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# **University of Sunderland**

Kinky Sexual Subcultures and Virtual Leisure Spaces

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the University of Sunderland for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy

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## **Abstract**

This study seeks to understand what kink is, exploring this question using narratives and experiences of gay and bisexual men who engage in kink in the UK. In doing so, contemporary understandings of the gay kinky subcultures in the UK are provided. It discusses the role of the internet for these subcultures, highlighting the use of socio-sexual networking sites. It also recognises the existence of kink *dabblers* who engage in kink activities, but do not immerse themselves in kink communities.

A qualitative analysis is used consisting of semi-structured in-depth interviews with 15 individuals who identify as part of a kink subculture and 15 individuals who do not. Participants were recruited through a mixture of kinky and non-kinky socio-sexual networking sites across the UK. Complimenting this, the author attended kink events throughout the UK and conducted participant observations.

The study draws on subcultural theory, the leisure perspective and social constructionism to conceptualise how kink is practiced and understood by the participants. It is one of the first to address the gap in the knowledge of individuals who practice kink activities but who do so as a form of *casual* leisure, akin to other hobbies, as well as giving due attention to the increasing presence and importance of socio-sexual networking sites and the Internet more broadly for kink subcultures. Community and non-community members were shown to possess similarities as well as distinct differences. The Internet was shown to play a significant role in all participants' kink narratives.

The research calls for further explorations of different aspects of the UK kink subculture which recognises the important role of the Internet for kink practitioners in shaping both the offline and online kink communities. The study also calls for research related to kink practitioners who are not embedded within subcultural kink communities.

## **Acknowledgements**

A common narrative among PhD researchers is how lonely the process can be: swimming in literature and reading as many things as possible; spending time travelling the country and interviewing strangers; hours of transcriptions becoming sick of the sound of your own voice; drafts and more redrafts in the library. While experiencing these things as lonely may be an accurate description of how others experienced their research and writing process, this was not my experience.

Throughout this process, I was grateful to have people close to me. I need to thank Professor Clarissa Smith – my supervisor who kept me on track with her sage words of ‘Get your writing done,’ keeping me grounded and reminding me to take the time to breath. Also thanks to Lianne Hopper for helping throughout the early stages of the PhD process, and to many of the University of Sunderland staff.

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I believe I kept some aspect of a social life together throughout the project, even if it did crumble towards the final year. Thanks London friends for providing an escape when needed. Thanks to the Scholastic Gang and the Bun for your help throughout and near the end especially. Thanks Steven for escaping the lab to answer my calls and destress and gossip with me and chat about literally everything. Thanks Kaylee for adding a sense of routine with breakfast clubs. Thanks Ameer for providing a roof and knowing me better than I know myself.

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Liam – July 2017

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## Declaration of Originality

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Sunderland or any other institution.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Printed name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

# Chapter 1: Introduction

Sexuality has traditionally been marginalised, both in society and in academic research. At a cultural level, this means that sexuality is simply not questioned for many people. People who identify as heterosexual and seek to engage in different-sex relationships are not marked as different by society. I knew this intuitively prior to attending university because my own personal understanding of society developed during my childhood and adolescence, where knowledge of my own sexuality as gay put me at odds with dominant sexual norms. Knowing I was gay from a young age, but remaining closeted until I was 16, I was forced to question the dominant norms related to sexuality. I recognized intuitively that my desires were not wrong, and this made me realise that the norms of society needed to be questioned. Even knowing this, and disclosing my sexuality openly, I could not prevent the aftermath of social stigma. Yet this stigma only fuelled my desire to have a better understanding of the ways in which sexuality is understood within culture and through social norms.

My interest in these areas was firmly rooted in gay identity and culture: exploring the debates about equality of sexuality such as the right to equal marriage and gay rights across the globe. It was only when reading Gayle Rubin's (2011) book, *Deviations*, when I first thought critically about sexuality beyond gay identity. Yet reading *Deviations*, I first began to think critically about other groups of people who form new communities and break free of cultural sexual norms, at least to an extent, and form sexual *subcultures*. Her chapter on a fisting subculture in San Francisco, subtitled *a Temple of the Butthole*, captivated me and made me want to learn far more about sexual subcultures, their politics and the experiences of people within them. I devoured the book and started thinking seriously about undertaking a PhD: my driving intellectual question became oriented around understanding contemporary kink cultures within the UK, from the perspective of people who are members of these cultures.

Before reading *Deviations*, I was aware of kink through representations in film and media, discussions within my own cultural groups, and experiences of it through social networking sites and other forms of new media. Yet this understanding was deeply influenced by the cultural representations of kink as something dangerous and 'other', which did not seem accurate to me and my own negotiations with kink and made me question what kink was and how others understood it. I expanded my reading to work on kink, as well as research on sexuality more generally. I read deeply into the work Feona Attwood and Clarissa Smith, and found great power in their concept of leisure sex—the notion that thinking of sex as a leisure activity, with all the potential benefits and negative consequences leisure can have, could help understandings of kink move beyond framings of kink as unsafe, crude, and non-consensual.

The other essay that captivated my early thinking was Rubin's (1981) essay *The Leather Menace*. While written well over 30 years ago, it still has resonance in the way that kink is stigmatized in broader sexual communities. Rubin documented the way the gay and

lesbian movement of the 1970s had excluded kinky individuals as dangerous and unrespectable—a leather menace. She argued powerfully how identity politics had benefitted gays and lesbians, but only at the expense of people who engaged in kink. It was a powerful reminder to me that issues about sexuality are complex, and kink remains stigmatized even within sexual minority groups (Rubin 1984).

Yet reading the work of Attwood and Smith (2013), I was excited by the trends they discussed in terms of how society was changing in regards to its attitudes regarding sexuality. Following sociologist Anthony Giddens' (1992) arguments that there had been a transformation of intimacy in British society regarding consensual sexual relations, Attwood and Smith discussed how ways of thinking about sex have expanded: from within a reproductive model where sex was legitimate if it was in a context that could produce children, to one where sex was viewed as a source of pleasure. It was not just something to be done with one's life partner in the context of marriage, but a form of entertainment and a leisure activity.

Yet leisure sex as a concept brings with it more than an understanding that sex is no longer solely about reproduction. It includes recognition of the work and labour put into sex. For part of leisure sex is that sex moved beyond the bedroom and much more explicitly became a part of cultural life. In this context, sex became part of mainstream culture (Attwood, 2014; Evans and Riley, 2015), not just a subcultural activity. Pornography was no longer reduced to a highly stigmatized activity to be consumed in private but a form of entertainment (McKee, 2012) and one that could be enjoyed as a social activity among friends: not necessarily consuming it together, but discussing it as a cultural event and as a source of stigma or disgust (Attwood, 2010; Mulholland, 2015).

