

**“A Certain Evolution”:**

**A Phenomenological study of 24/7 BDSM and Negotiating Consent**

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**Abstract**

### Abstract

BDSM as a full-time lifestyle is stigmatized and underexamined as a phenomenon. Previous studies have investigated 24/7 sadomasochism (SM), 24/7 dominance and submission (D/s), or total power exchange (TPE), yet 24/7 BDSM remains under researched. Using a social constructionist and sexual diversity framework, we used insider knowledge to recruit four participants: a female slave/masochist, a male sadist, a female submissive, and a male dominant/protector. Interpretative phenomenological analysis revealed four superordinate and 10 subordinate themes: *routes toward the fundamentals* (i.e., sexually explicit resources, kink-related experiences), *full-on lifestyle* (i.e., self-in-role, flexible rules, shades of play, polyamory), *dynamic consent* (i.e., honesty, contextual communication), and *practicalities* (i.e., challenges, benefits). Our findings suggested that 24/7 BDSM is a socially constructed, consensual, full-time adherence to kink-related roles and behaviors untethered to time-limited scenes, woven into other life domains, and operating as an umbrella term to encompass other perpetual power dynamics. The themes contribute to the debate of kink as a sexual identity or serious leisure. We concluded that the centrality of self-in-role coupled with leisure features support 24/7 BDSM as an erotic lifestyle. Implications for sexual diversity, sex education, clinical guidelines, and social justice are discussed.

*Keywords:* 24/7 BDSM, kink, qualitative, sexual identity, serious leisure

## Introduction

BDSM (bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, sadism/masochism) comprises a constellation of diverse erotic or sexual practices, relationships, and identities (Sprott & Williams, 2019). Whether BDSM functions as a form of serious leisure or as a sexual orientation has emerged as an important debate in the field (see Sprott & Williams, 2019), where *serious leisure* refers to the pursuit of an activity that people find so fulfilling that they start a leisure career, acquiring and expressing a mixture of skills, knowledge, and experiences (Stebbins, 2007). Research on certain subpopulations, such as people who engage in BDSM on a permanent basis without interruption, colloquially called *24/7 BDSM* (Kaldera, 2010), may advance this debate.

Estimates of BDSM engagement, often referred to as kink (Wignall & McCormack, 2017), hover around 20% of the population across Western societies (Brown et al., 2020), with evidence it is growing in popularity and visibility (Wignall & McCormack, 2017). However, BDSM remains pathologized generally (e.g., Waldura et al., 2016) and stigma may be prominent for 24/7 BDSMers given that this subpopulation is less understood than broader kink subcultures. Indeed, 24/7 BDSM relationships were only first identified among professionals in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Moser, 1989). While the prevalence rates of 24/7 BDSM relationships are unknown (Dancer et al., 2006), research suggests that between 27.5–43% of kink practitioners have engaged in 24/7 behavior (Gemberling et al., 2015; Rogak & Connor, 2018). While these rates seem substantial, it is unclear how the authors defined 24/7 BDSM or what the phenomenon meant to participants, suggesting that future work would benefit from a definition of the essence of 24/7 BDSM. Accordingly, from the perspective of social constructionism and sexual diversity (van Anders, 2015), the present project seeks to describe the phenomenology of consensual 24/7 BDSM relationships.

## 24/7 BDSM

When measuring the prevalence of kink-related behaviors, most researchers group 24/7 BDSM into an “other” category (Pascoal et al., 2015) or use it as a descriptive demographic variable (Cook-Daniels & Munson, 2010; Gemberling et al., 2015; Rogak & Connor, 2018; Ryan, 2018), rather than the subject of study. Consequently, contemporary evidence on the experiences of 24/7 BDSM relationships is often tangential. For example, researchers document that 24/7 BDSM may be associated with increased self-confidence and the ability to explore different aspects of one’s personality (Hébert & Weaver, 2015; Williams, 2017), but their main research objective resulted in a periphery exploration of immersive kink relationships. The present study centers this phenomenon.

