REPEATED-BEHAVIOR encounter

We would now like you to compare these encounters.

Q201 Were there any DIFFERENCES between the two encounters in how you and your partner communicated what was OK? If so, how was your communication different?

Q202 In your opinion, why was the communication between the two encounters different?

Q203 Were there any SIMILARITIES between the two encounters in how you and your partner communicated what was OK? If so, how was the communication similar?

Q204 In your opinion, why was the communication between the two encounters similar?

Q205 How, if at all, does communication about what is OK or not OK during a sexual encounter change depending on the situation?

Q206 What factors might influence the way people communicate about what is OK or not OK during sexual encounters?

Q207 Suppose a friend of yours is interested in exploring eroticized pain and/or power play. They ask you how such encounters usually go. How would you respond?

Q208 Do you have any final comments about this survey?

Q209 Please click the next button below to submit your responses.



## Appendix E

### Debriefing Statement

Thank you for your participation in our survey!

The purpose of this study is to better understand how individuals involved in BDSM/kink sexuality communicate about sex in their everyday sexual encounters.

Past research indicates that many people seem to ASSUME that their partner is consenting, which can result in problems, including sexual assault. Many people think that actually discussing sexual consent with their partners is unnecessary and would interfere with their pleasure; some think that they “just know” whether their partners are consenting.

A few studies suggest that some individuals who practice BDSM are more likely than other individuals to discuss sexual consent. We hope that the information about sexual communication provided by people who engage in eroticized pain and/or power play will be helpful for programs related to sexual consent and preventing sexual assault. We are also interested in whether sexual communication changes over time or based on relationship context, and if so, how it changes. For example, do partners learn what is generally OK or not OK with each other and does direct communication of consent become less common for them?

**If you have questions about this study**, you can contact the graduate student conducting this study or the faculty advisor:

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**If you have questions about your rights as a research participant**, you can contact the HRPP: Human Research Protection Program, Lawrence; University of Kansas; 2385 Irving Hill Road; Lawrence, KS 66045-7568  
(785) 864-7429, irb@ku.edu

**If this study raised any personal issues that you would like to discuss with a counselor, you can contact:**

- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>, 1-800-273-8255
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Treatment Services Locator, <https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/>, 1-800-662-HELP (4357)

**If you want to report an incident of sexual assault**, you can contact the National Sexual Assault Telephone Hotline, 800-656-HOPE (4673). You can also visit <https://www.rainn.org/> for more information about sexual assault resources.