I became excited reading around this research into sex and sexualities, specifically as they resonated so much to my own life experiences, particularly with as an individual who grew up with technology. Trends with sexuality have been accelerated with the rise of the internet (Döring, 2009). The internet has transformed experiences of sexuality, particularly for sexual minorities as it enabled young people to share experiences of sexuality online. Waskul (2003) discusses how the internet enabled people to explore the bodies and sexual identities through online chat and cybersex, while Mowlabocus (2010) contends that the relationship between digital media technologies and urban gay male cultures is so profound that it has fundamentally altered many of the practices of gay male subcultures. While he does not address kink in any detail, it is clear that these technologies and broader social trends also apply to kinky subcultures.

Indeed, in his essay exploring a history of kink subcultures, and recognizing the change that is occurring, Ying-Chao (2013, p. 173-174) observes that:

BDSM is not only an emerging sexual subculture, but in many ways it is also a mainstream, commercialized, and highly iconized culture... [However] the BDSM subculture is not merely a subculture, but also a trendy, popular lifestyle which has evolved to fit modern, industrialized highly complex social life.

While his essay was written four years ago, the point of kink subcultures flourishing and being connected to contemporary trends means that new studies are necessary to understand these changes. Indeed, since Rubin's (1991) ethnography of a fisting subculture that initially captured my intellectual imagination, several ethnographic studies have documented the ways in which kink cultures are thriving (e.g. Newmahr, 2011; Weiss, 2011). Discussing these in detail in my literature review chapters, Newmahr's ethnography, *Playing on the Edge*, is particularly relevant now as it adopted a framework that connects with the arguments of Giddens, Attwood and Smith. She argued her participants were treating kink as a serious leisure activity, and through rich qualitative data she documented the dynamics of the kink subculture and the experiences of the individuals involved. Yet while finding her work powerful in advancing our understanding of kink as a leisure activity, I noticed an absence in the subculture she was discussing: there was no real engagement with the internet or individuals I had come across who did not engage with kink communities, but were adamant about their kink identity and practices. It seemed that the question of "what is kink?", was being answered in a very specific way. This subculture existed in a particular venue, and while there was some communication through the internet, the most important and meaningful activities occurred in person, in their regular venue. The omission was not a fault of Newmahr's, but the reality of that kink community.

This gap was my route into my doctoral research and provided me with smaller questions to answer my broader driving question of "What is Kink?". I was able to research kink and to particularly think about the influence of the internet. Yet I also had another interest that I knew was missing from the literature: what about people who engage in kinky practices, but do not attend kink events. Research on kink has tended to view it as a subculture, heavily stigmatized in broader culture (Langdridge, 2006; McNair, 2013): people who practiced kink, from this literature, were heavily involved in such a subculture—that is how they could meet other people. But given the reach of the internet, and new forms of sexual subcultures online (Mowlabocus, 2010), I wanted to understand how different levels of engagement with kink communities influenced how kink is understood and experienced as an act that is rooted in social and cultural context. These individuals needed to be included in the research to provide an accurate answer to my initial driving question.

## **Structure of the thesis**

The layout of this thesis can be split up broadly into two parts. The first part consists of three literature review chapters, Chapters 2, 3 and 4, which provide the foundations for the research project.

Chapter 2 discusses the historical background of kink, highlighting the roots of the term and the activity within medicalised frameworks which sought to entrench kink within pathologising discourses and stigmatise individuals who engaged in the activities. In arguing for a movement away from the helpful history of kink, I build on the discussions above and highlight how kink can be understood through leisure frameworks.

Chapter 3 discusses the history of subcultural research, highlighting how subcultural theory and the related research has developed since its inception. The chapter outlines how subcultural research began in the Chicago School of Sociology and was further adapted in the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. The chapter ends on more recent understandings of subcultures while engaging with debates for other related terminology.

Chapter 4 builds on the history of subcultural research mentioned in Chapter 3 and on the movement of sexology research away from medicalised discourses highlighted in Chapter 2. In this chapter, I describe some of the research which has been carried out into sexual subcultures. In doing so, the chapter emphasises the importance of research into sexual subcultures which understands sex as a social and cultural phenomenon. The chapter begins with a history of sexual subcultures more generally, before focusing on research into kinky sexual subcultures. The chapter ends by addressing the critiques highlighted throughout the interview and sets up the research questions which the study will address.

The second main part of the thesis consists of Chapters 6, 7 and 8 and make up the results chapters. Chapter 6 explores conceptions of kink and how it is understood by the participants in the study. Building on the discussions raised in Chapter 2, the chapter explores participants' definitions of kink, highlighting how it was described as a fairly nebulous term and very hard to outright define. Indeed, kink was framed as a fluid construct, with definitions influenced by previous interactions and experiences. The chapter also examines participants' framings of kink and what it meant to identify as kinky. In doing so, initial differences between community and non-community members are identified. The language and terms used by participants to communicate their kink interests to others were also explored.

Given the importance of experiences and previous interactions with kink in shaping a kink identity and influencing definitions of it discussed in Chapter 6, Chapter 7 inquires how participants first interacted with kink and how they subsequently began to explore their desires. In asking about their overall kink narratives, the chapter highlights how new sexual stories related to kink are being experienced – ones which are very much different to those

described in Chapter 3. While the chapter separates routes into kink and exploration as distinct with different paths within each part, there are of course overlaps between the routes and the means of explorations. The chapter begins to explore the role of the online for the participants in the study.

Chapter 8 builds on the discussions of the role of the online for participants and provides updated understandings of how kink subcultures, for both community and non-community members, are experiencing and interacting with kink and the internet. The role of socio-sexual networking sites are discussed with an in-depth analysis of how participants are using the internet to interact with other kink practitioners, engaging in kink in online spaces and how they use the online to facilitate their offline interactions. I provide some analyses of online profiles of participants and begin to highlight some of the key differences between community and non-community members.

Chapter 9 provides an overarching review of the main findings from the research and begins to contextualise them more in relation to the literature review discussed in Chapters 2, 3 and 4. It provides a summary of the findings related to the non-community members and underlines some of the findings related to the role of the online for kink practitioners. Finally, it provides some potential areas for further research in relation to the study of kink practitioners in a UK setting and more generally.

Throughout this work, I consider my role as a researcher of kink subcultures and how my own experiences and understandings affect my writing and how I interpret the narratives of my participants. I use the observational findings attending kink events and engaging with different kink communities in the UK and US to inform the conclusions I make from participant interviews. I discuss these issues and others related to my research more in the methods section in Chapter 4.