Non-academic community members describe how “the sex and the bondage [of 24/7 BDSM relationships] are only minor portions of a typical day” (Rinella, 2005, p. 185). During the consent process, the submissive partner may negotiate autonomy over specific duties (Kaldera, 2010; Rinella, 2005), which scholars contend do not necessarily disrupt the hierarchy of control (Dancer et al., 2006; Green, 2007). Feminist scholars have paid special attention to the hierarchies of 24/7 power dynamics (Bauer, 2008; Carlström, 2017), arguing that feminist ideals were sustained in 24/7 BDSM relationships when women freely entered into the arrangement (Ritchie & Barker, 2005). Therefore, consent may be a particularly salient feature of this phenomenon, but empirical evidence is limited.

A significant contribution to the literature on 24/7 BDSM relationships is the study of 24/7 SM slavery. Dancer et al. (2006) researched the role of 24/7 slaves, highlighting that participants tended to daily chores, adhered to rules, and described relational satisfaction, among other features. Dancer et al. (2006) concluded that 24/7 SM functions primarily to protect the slaves and reinforce their role while paralleling conventional relationships. Although significant, their study could have further explored the importance of negotiating consent in these relationships, drawing on the perspective of dominants.

Consent distinguishes 24/7 power structures from abusive relationships (Carlström, 2017; Ritchie & Barker, 2005). Without consent, a 24/7 arrangement could lead to intimate partner violence (Pitagora, 2016), although this outcome seems to be rare (Gemberling et al., 2015; Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013). Popular discourse on 24/7 BDSM presents a misleading definition of consent (Leistner & Mark, 2016), as if it were negotiated once instead iteratively (Simula, 2019). Although a significant amount of work exists on the topic of consent within kink relationships (e.g., Bauer, 2014; Dunkley & Brotto, 2019; Fanghanel, 2020; Kaak, 2016), some research has questioned traditional understandings of how consent is negotiated (Wignall, 2020). Furthermore, in a stigmatized phenomenon like 24/7 BDSM, nebulous descriptions of the consent process intensify misguided public speculation.

Negotiating consent in 24/7 BDSM may be like discussing risk in other leisure pursuits. Based on the definition of serious leisure (Stebbins, 2007), evidence suggests that 24/7 BDSM practices share many qualities with serious leisure, such as investing significant resources into the activity to learn how to do it well and having a personal identification with the activity (Hébert & Weaver, 2015; Wignall & McCormack, 2017; Williams et al., 2016). Although some BDSM practitioners may express both sexual identity and serious leisure (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2007), the centrality of the identity–leisure debate in the context of 24/7 BDSM relationships has yet to be examined. Therefore, we sought to describe consensual 24/7 BDSM relationships while attending to narratives about leisure and identity.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Insider knowledge, a recruitment strategy based on one's cultural proximity to participants (Taylor, 2011), allowed one of the authors to use their pre-existing links with BDSM networks in the South of England to purposefully sample this hard-to-reach population. Through word of mouth, this author invited people involved in 24/7 BDSM to

participate in the study. While numerous practitioners showed interest in the study, most did not wish to participate due to hesitancy with academic research or did not meet the recruitment criteria of participating in 24/7 BDSM. Two couples, four participants were recruited—these participants were already known to the author due to the community nature of kink subcultures. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their privacy. Three identified as White British, one participant self-identified as mixed White-Arab. Participants were cisgender. Ava identified as a female slave and masochist (aged 28), with her partner Oliver identifying as a male sadist (aged 49). Ivy identified as a female submissive (aged 27), and her partner Teddy identified as a male dominant/protector (aged 31). Four participants are a suitable sample size in phenomenological analyses (Giorgi, 2008).

### **Procedure**

After gaining consent, one author conducted semi-structured interviews via video call or in public cafes. The interview schedule included questions about 24/7 BDSM relationships, sexual consent, and power dynamics. All participants were interviewed separately, and interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes after which participants were debriefed. Audio recordings were stored on a password-protected computer, transcribed and anonymized, and recordings were destroyed.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) draws on many of the philosophical assumptions of social constructionism (i.e., our theoretical framework) and, thus, a seven-step variation of IPA was performed (Smith et al., 2009). First, the researchers familiarized themselves with transcribed data and coded descriptive and conceptual elements. Second, preliminary codes were examined. Third, mind maps encompassing all the notes and possible connections were created. During step four, mind maps were used to generate subordinate and superordinate themes. Step five required populating these themes with quotes from the participants. During step six, the first five steps were repeated for all participants, a master

list of themes was created, and themes were collated into a model. Finally, an analysis of the master list of themes was conducted. Participants were provided the results and their feedback was incorporated. To increase methodological rigor, a third researcher audited the transcripts and coding scheme. The ethical committee of Bournemouth University approved this project.

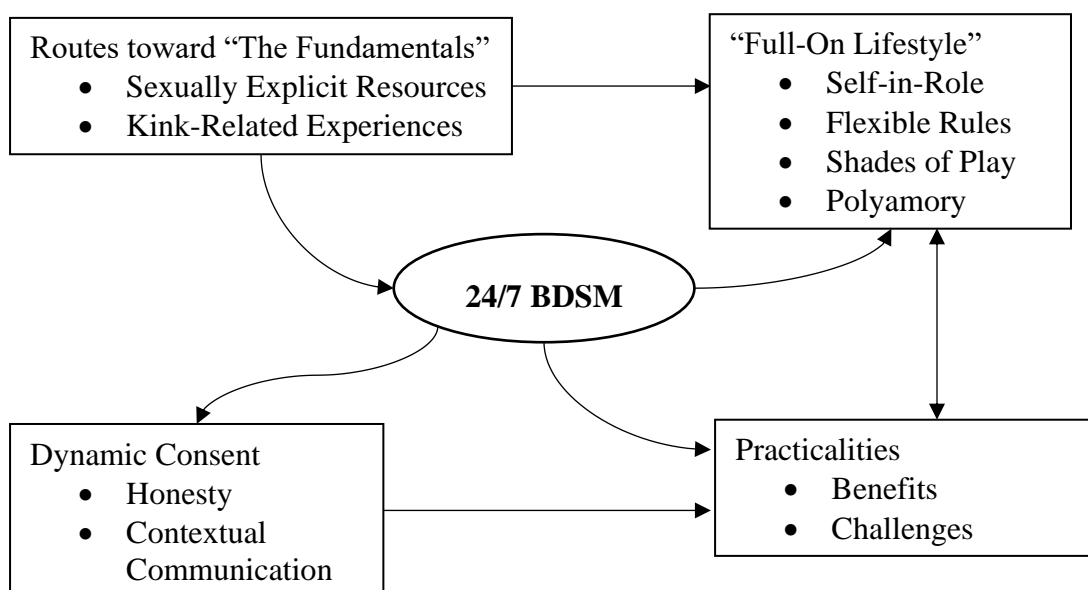
Positionality informs IPA (Smith et al., 2009). Cory, a doctoral student of counseling psychology, identifies as a White American, gay, cisgender man from a middle-class background. He researches sexual and gender minorities and has promoted BDSM community events. Amy identifies as a White British, bisexual, non-monogamous cisgender woman with a working-class, student background. She has extensive personal experience within the BDSM community and kept a reflexive journal throughout the project. Liam is a White British, gay, cisgender man from a working-class background. He has extensive ethnographic experience researching BDSM communities. The authors' combined knowledge of BDSM culture informed the analysis, drawing on our understandings while rooting the analysis within the participants' experiences.

### **Results**

An IPA led to four superordinate and 10 subordinated themes (see Figure 1). Given the interrelatedness of the superordinate themes of *routes toward "the fundamentals," "full-on lifestyle," dynamic consent,* and *practicalities*, it is important to consider each in relation to the whole (Smith et al., 2009) because, in isolation, individual themes are partial descriptions of the phenomenon (i.e., a limitation of previous work).

**Figure 1**

*A Proposed Process Model Linking Superordinate and Subordinate Themes*



### **Routes Toward “the Fundamentals”**

*Routes towards the fundamentals* are a form of research conducted by participants, describing how participants initially discovered and experienced BDSM. Sexually explicit resources and kink-related experiences nurtured a foundational interest in 24/7 BDSM relationships. The *fundamentals* were described by participants as the knowledge needed to engage in BDSM, such as an awareness of the risks and an understanding of consent, a knowledge of the skills involved in certain practices, alongside the importance of communication and trust.