Finally, the appendix features a breakdown of the participant demographics and a glossary of terms related to kink which I employ throughout the thesis.

# Chapter 2: Understanding Kink

## Introduction

Sex can seem an uncomplicated act. It is often considered through the frame of reproduction and having children (Connell, 1995). Alternatively, it can be viewed as a pleasurable activity with the ultimate goal of sexual orgasm. Yet these framings are simplistic and can be considered a form of sexual essentialism (Brickell, 2015). Such essentialism ignores the meanings of sex, its political nature and how it has been a source of great contention in society. As cultural studies and the social sciences have highlighted, sex is always a part of culture (Weeks, 1991), comprised of numerous subcultures, each with its own rich cultural and social history (Foucault, 1979; Ghaziani, 2017). There is great variance between individuals' understandings of sex and sexuality, and an equal variance in the meanings they ascribe to these acts and identities. These ascribed meanings are informed by numerous factors, including: the associated history, an individual's interactions with others and their own experiences.

To understand sex we need to think about its location within society and culture. As Richardson, Smith and Werndly (2013, p. 45, emphasis added) emphasize, 'the sexual is *cultural* and *social*.' By this, sex cannot be reduced to acts or biology, but has to be considered in *context*. One of the key scholars to make this argument is cultural anthropologist, Gayle Rubin. She built on the work of historians of sexuality, such as Jeffrey Weeks, Michel Foucault and Judith Walkowitz, that challenged sexual essentialism. Rubin (1984, p. 146) writes of this social and cultural approach: 'underlying this body of work is an assumption that sexuality is constituted in society and history, not biologically ordained.' Highlighting the importance of the social in understanding sex, she writes:

Human organisms with human brains are necessary for human cultures, but no examination of the body or its parts can explain the nature and variety of human social systems. The belly's hunger gives no clues as to the complexities of cuisine. The body, the brain, the genital, and the capacity of language are all necessary for human sexuality. But they do not determine its content, its experiences, or its institutional forms. (Rubin, 1984, p. 147).

In Chapter 6, I examine how identities and practices of kink have meaning for participants in this thesis. For now I highlight one must acknowledge how the context, experiences and institutional forms of kinky sexual practice are created and reproduced by participants. As Rubington and Weinberg (2015) highlights, meanings

and cultures related to sex and sexuality are in flux as values and norms change through social interactions and broader cultural changes (see also Brickell, 2015). A central component here is that the language used to describe acts and desires is important in how those things are experienced by people.

Moreover, language is the mechanism humans have to make sense of society and social interaction. As such, language holds great power in relation to sexuality related to the terms we use to describe aspects of sexuality (Cohler and Hammack, 2009), but also the broader discourses in which sexual norms are constructed. In their discussion of why and how we talk about sex, Cameron and Kulick (2003, p. 12) highlight how:

The language we have access to in a particular time and place for representing sex and sexuality exerts a significant influence on what we take to be possible, what we take to be 'normal' and what we take to be desirable.

The language we use to discuss sex is not only embedded within cultural and social norms, but is also utilised in how we produce understandings of the self (Weeks, 1991), particularly related to kink which I expand on later.

Indeed, not only is sex located within culture and society, it also has great relevance to people's sense of self. As Attwood (2009, p. xv) states, 'whether it is domesticated in intimate relationships between couples or let loose in hedonistic and uncommitted sexual episodes, sex is often now seen as central to the creation and expression of an individual's self.' How sex contributes to one's identity and place in the world is another vital component in understanding sexuality in society (Plummer, 1995).

These points also apply to kink – the symbolic meanings kink has changes based on an individual's own experiences and knowledge. Many books have been written about how sex and sexuality are defined, debated and have changed over time (e.g. Foucault, 1979; Richardson et al., 2013; Weeks, 1991). I draw on these arguments and thread discussions and conceptualization of sexuality throughout my thesis. Given the word limitations of a thesis, I want to develop a similar cultural and social history related to kink and how this led to varied definitions and meanings. Not only is this less developed in the academic literature than broader discussions of sexuality, it is more relevant to the issues that my participants are concerned about and discussed with me in their interviews.

## **A Critical Framework for Understanding Kink and Sexuality**

This thesis draws on many theoretical traditions to examine contemporary kink practices and subcultures in the UK; including scholarship located in the fields of cultural studies, sociology and critical sexualities studies. I believe an open and interdisciplinary approach is important to understanding the complexity of sexual subcultures, where attitudes and experiences are interwoven with representations and dominant discourses in society. Perhaps more than other areas of society, it is necessary to hold both individuals' perspectives together with dominant discourses to understand the dynamics of sexual subcultures (Rubin, 2011).

Yet, as poststructural theory tells us, our contemporary understandings of any social issue are always influenced by historical meanings and previous framings of cultures and societies (Foucault, 1979; Turner, 2000). As such, it is of fundamental importance to trace the meanings and changes in meaning of how society has understood terms (and the associated activities) such as kink, subculture and sexual cultures. In doing this, it is vital to adopt a *critical* approach that avoids the presentism of assuming the current social order is natural, pre-ordained or ahistorical (Foucault, 1979; Sedgwick 1990). British sociologist Mary McIntosh (1968) provided an early example of this approach in her essay *The Homosexual Role*, where she sought to understand the reasons why particular stigmatized notions became attached to homosexuality at that period and what causes or political actions they served. As historian of sexuality Jeffrey Weeks (2016) highlights, the key point was to recognize homosexuality as a *social category* that requires a cultural and political analysis.

The scholar who made the most impact in consolidating this approach in critical sexualities research more broadly is Michel Foucault. His three-volume treatise on the history of sexuality saw him chart sexuality as a historical construction that became particularly important to Western societies in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Foucault documented the ways in which power and knowledge came together to produce particular social categories of sexuality, with the focus at that time on 'the homosexual'. Foucault also argued for the importance of *resistance* to any dominant set of social categories: That social categories of sexuality are not just passively experienced, but that individuals can challenge and contest them and fundamentally alter the social categories (see also Butler, 1990, 1997). Crucially, as Rubin (1984) argues, this perspective *enables* a new study of sex—one that is focussed on

“populations, neighborhoods, settlement patterns, migration....and police technology” rather than “the more traditional ones of sin, disease, neurosis, pathology, decadence, pollution, or the decline and fall of empires” (p. 127).

Foucault was concerned not with providing the definitive answer to the history of sexuality in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but, in some sense, to develop a *methodology* for studying the topic (see also Turner, 2000): his genealogical approach. Given that there are vast, complex debates about the precise meaning and value of genealogy (e.g. Bastalich, 2009; Turner, 2000; Visker, 1995), I focus on the narrower but more useful component of Foucauldian notions of discourse. Richardson, Smith and Werndly (2013) define Foucault’s conceptualization of discourse as referring “not simply to speech but to the context and manner in which words and ideas are exchanged – who gets to say what, how and when, and with what effects” (p. 21). This means that sexual identities, definitions of kink, and the moral values attached to certain acts, are all products of discourse—dependent on social and historical context and the dynamics of that particular society. Thus, in these early chapters I provide a historical account of how Western societies have considered and spoken about sex: In this chapter I focus on kink, and I provide the same analysis for subcultures and sexual subcultures in the following sections. In this regard, I am adopting the approach laid out by Michel Foucault, and also Jeffrey Weeks, in order to better understand the dynamics of kink among my participants discussed in the latter half of this thesis.

### **Defining Kink**

One of the main foci of this research is kink. However, no clear, unified definition of kink exists, and there are no distinct boundaries demarcating when an activity moves from being vanilla (non-kinky) to kinky. Furthermore, there is a lack of clarity around how sex intersects with kink and the extent to which kink is sexual. There are numerous instances where kink is used in academia and popular culture, but never truly defined, such as when it is used as an adjective for BDSM (e.g. Taormino, 2012) or used as a noun initially in an introduction, but then discussions use alternative terminology (e.g. Khan, 2014). This raises questions around the synonymy of kink, BDSM and alternative language. Given the politics regarding terminology for kink communities (discussed below), it is important to understand nuanced meaning behind such terms. While the popularity of kink as an overarching term has been

recognized, it is important to understand the history behind the word, and the history of kink more generally.

### ***A Literary History***

The etymology of the term kink is arguably rooted in its popular predecessors of sadism and masochism. The words were originally coined by Richard von Krafft-Ebing in his work *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886; 1965). He was one of the first sexologists to examine the link between pain and pleasure in sex, focusing on the medical concerns and labelling them sadism, defined as pleasure in inflicting pain, and masochism, defined as pleasure in receiving pain. The influences of his research and ways of thinking are still present today. However, Krafft-Ebing did not create these words: he appropriated the terms from the authors Donatien Alphonse François Marquis de Sade and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch.

De Sade was a renowned literary writer and he was well-known for his sexual interests. These included a range of acts that were illegal at the time: having anal sex with prostitutes, blasphemy during sex (e.g. shouting the Lord's name in vain), and the sexual torture of children (which is still illegal) (Peakman, 2013). He was eventually held accountable for his numerous crimes and spent most of his life in-and-out of prison until his death, aged 74 years old.

While incarcerated, de Sade used literature as an outlet for his sexual energies—putting his sexual fantasies, including deeply troubling behaviours, into his fiction. The main tenet of his works revolved around the idea of torture and the infliction of pain, and ends in the death of the 'victims' in his stories. Some of his books included: *Justine* (a story about a submissive masochist), *Juliette* (a heroine who seeks out all perversities), and *120 Days of Sodom* (a story about the ultimate sexual orgy).

De Sade defended his interests when they were critiqued for being 'unnatural'; he argued that natural vices were those urges inspired by nature, such as vaginal penetrative sex for most heterosexual couples, and natural for him were his perversions (Eisler, 1948). Yet it is important to note that these stories were often very explicit and featured acts which are undoubtedly considered extreme and perhaps most would consider should be illegal, such as the death of the victim or child abuse. While the works of de Sade were used to coin the term sadism, and we are reminded of this fact in a substantial amount of texts which discuss kink, it is problematic to

locate the interests of de Sade on the same scale as consensual sadism. Arguably, de Sade was a *true sadist* inasmuch as he fantasised about such acts occurring in a non-consensual environment (Peakman, 2013). Feay (2014) argues that de Sade's cultural conditions shaped his desires, writing 'Sade's distress at his confinement, combined with his sense of entitlement, sexual peculiarities, hatred of religion and an obsession with numerology, gave rise to his precisely ordered fantasies of lust, omnipotence, cruelty and revenge.'

Similar to the origins of the word sadism, masochism also has literary roots – the antithesis of de Sade's perspective coming from Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. He was an Austrian writer and journalist known for humanitarian thinking, poetry and novels. His most well-known work is *Venus in Furs* - a novel which draws upon female dominance and is based on his own life events: he was beaten by his Aunt, whom he revered, while she wore only a fur-lined dressing gown, for watching her have sex (Peakman, 2013). *Venus in Furs* contains this image and is about a complicated relationship between a man who is infatuated enough by a woman that he wishes to become her slave. The woman tentatively agrees, but eventually embraces the idea and role and performs more degrading activities with her new slave while at the same time despising him for making her feel this way.

Sacher-Masoch's interest with female dominance was not confined to his writings. He initially explored his interest in masochism through whippings and humiliation with his first lover, Anna von Kottowitz, but found the partnership unfulfilling in the end. It was his second lover, Fanny von Pistor, who fulfilled his fantasies – the pair engaged in a six-month formal contract which stated Sacher-Masoch would be the slave of Pistor and answer to all her demands, provided she wore furs as often as possible. Sacher-Masoch's writings helped form the definition of what we would now call masochism.

Julie Peakman (2013), a historian who specialises in sexuality and pornography, highlights the roles that both de Sade and Sacher-Masoch played in influencing future insights into non-normative sexualities and how they have been entwined in cultural texts for many years since. She writes:

Sacher-Masoch was one of the first people to write constructively about masochism and his sexual fantasies involving masochist behaviour. Sade's revelations also exposed the connection of pain and suffering to heightened

lust and desire. The work of both men was to become the bases of explorations into sadomasochism that would change medical thinking in the twentieth century (ibid, p. 224).

With this literary background, it was in the context of the growing interest in psychology and psychoanalysis in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century where discussion of kink as a component of 'perverse' sex was developed further (Foucault, 1985).

### ***Psychological Roots***

As briefly highlighted earlier, a key researcher to focus on kink in their writing was German psychiatrist Richard Freiherr von Krafft-Ebing. With a medical background, and a keen interest in psychiatry, Krafft-Ebing used the interests of the two men to define sexual disorders - de Sade's primary interest of pain and torture led to Krafft-Ebing adopting the term *sadism* in his research, while he defined *masochism* using Sacher-Masoch's interest in serving and receiving humiliation. Importantly, Krafft-Ebing was writing for a medical audience and his book translates as *Sexual Psychopathy: A Clinical-Forensic Study*. As such, he located sadism and masochism within a psychological and medical discourse of pathology.