### ***Sexually Explicit Resources***

Participants derived much of their knowledge from sexually explicit materials. Teddy, for instance, learned “the fundamentals of BDSM” from pornography websites like *Hogtied*, a media collection created by Kink.com. He described how “it’s filmed live, it’s just unedited, real BDSM.” Ava gained insight into her sexual interest by “reading erotica that was BDSM in nature and finding that [she] liked the idea of being a submissive.”



Consumption of sexually explicit media formed the psychological substrate from which future full-time kink relationships bloomed.

### ***Kink-Related Experiences***

Vicarious learning was necessary, but not sufficient, for the formation of interest in 24/7 BDSM relationships. Ivy described how her partner, Teddy, shared sexually explicit resources about BDSM which, although crucial for her sexual consent, was not a replacement for physical play:

He had a lot more experience and could teach me a lot more about the lifestyle [...] he showed me websites, how it's done [...] he wanted to make sure I had all the tools and knew what was going on. [...]But] I didn't know what I wanted, because I hadn't really experienced anything as a submissive.

Beyond the need for immersive learning, evident in Ivy's account is the importance of a supportive bond in early, kink-related experiences. She needed time to discover what she wanted. Veteran kinksters, like Teddy and Oliver, took their time to mentor partners who were newer to the BDSM lifestyle which, in turn, seemed to legitimize the possibility of a 24/7 BDSM relationship. Oliver, for instance, met Ava through a friend from the community who wanted to demonstrate a scene to Ava. Oliver described how he and his friend were going to play together, saying, “[My friend] turned round and said, ‘I want to try [...] to have a play scene in front of [Ava] so she can watch and have an idea what it's all about.’”

Thus, kink-related experiences that formed *the fundamentals* came from community members as well as current partners.

### **Dynamic Consent**

Participants created honest, iterative, consensual agreements with their partners over time and across contexts. A 24/7 BDSM relationship seems to provide a comfortable,

rewarding container in which participants renegotiate limits in partner-specific communication daily, considering factors outside of the kink scene.

### *Honesty*

Participants described stigma as a barrier to disclosure of their kink interests. Ava, for example, discussed torture fantasies with a previous romantic partner but “the reaction was awful and [she] never talked about it again.” Once within a 24/7 BDSM relationship, Ava experienced dissonance between the need for honest disclosure and her role as a submissive:

[I] like not having to make decisions and being able to relinquish all that power to someone else and just do everything [I] can to please them [...] it is quite hard to say “I actually can’t do that” and it feels—and it’s like an emotionally taxing thing to do, especially at first.

Despite the emotional toll, honest disclosure is paramount for a 24/7 BDSM relationship to work. For example, Teddy said:

Honesty in a relationship is probably the only way to actually get anywhere, to be completely open and definitely not lie to yourself. [...] People will do things that they don’t want to do because they want to please their partner and [it] almost causes resentment because they’re enduring something instead of enjoying something.

*Dynamic consent*, then, required *honesty* with the self and partners, moving beyond stigma to arrive at the notion that BDSM is an acceptable expression of human sexuality. For submissive partners, honest disclosure was an exercise in vulnerability while managing feelings of role conflict. For dominant partners, honest disclosure entailed the creation of a space in which disclosure was valued and encouraged. Hence, the self-in-role was central to the experience of honesty.