Krafft-Ebing defined sadism in *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886, p. 109) as:

The experience of sexual, pleasurable sensations (including orgasm) produced by acts of cruelty, bodily punishment afflicted on one's person or when witnessed in others, be they animals or human beings. It may also consist of an innate desire to humiliate, hurt, wound or even destroy others in order, thereby, to create sexual pleasure in one's self.

He defined masochism through very gendered and patriarchal terms, stating (ibid) it is 'where, the man, because of his sexual sensations and impulses, permits himself to be mistreated by the woman and prefers to take the part of the pursued rather than the pursuer.' Indeed, Krafft-Ebing's work and understandings of human sexuality were informed by his belief that there are 'hierarchical polarities between man and beast, man and woman, and what he calls 'civilized' and 'savage' cultures' (Khan, 2014, p. 28). He then argued that the space between these polarities is permeable and non-fixed; men can be lured into this space and go from the 'civilized' to the 'savage.'

Krafft-Ebing conceived of sadism and masochism as relatively unproblematic, and reflexive of innate (patriarchal) gendered behaviors. He argued that women

should be naturally submissive (and masochist) and men were naturally dominant (and sadist) (Krafft-Ebing, 1886). Ummni Khan, a scholar who focuses on the socio-legal construction of sexual deviancy, writes how we can witness examples of what Krafft-Ebing would conceive as every day and unproblematic forms of sadism and masochism through 'mild aggression, i.e. 'horseplay' in Krafft-Ebing's terms, which includes wrestling, pinching, and biting between couples' (Khan, 2014, p. 31). Krafft-Ebing only believed there to be a problem when the genders acted upon their stereotypes too much or when men adopted the role of a masochist.

Krafft-Ebing was not the only sexologist who believed that instincts of sadism and masochism were biological: Albert Moll, a German psychiatrist and one of the founders of modern sexology, asserted that 'the sexual impulse consists of the tendency to strike, ill-use and humiliate the beloved person' (Moll, 1899, p. 105); Albert Eulenburg, a German neurologist with interest in sexology, spoke of 'the irresistible impulses...of human nature' (Eulenburg, 1902, p. 25). However, while a group of sexologists thought in this way at the time, not all believed innate human desires played such an important part in sadism and masochism.

Sigmund Freud, a psychologist and a father of psychoanalysis, had a lasting effect on our understanding of what we now call kink and sexuality more generally (Richardson et al 2013), with psychoanalysis being one of the first theoretical perspectives which argued for sexuality to be understood as distinct from reproduction (Foucault, 1979). While he aimed to carry on the work of his contemporary, Richard Krafft-Ebing, Freud 'refuted the idea that sadomasochism had an evolutionary [and biological] basis and thought it stemmed from incidents in childhood' (Peakman, 2013, p. 228). Indeed, he argued that sexual life began in infancy and introduced the concept of psycho-sexual stages of development, erogenous zones and stated that a person's genital and their sexuality have different meanings (Turley and Butt, 2015). Freud is such an important figure in the history of sexuality studies precisely because he was pivotal in expanding our understandings of sex and sexuality (Weeks, 2010).

According to Freud, individuals are born with innate bisexuality (attraction to all genders) and in a state of 'polymorphous perversity' (sexual desire which can be gratified in a multitude of ways) (De Block and Adriaens, 2013). He argued that it is through successful socialization and development that an infant will evolve into a

healthy sexual adult, leaving behind their perversities and begin to desire reproductive monogamous heterosexuality (Weeks, 2010).

However, this is not a static and easy process, involving an individual battling with their desires, repressing them and displacing them. In this way, Freud argued that sexuality was far more complex than initially thought and opened up notions of what could be understood as sexual (Freud, 1905; Weeks, 2010). The acknowledgement that infant development plays a critical role in adult development was highly impactful and he had a lasting influence on sexuality studies by questioning what natural sexuality was; indeed, he suggested that ‘perversions, far from being the unique property of a sick or immoral minority, are the common property of us all’ (Weeks, 2003, p. 72).

Related to kink, Freud believed sadism and masochism could manifest through a combination of: children being sexual during their early psycho-sexual developmental phases; the repeated act of spanking, whipping and/or being beaten; a dysfunctional death instinct; and a weak ego and super-ego (Cross and Matheson, 2006; Ehrmann, 2005). Freud also disputed that sadism and masochism were separate, arguing ‘the most striking peculiarity of [sado-masochism] lies in the fact that its active and passive forms are regularly encountered in the same person’ (Freud, 1938, p. 570).

Freud’s ideas around sadism and masochism were coined at the same time as he was trying to understand and explain other areas of non-normative sexuality, such as fetishes and homosexuality. For example, Freud argued that male sexual fetishes were rooted in the unconscious fear of the mother’s genitalia due to it lacking a penis, and from a fear of castration of the male’s penis – fetishes in females were not discussed (Freud, 1927). However, Freud’s explanations of fetishes and kink were difficult to prove due to the unconscious desires and psycho-sexual stages of development being internal and untestable.

Freud’s notions of sexuality have been greatly influential in subsequent research into sexual development, and other areas of development more generally, such as in personality testing (e.g. Dumont, 2010; Hartmann, 2009). His work has been foundational in recognizing that sexuality is not solely a biological construct, but is instead shaped through developmental and social interactions. Furthermore, he argued that sex and sexuality were worthy of study, leading others to follow the path of sexuality research (e.g. Garcia, 1995). In their book on the language of psychoanalysis, Laplanche and Pontalis (1980, p. 307) highlight, Freud used discussions

of alternative sexualities 'as a weapon with which to throw traditional definitions of sexuality into question,' with Weeks (2010, p. 76) adding that Freud's discussions 'were the seeds of a modern view of infinite sexual variety.'

While Freud's perspectives and understandings of sexuality have been influential, his earlier theories of sexuality have been heavily critiqued. Weeks (2010) critically evaluates Freud's *perverse implantation* (a term coined by Foucault (1979) related to Freud's theory) – that is, where sexual diversity was seen as potentially positive, but understood within a broader discourse of what Freud believed was normal sex and problematically using the language of 'perversity' to describe this. Weeks (2010, p. 77) summarises:

[Freud's] definition is more generous in its inclusiveness than many others on offer. It is, however, difficult to avoid the conclusion that there is in his mind a model of what sex should be, a goal towards which sexual practices ought to be directed, and hence a prescription of how we must live.

Freud's theories were constructed through case studies of his patients – these were individuals described as special and unique and assumptions made on these patients could not be generalized to the wider population (Comer, Gould and Furnham, 2013). Indeed, there has been research since which has refuted Freudian theories, particularly from a feminist stance due to a lack of recognition of female sexuality (Khan, 2014). For example, Irigaray (1985), a feminist who specialises in philosophy and psychoanalysis, argues that psychoanalytical theories operate in a phallogocentric society which focus on female passivity and therefore lack applicability for females. Yet Freud's notions of sexuality rooted in social interactions and developing over time are critical in research into sexuality, with these ideas reflected in the thesis. I discuss the concept of the social role in sexuality more later on in the thesis.

While Freud and Krafft-Ebing were researching with an understanding of sadism and masochism as relating to control, pain and humiliation, their predecessor and fellow psychologist Havelock Ellis believed that definitions of sadism and masochism should focus principally on pain (Ellis, 1903). He believed that sadism and masochism were linked, but were also forms of *algolagnia*: a desire for sexual gratification through pain, whether inflicted or received (Ellis, 1933). For Ellis, sadism was the active form of algolagnia and masochism was the passive form. Akin to Freud and Krafft-Ebing, Ellis also viewed sadism and masochism as acceptable behaviours,

when within specific boundaries. Ellis highlighted how men suffer to win the hearts of the female they love while females take ‘pleasure [in] the sufferings’ of men (Ellis, 1972, p. 203). Ellis observed sadism and masochism in the same person and also in males and females, therefore critiquing Krafft-Ebing’s assertions that they were gender specific behaviours.

Ellis goes on to discuss how the active/passive roles are reversed during the mating/sexual relationship; women ‘in turn become subjugated to her mate and later to her offspring, receiving her full share of the pain which the sexual process allows’ (Ellis, 1972, p. 203). As Khan (2014, pp. 37-38) writes, it was only ‘when these [active and passive] tendencies exceeded the boundaries of ‘mild’ cruelty and pain, that pathology has set in.’ Ellis’ work was part of a ‘new psychiatric style of reasoning about diseases’ (Davidson, 2001, p. 68) which, while using unhelpfully deviant based frameworks, promoted the idea of sadism and masochism as extensions of the normal behaviours. Ellis’ arguments that there are acceptable and non-acceptable forms of sadism and masochism are still popular in current discourses around kink (Downing, 2007).

Another prominent writer who contributed to debates around kink was French historian Michel Foucault. In his book, *The History of Sexuality* (1979), Foucault documented how despite certain forms of sexuality being greatly repressed, sexualities emerged as an object of discussion in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There was a privileging of normative sexuality within marriage, with those who fell outside this – such as sex among children, handicapped, homosexuals or kinksters – becoming subject of punishment by society and the state. Despite such regulations, individuals with alternative sexualities were beginning to construct them, not as simply activities, but as part of their identities in empowering ways; as Foucault argued, ‘the homosexual had become a species’ (Foucault, 1979, p. 43). Foucault’s acknowledgment of sexual identities has been carried through sexuality research since (e.g. Hammack and Choler, 2009; Plummer, 1995).

An interesting component of Foucault’s theoretical discussion was his recognition of the role of confession in sexuality, and its omnipresence in society more broadly (Foucault, 1979). Part of religion for many centuries, Foucault argued that the confessional was being applied to a range of different contexts, and none was more receptive than sexuality. As people ‘confessed’ their sexual desires and fantasies, they

narrated a story of themselves that became their inner truth and a form of sexual identity.

The sexology researchers described above came from varying theoretical perspectives, but with the common goal of trying to understand and explain sadism and masochism and, as an extension, kink. Interestingly, the majority of these researchers shared the same understanding that these activities could offer pleasure, with some acknowledging that they were more than sexual practices and could constitute an identity. However, the need to *explain* kinky desires is still rooted in pathologizing and medicalized frameworks – sadism and masochism were understood as differing from *normal sex*. This concept of normal sex as a reference point to which other acts are compared against continued and greatly influenced future sexological research. Moreover, there was a distinct lack of engagement and contributions from practitioners in theorising their desires. This type of discourse continued and was only worsened through the introduction of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM)* which has arguably had the biggest impact on our understandings of sadism, masochism and kink more generally.

### ***The Psychiatric Manual***

The DSM is the psychiatric authoritative guide used by psychiatrists and psychologists to diagnose mental illnesses. It provides a consensus of what can be classified as a mental illness – something that was greatly welcomed at the time of its introduction in 1952. While the DSM prides itself on being ‘neutral with respect to theories of etiology’ (APA, 2000, p. xxvi), basing diagnoses on objective research, it has been critiqued as highly reflective of social trends in Western societies (Kleinplatz and Moser, 2005). Given that these trends and norms have often been critical of and even prejudiced toward many forms of sexual practice (Rubin, 1984), it has the potential to have a damaging effect on non-traditional forms of sexual expression. Indeed, Khan (2014) discusses the claims made against kink practitioners and how they have been used in legal settings to regulate kinky acts. In her book *Vicarious Kinks*, she argues how ‘right from its inception, the *DSM-I* identified sexuality as a site where deviations from the norm were to be ascertained and treated’ (2014, p. 38) – this did not bode well for sadism and masochism.

Kreuger documents the development of sadism (2010a) and masochism (2010b) as they appear in the DSM<sup>1</sup>. There is no mention of masochism in the DSM-I (APA, 1952). However, sexual sadism is explicitly mentioned as a component of *Sexual Deviations*, under the category of Sociopathic Personality Disturbance: ‘...the diagnosis will specify the type of pathologic behavior, such as homosexuality, transvestitism, pedophilia, fetishism and sexual sadism (including rape, sexual assault, mutilation)’ (APA, 1952, pp. 38-39). Here, sadism is grouped together with other non-normative sexualities.

In the next edition of the DSM, the DSM-II, both sexual sadism and masochism appear under the categorization of *Sexual Deviations*. The DSM-II (APA, 1968, p. 44) states ‘[Sexual Deviations] is for individuals whose sexual interests are primarily... performed under bizarre circumstances including necrophilia, pedophilia, sexual sadism and fetishism.’ The DSM-II does not give details on what each of the deviations entail, leaving the reader to need to consult other scientific literature.

The DSM-III (APA, 1980) separates sadism and masochism into two distinct sexual *Paraphilias*, moving them from deviations to paraphilias due to shift in medical opinions and kink activism (Khan, 2014). Theoretically, paraphilia is less stigmatising as a word in that it represents variation (para) of attraction (philia). However, it still had a value-judgment implicit within this as the variation is from a supposed norm of heterosexual penile-vaginal intercourse. To summarize the descriptions of sadism and masochism in the DSM-III, sexual sadism is classified as inflicting psychological or physical suffering, humiliation, and/or permanent injury on a consenting or non-consenting partner in order to produce sexual arousal (Kreuger, 2010a). Sexual masochism is classified when an individual has intentionally participated in an activity where they have been physically harmed, humiliated, bound, beaten, or otherwise made to suffer for their own sexual excitement (Kreuger, 2010b).