### *Contextual Communication*

Participants' narratives stressed the importance of communication in 24/7 BDSM relationships. Many of their consent practices were consistent with mainstream BDSM, such as negotiating sexual limits through dialogue, discovering limits via online questionnaires, agreeing to polyamorous boundaries, using safewords to end an activity, and debriefing after a scene. Importantly, within the context of a long-term, full-time kink relationship, communication practices became nuanced and subtle. Here, Teddy said, "[Ivy and I] almost don't talk about consent now [...] consent is almost body language [...] we knew that we were on the right track when she rubbed her feet together, it's almost like a tell in poker." Body language and physical cues slowly replaced the explicit, verbal consent necessary in the early stages of a 24/7 BDSM relationship. While debriefing and aftercare continued, partners became more attuned to each other's limits during a scene. Given that some submissive partners struggle to verbalize their needs, non-verbal communication is a welcomed change. Ava stated:

There have been times where I've been doing [...] edge play [activities which play with consent] where it's [...] rather than being well within the realms of what can be taken, it's kind of edging out towards the bounds of what I can take, or what he's comfortable doing, where I've been actively reminding myself in my own head of, like, [...] "if I want to stop at any point I can say red." [...] But, there are people who really, really struggle to communicate in times like that, and I think it's actually really important that both partners can read each other.

Thus, accurate interpretation of physical cues within a 24/7 BDSM relationship enabled deeper bonding and greater risk taking. Ava also underscored the emotional context, saying, "If I'm feeling particularly emotionally vulnerable [...] I might unexpectedly not react very well emotionally to it." As 24/7 BDSM relationships evolve, scenes require attention to contexts beyond pure play because emotional, cognitive, and physical states are not static.

Teddy highlights that: “the biggest role of any dominant, in any relationship, is judging timing, knowing when she’s ready to take a harder impact, when she’s ready to try something she said she wants to try.” Thus, while dominants like Teddy were responsible for “reading” the “tells,” submissives like Ava were responsible for letting their body talk, suggesting that communication patterns depend on the self-in-role.

*Contextual communication*, or a sensitive awareness of the partner across time, scene, and situation, is therefore a cornerstone of *dynamic consent*.

### **“Full-On Lifestyle”**

Participants indicated that 24/7 BDSM is an all-encompassing permeation of kink throughout their lives. As Ivy noted, “it’s just gone from, like, hands being tied behind your back to full-on lifestyle.” Participants used *the fundamentals* to seek out a full-time power dynamic which, in turn, intensified the *self-in-role* through *flexible rules*, *polyamory*, and different *shades of play*.

### ***Self-in-Role***

In addition to their main roles as slave (Ava), sadist (Oliver), submissive (Ivy), and dominant/protector (Teddy), all four participants identified as 24/7 BDSMers, a higher-order social category imbued with meaning. Ascription to the 24/7 role increased the salience of other identities. Ava, for example, said “[BDSM] is a big part of my identity *because* I am 24/7.” Teddy said, “BDSM is part of my identity.” Participants also referred to their identities as natural, most of them participating in kink-related experiences before knowing that their interests were called BDSM; instead, they relied on *the fundamentals* to describe their experience. Ava, for instance, described her role as slave as “intrinsic to [her] sexuality.” Oliver expressed a sense of completeness, saying, “I feel like I am more me now than I’ve probably ever been.” Oliver, like Teddy, said he was a straight male dominant, yet Oliver expanded on his sexuality as being “bi-sadistic [a sadist for men and women].” Moreover,

they both played with different genders, indicating that their dominant/sadistic identity may be more salient than their sexual orientation.

### *Flexible Rules*

Given the importance of role adherence in 24/7 BDSM relationships, the participants constructed *flexible rules* to manage demands in other life domains. Non-sexual rules were introduced to create the desired feelings of submission within the power dynamic, such as when Ava says, “I’m yours,” and Oliver says, “you’re mine,” at the end of phone calls. Ava stated that she kneels “quite often, you know, even in a way that looks inconspicuous in front of 11-year-olds.” Both Ivy and Ava said that they wore necklaces in public to symbolize their submission. Ivy described everyday displays of power exchange:

It will get to, like, three o’clock and [I don’t want to eat and] he’ll say “no, you—I’m making you food and you’re going to eat it!” Like, there is no question about that [... Or] when we’re just out and about normally, to cross the road, I hold his hand. I’m always on the inside of the pavement.

The desired power dynamic of 24/7 BDSM needs constant maintenance outside of explicitly kinky scenes. Upholding sexually laden narratives was impractical in public spaces, in front of children, or under certain emotional circumstances. However, when the couples were alone and mentally well, the “protocols” were strict.