When this version of the DSM-III was revised (APA, 1987), both sadism and masochism had their definitions slightly changed: the key adaptations were that the sadism/masochism desires needed to last over a period of at least 6 months and the individual has either acted upon these desires or is markedly distressed by them.

The DSM arguably recognized individuals can have sadistic/masochistic thoughts without it being problematic to them. It began to open the criteria of the disorders, saying a diagnosis can be given if ‘the person act(s) on (sadistic/masochistic)

urges, or is markedly distressed by them' (APA, 1987). Furthermore, value-laden terminology found in the DSM-II (for example, the word *bizarre*) was removed from the DSM-III – 'the manual acknowledges that society has created normative standards applicable to arousal and sexuality' (Khan, 2014, p. 40).

Real progress for a more accurate definition of sadism/masochism to be in the DSM came in 1994, when the DSM-IV focused more on the distress that such desires may cause to an individual. Based on their criteria, the sadistic/masochistic urges must 'cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational or other important areas of functioning' (APA, 1994). While there may not be a clear example of what significant distress means, there is recognition that an individual can engage in such urges and not be labelled as having a paraphilia. In addition, the sexual sadism criteria allowed a discussion on non-consensual sadism (sexual assault). While the roots of sadism were in the stories of de Sade, the DSM recognized that most individuals do not want to experience *true sadism* which negates consent. There is a clear separation between individuals who enjoy sadism as a form of kink, compared to those who fall within a spectrum of pathology spectrum and wish to commit rape.

The most recent version of the DSM, the DSM-V (APA, 2013), seems to be the most tolerant and non-judgmental approach to sadism and masochism and is undergoing great revisions related to paraphilias and sexual norms. Giami, a French psychologist, points out that there have been vast changes in the social treatment of sexual perversions/paraphilias, moving from:

A model of pathologization (and sometimes criminalization) of non-reproductive sexual behaviors (such as that developed in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by authors such as Krafft-Ebing) to a model that pathologizes the absence or limitation of consent in sexual relations (Giami, 2015, p. 1128).

These changes in how paraphilias are viewed is also expressed through the introduction of the word *disorder* (Khan, 2014). This demonstrates that individuals can be sexual sadists or masochists in unproblematic ways because it does not assume that the individual feels distressed by their sexual desires; nor does it assume that non-normative sexual behaviours should be automatically labelled as psychopathological. While some have argued for the removal of sadism, masochism and other kinks from the DSM, the justification for keeping a level of classification in the DSM-V is that allows the space for future research to develop (APA, 2013; Giami, 2015).

### ***New Language and the Movement away from Pathology***

Within the DSM, there has been a broad movement away from the pathology of kink over time. Even so, its roots of sadism and masochism have been shrouded within a medicalized framework and ‘the origins of contemporary psycho-medical perspectives towards BDSM remain situated in Victorian sexology’ (Turley and Butt, 2015, p. 26). The inclusion of these terms and practices within several iterations of the DSM served to enhance the notion that they are problematic as they are different from normal sex and are even pathological. Indeed, given the focus in the DSM of heteronormative ideals of sex, kink was framed as deviant—as highlighted, there has been a political campaign to move beyond such a framing. To do this, alternative terminology was introduced by practitioners and researchers. As Weiss (2011, p. vii) notes in the introduction to her ethnographic text examining a kink subculture, ‘terminology matters.’ Just as gays and lesbians have adopted new terms for their sexual identities (Chauncey, 1994), and the same with people of non-binary gender (Davis, 2015), a similar process has occurred with kink practitioners.

Weiss expands her initial point, stating ‘the SM community recognizes itself – its practices, its desires – in and through a shared, yet contested, language’ (Weiss, 2011, p. vii). As with all communities, there are differences of opinion about the importance of specific terms and language more generally. Regarding kink subcultures, while some use sadism and masochism and overlook their stigmatized history, others sought to move beyond the two terms. This led to a debate among kink communities over which terminology was the most appropriate.

### ***Kink Terminologies***

One of the main alternatives used to describe deviant sexual practices is *Sadomasochism* (the combining of sadism and masochism into one word). There are numerous examples of Sadomasochism used in the academic literature (e.g. Langdridge and Barker, 2007; Moser and Kleinplatz, 2006) and used by practitioners. The justification for combining the terms into one word is the recognition that the two interests, sadism and masochism, are not distinctly different practices and it helps to move away from the medical association of the individual words.

Yet some argue *Sadomasochism* is still heavily shrouded in the psychological framing. For example, Weiss (2011, pp. x-xi) argues it ‘embeds the eroticization of pain within a psychiatric model of pathology.’ Instead, she discusses how practitioners and activists instead use *SM* to describe their activities, moving beyond individual words to a more rounded shorthand. However, there is still discussion on how best to frame *SM*.

Practitioners, activists and researchers stress the importance of using *SM* and not derivatives of it (i.e. *S&M*, *S/M* or *S and M*). The National Coalition for Sexual Freedom, an advocacy group that serves kink and related communities, summarise the reasoning behind not separating *S* and *M*, using an example stating:

[When talking to the press] try to get the reporter to write *SM*, not *S&M* – that evokes the old stereotypes and we are trying to get around that. *S&M* stands for sadism and masochism while *SM* stands for sadomasochism; inherent in the word is the mutual necessity for both as well as the consent involved. (NCSF, 2007)

Clearly, regardless of whether *SM*, *S/M* or *sadomasochism* is used, there is still a strong link to issues of pathology. Attempting to move the discourse beyond such debates, *BDSM* was introduced as an all-encompassing alternative.

After an extensive literature search, I cannot find a definite point of when *BDSM* was coined. While some sources suggest that it was first brought about in USENET forums in the 90s (e.g. OED, 2017), I have not been able to confirm this. In academic research, there is less focus on its conception, and more focus on breaking the term down with a discussion of its benefits and limitations. The term *BDSM* normally consists of three parts: ‘Bondage and Discipline’ (*BD*), ‘Domination and Submission’ (*DS*), and ‘Sadomasochism’ (*SM*).

*BDSM* is argued as ‘newer and trendier’ compared to *SM* (Newmahr, 2011, p. 18), and is used as an umbrella term to include all non-vanilla sex (vanilla sex is classed as sexual practices which are not classed as kink and are discussed below). While some see it similar to *SM*, or even interchangeable (Langdrige and Barker, 2007), others regard it as a stand-out term trying to expand discourses related to *SM* practices (Weiss, 2011). A benefit of *BDSM* is that it has gained more public popularity in a way that *SM* was not able to do. Furthermore, the term allows for more acts to be classed as ‘kinky,’ due to its three categories (*BD*, *DS* or *SM*).