It’s probably been about six-and-a-half years [...] since [Ava’s] orgasmed without my permission [...] She will kneel by the bed, you know, [...] she kneels naked and she waits for me to enter the bedroom [...] When it is just the two of us in the house, or if we are in the company of only people who are kinky and also comfortable enough with it, she requires permission to keep her clothes on [...] You know, that’s what makes it a 24/7 relationship is that it’s not just at events, it’s not just at parties—that this is constant. (Oliver)

Heavy bondage, flogging, fetish objects—traditional elements of kink play, while attractive to participants, were not necessary for erotic energy to imbue full-time power dynamics.

### *Shades of Play*

Play within a 24/7 BDSM relationship ranges from traditional kink scenes to unique features of the full-time power dynamic. Traditionally, participants reported interest in many forms of kink (e.g., exhibitionism, bondage, etc.). After intense play, participants tended to one another with a process called aftercare, a stable feature of risk-aware consensual kink scenes. For example, Oliver said:

Tending injuries itself—to actually soothe them physically—sometimes it can be, you know, just giving them water, maybe some sugar to deal with the energy drop [... or] subdrop [...] an adrenaline come down [...] where someone can become quite woozy and flaky and can be quite tearful.

Oliver described the importance of physical contact, conversation, and reassurance as well, a process called debriefing. Thus, people engaged in 24/7 BDSM relationships follow the cultural practices of safe, sane, and consensual BDSM.

Uniquely, given the 24/7 commitment, power exchange was present even during normative sexual encounters, with Teddy saying, “1 out of every 100 times is normal sex effectively, but even then, there is still [BDSM] dynamic aspects.” Similarly, Ivy said, “He’s my dominant, I’m his submissive. Therefore, I have given him the rights to do what he will.”

Another unique aspect was the possibility of play at any time, even undesirable activities at undesirable times within consented limits, with Oliver stating, “The submissive needs to be ready for anything that hasn’t already been agreed as a hard limit.”

In summary, *the fundamentals* of kink infused the *full-on lifestyle*, while the unique features of 24/7 BDSM play were an undercurrent of power exchange throughout the day,

even during casual sex or mundane activities, to sustain the self-in-role within the bounds of flexible rules.

### ***Polyamory***

A final, minor subordinate theme of the *full-on lifestyle* was the practice of polyamory. Ava and Oliver played with others but did not identify as polyamorous. Ivy and Teddy had a polyamorous relationship and were looking for a “unicorn”, with Ivy describing this as, “Another female introduced into our relationship [...] We have that much love that we have room for another person.” Hence, 24/7 BDSM relationships may intersect with consensual non-monogamous arrangements.

### **Practicalities**

Practical concerns were evident across narratives. Perceived benefits sustained engagement in 24/7 BDSM despite complications. Challenges to the *full-on lifestyle* informed features of the 24/7 power dynamic which, in turn, shaped the challenges.

### ***Benefits***

Participants experienced many benefits from 24/7 BDSM, including greater physical and communication skills. Ava, for instance, discovered an ability to control her orgasm. She also learned how to set better boundaries, assert her desires, and express her feelings. Similarly, Teddy said 24/7 BDSM “taught me to be more okay with my emotions.” Compared to other relationships, Ivy reported higher levels of trust and communication within her 24/7 BDSM relationship. Finally, Oliver stated that the BDSM community engendered feelings of belonging which, in turn, allowed him to pursue 24/7 BDSM.

### ***Challenges***

Defining 24/7 BDSM was the primary challenge to emerge. Sustaining power dynamics became complicated in the presence of domain-specific demands (e.g., work). Ivy stated, “Sometimes life gets in the way and it’s very difficult to keep things going.” Mental

health adaptations, for instance, such as when Teddy attends to Ivy's anxiety, were important considerations in full-time kink. That is, Teddy had to serve Ivy during moments of need. However, the participants drew upon flexible rules to address these challenges and sustain the self-in-role.

### **Discussion**

We conducted a phenomenological study of 24/7 BDSM relationships. Our findings enrich the constitutive definition of 24/7 BDSM to suggest that the phenomenon is a socially constructed, consensual, full-time adherence to kink-related roles and behaviors untethered to time-limited scenes, woven into other life domains, and operating as an umbrella term to encompass 24/7 SM slavery (Dancer et al., 2006), TPE (Green, 2007), 24/7 D/s (Rainey-Smithback, 2020), and other perpetual power dynamics. In understanding 24/7 BDSM through a social constructionist framework, rules and practices described by participants were informed through cultural artifacts (e.g., pornography), dyadic interactions with their partners, and through involvement in kink communities. Future researchers can use our qualitative findings to develop culturally sensitive measures, demographic forms, and interview protocols, as well as test whether the features of 24/7 BDSM described presently generalize to larger, diverse samples. Indeed, research should begin to acknowledge the unique insights offered by 24/7 BDSMers to understand BDSM, and kink, more generally.

This study contributes to the discussion of how BDSM can be conceptualized, drawing on the experiences of 24/7 BDSMers. Participants had strong attachments to BDSM labels (e.g., slave; dominant) and described BDSM as a salient part of their sexual identity (Hughes & Hammack, 2019), and sexual orientation (Gemberling, Cramer & Miller, 2015). Participants' narratives also support Newmahr's (2010) six characteristics of serious leisure, describing: the need for perseverance, the opportunity for careers, efforts in the acquisition of



knowledge, durable benefits, a unique ethos and personal identification. We refer to different aspects of these characteristics below.

This study is the first to link early explorations of kink to 24/7 BDSM participants kink interests over time, supporting a constructionist account of BDSM (Wignall, 2019). Therefore, there appears to be support for two criteria of serious leisure: the acquisition of specialized knowledge and the importance of a unique ethos through community involvement (Wignall & McCormack, 2017). Through social interaction with sexually explicit resources, kink community members, and each other, participants nurtured their sexual expression and learned how to navigate kink scenes skillfully.

There was also evidence for essentialist accounts of BDSM interests (Yost & Hunter, 2012), such as Ava's use of the word "intrinsic" or Oliver's willingness to be dominant over different genders despite his heterosexual orientation. *The fundamentals* may have engendered a belief in essentialism which, as Yost and Hunter (2012) noted, was typical in their study of initial BDSM attraction and, considering the presence of stigma, such an essentialist narrative could lend credibility to kink desires, behaviors, and practices among our participants. Categorizing the self as a 24/7 BDSMer centered kink and enhanced well-being. For instance, our data depart from Dancer et al. (2006), who did not explore romantic feelings, and align with findings that 24/7 BDSMers experience deep emotional bonds (Rogak & Connor, 2018). Thus, the criterion of personal identification within serious leisure pursuits was met and essentialism appeared to legitimize the self-in-role, thereby facilitating the power dynamic beyond the bedroom.

Participants also used flexible rules and shades of play to construct a *full-on lifestyle*. Like other 24/7 BDSMers (Dancer et al., 2006; Green, 2007; Hébert & Weaver, 2015), our participants used rules to enhance the self-in-role, to center the power dynamic, and to feel treasured. Everyday displays of power exchange were necessary to integrate the relationship

structure across domains (Rubinsky, 2018). Although non-sexual, everyday power exchange was nevertheless an erotic, and occasionally subtle, method of affirming the 24/7 dynamic. Furthermore, while the sexual repertoires of our participants were diverse (Dancer et al., 2006), our results depart from previous work to indicate more fluidity between public and private spheres.

Consent involved honesty and contextual communication. Unlike the respondents in Dancer et al. (2006), our participants valued the use of safewords, although they used them less over time. Another unique contribution is the emotional texture of limits, extending the conceptualization of BDSM limits as mere malleable thresholds to center the affective dimensions of vulnerability, resentment, and joy. In a survey of 5,667 respondents, NCSF (2013) found that most BDSM practitioners believed in ongoing consent, especially verbal consent before a scene. Our data indicate that context may diminish the need for verbal consent as partners learn to “read” one another’s physical cues and emotional states, mirroring more contemporary research (Wignall et al., 2020). Reading their partners became more valued than explicit negotiation, suggesting that relationship stability allows 24/7 BDSMers to improvise the subcultural norms of consent negotiation without eroding its primacy.

Aligned with the serious leisure characteristics of perseverance and durable benefits (Newmahr, 2010), our participants reported challenges and benefits. Oliver, for instance, experienced a sense of self-actualization paralleling benefits found in previous, tangential work on 24/7 BDSM (Hébert & Weaver, 2015; Williams, 2017). Consequently, our data meet five out of six criteria for serious leisure (Newmahr, 2010). Although we cannot definitively state that 24/7 BDSM is a serious leisure, it is certainly more than casual. Movement away from 24/7 BDSM as a sexual identity “highlights the flaws of medicalized frameworks” (Wignall & McCormack, 2017, p. 802), thus deconstructing the stigmatization of 24/7

BDSM. Our participants constructed essentialist accounts of their kink interests, which are not equivalent to the construct of sexual orientation. Thus, a comparison of 24/7 BDSM roles to sexual orientation (Sprott & Williams, 2019) may have intuitive appeal and be applicable for some BDSMers, but we find limited support for this framing in our sample.

### **Implications**

Our data contribute to basic research on human sexuality because, from a sexual diversity lens (van Anders, 2015), the study of minority sexualities unveils aspects of majority sexualities that were previously uncontended. Although we rely on future researchers to draw these inferences, one example is how flexible rules, while explicit in 24/7 BDSM relationships, might inform critical analyses of relational norms as necessary for eroticism. Sex educators could use our findings to inform educational interventions about sexual roles and sexual consent in non-normative relationships. Clinicians can use these themes to increase their multicultural competency and integrate treatment into the context of full-time kink, such as involving the dominant partner to support medication adherence. Finally, our data suggest that 24/7 BDSMers are highly functional, committed, and caring people whose full-time power dynamics do not infringe upon the rights of children or people in the public sphere.

### **Limitations & Future Directions**

Several limitations are evident. First, our sample was limited to predominantly White, educated, cisgender people from middle-class backgrounds, a problem in kink research generally (Sheff & Hammers, 2011). Related, the roles involved in 24/7 BDSM may be perceived and enacted differently by non-White individuals (Cruz, 2016). Second, our participants enacted traditional gender roles and common power dynamics (i.e., female-bottom/male-top). This relationship is more common in literature and popular culture, so future research could explore the reversal of these roles (female-top/male-bottom), as well as

investigating queer sexualities or the structure of other kink dyads (e.g., big–little, pup–handler, etc.). Third, our sample involved partnered, allosexual configurations only, but it is possible that 24/7 BDSM intersects with solitary sexuality or asexual identity. Fourth, the insider knowledge approach, while appropriate for the population, may have curtailed the “processes of perception and interpretation” (Taylor, 2011, p. 6). Consequently, future studies might use a different recruitment technique to reduce “insider blindness” (p. 13). Finally, two couples comprised the four participants in this study; the individuals in the couples may have shared experiences and interpretations of 24/7 BDSM, leading to a potentially narrowed representation of 24/7 BDSM outlined in this article. Future research should seek participants from different social circles and relationships to provide a more diverse understanding of 24/7 BDSM (see McCormack, 2014). In addition to these suggestions, our work calls for further research on 24/7 BDSM more broadly. For example, given the potential mental health benefits of Ivy and Teddy’s relationship, studies should examine how full-time kink affects prevention and recovery. Researchers also might employ a developmental perspective or longitudinal design to delineate the etiology of 24/7 BDSM practices.

### **Conclusion**

The phenomenology of 24/7 BDSM advances the field of human sexuality, provides a precise definition, draws attention to consent negotiation, and extends the limitations of both major and minor contributions. The themes contribute to the debate of kink as a sexual identity or serious leisure. Like others (e.g., Wignall & McCormack), we found greater evidence but insufficient criteria for serious leisure. Given that 24/7 BDSM is woven into several life domains, we conclude that the centrality of self-in-role coupled with leisure features support 24/7 BDSM as an erotic lifestyle.

### **Declaration of Interest Statement**

The authors report no conflicting interests.



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