However, this can also be a limitation - it can be exclusionary if activities do not fit into BD, DS, or SM. Fetishes, for example, are characterized by sexual arousal to an inanimate object (Moser and Kleinplatz, 2007) and are different to partialisms (strong sexual attraction towards a part of the body). While Moser and Kleinplatz (2007) discuss fetishes in relation to SM and speak of the overlap between the two, they do not clarify how they can both be categorized under the same SM framing, or indeed BDSM framing. Furthermore, other activities ostentatiously kink do not neatly fit under the BDSM umbrella either, despite recognition of their relatedness.

Given the problems with previous labels, (sadism and masochism being too specific, S/M, SM and sadomasochism weighed with medical history, and BDSM feeling too awkward and narrow for inclusivity), I feel that it is time to welcome a term that has been used in almost all research mentioned above, yet never as the overarching term—kink

### ***Kink: Moving from the Adjective to the Noun***

There are numerous instances of kink being used in relation to non-vanilla sex. While there seems to be no specific time when people began using the word kink in a sexual context, it appears to have a strong link with deviant sex – despite differences in preferences for terminology (of S/M, SM, BDSM), there is a mutual use of the word kink.

However, it started to gain some use to describe eccentricity and perversion when it was used by Colin MacInnes in his novel *Absolute Beginners* in 1959. He writes, ‘Suze...meets lots of kinky characters...and acts as an agent for me getting orders from them for my pornographic photos’ (MacInnes, 1959). However, it gained more momentum as describing more perverse sex: kinky was used in a song called *Kinky Boots* (Kretzmer and Lee, 1964) by Honor Blackman and Patrick Macnee; in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century it entered the general lexicon to mean a sexually abnormal or perverted person; it has also been used in rhetoric which describe *good* deviant sexual practices compared to *bad* ones (Medlin, 2001).

However, kink is very rarely used as an all-encompassing word for the set of behaviours within academic contexts. Instead, it is used more so as an adjective to describe kinky practices or kinks people have, used in titles to make them catchy but synonymous with a given definition of SM/BDSM/etc., or used throughout a text once

a definition of SM/BDSM/etc. has been provided. For example, Newmahr (2010) titles her article 'Rethinking Kink: Sadomasochism as Serious Leisure' – while using kink in her title, she goes onto give explanations of SM behaviour. Another example is Khan (2014) and her book *Vicarious Kinks: S/M in the Socio-Legal Imaginary* – despite kink on the front cover of the book, it is S/M that is used throughout. Weiss (2006) titles an article 'Mainstreaming Kink: The Politics of BDSM Representation in U.S. Popular Media' – again, kink features in the title but the focus is then moved to BDSM. Sloan (2015) uses the term BDSM in her article, despite quotes from her participants using the word 'kink' repeatedly. Barker (2013) speaks of kink throughout their article, yet still provides definitions and discussions of BDSM. It seems that kink is considered vernacular whereas BDSM or SM are considered more (social) scientific—perhaps a legacy of the pathologizing past.

While I have engaged on the discourses related to terminology I argue to move away from these debates and use kink as a noun and umbrella term for a diverse set of sexual practices that extend beyond the traditional BDSM. I am not alone in recognizing the popularity of kink. For example, Newmahr (2011) in her ethnography comments that kink is becoming a more popular term. Furthermore, kink is the terminology used in subcultural groups who engage in non-vanilla behaviours (discussed later). It is this ultimate point that I feel is the most important for justifying the use of the word kink. While Moser and Kleinplatz (2007, p. 41) were writing around SM, their point is equally valid when the term kink is used instead: 'self-definition is crucial for understanding SM phenomena'—a notion that has a significant history in social and cultural research related to oppressed groups (Davis, 2015; Lorde, 1984). If kink is the term used by practitioners, then it should be the term used in academic discourse.

### **My Definition of Kink**

In the rest of this thesis, I shall be using the term kink to encompass alternative terminology, such as SM, S/M or BDSM. This is due to an increasing recognition of the use of kink in academia, but also its prevalence among kink subcultures (Newmahr, 2011). The aim of the previous section was to document the nuanced ways terminology has changed and to justify the use of kink hereon in. However, it did not

provide a definition of kink. After discussing some of the intricacies of definitions, I shall provide my own definition of kink and explain why I came to it.

In developing my arguments, I use research where authors may not have used kink as their choice of terminology. While the terms may not be the same, their broader arguments are important and can be used for my terminology, which is intended to be broader in scope. For consistency, I will be using the term kink throughout my work, but will use the original terms when using other materials.

In their edited text *Sadomasochism: powerful pleasures*, sex researchers Kleinplatz and Moser provide an in-depth exploration of the kinky sexual subculture. They discuss the problems with coming to a precise definition of kink (they use the terminology SM). They state:

This task is actually quite difficult. First, who is to define it? Is it to be the helping professionals... who work with these people clinically, though not necessarily for the consequences of SM interests? Should it be the lawyers and legislators who define the crimes and determine when the behavior goes 'too far'? Should terms be defined by researchers who study SM and, more specifically, by theorists or by those who collect data? Is it to be defined by SM practitioners themselves, and if so, by which subgroup? (Kleinplatz and Moser, 2006, p. 2)

Moser and Kleinplatz do not discuss the importance of changing sexual norms and societal change more broadly: Weinberg, Williams and Moser (1984, p. 380) emphasize that 'the 'sadomasochist' [or kinky practitioner] is a socially constructed category.' This comment is reflective of how the kinky practitioner was framed in the DSM and will be discussed further throughout the rest of the thesis.

It is also important to recognize in any definition of kink that while the notion of a 'kinky individual' may be socially constructed, kink can also hold a symbolic meaning for the practitioner with varying levels of importance in an individuals' life. The meanings of kink may change based on an individuals' sexual interests, their familiarity with kink or on the importance kink holds to them. For example, in an ethnography of a kink community, Rubin (1991) highlighted how SM was not only framed as a set of non-vanilla activities, primarily consisting of fisting related activities, but also served as a form of political resistance to the broader gay hegemonies at the time, discussed more in Chapter 4. A definition of kink must account for this diversity.

The first study to attempt to root definitions of kink, or SM in their terminology, within the narratives of practitioners was carried out by Weinberg, Williams and Moser (1984). They conducted fieldwork in both heterosexual and homosexual SM communities in San Francisco and New York between 1976 and 1983. Using data from interviews and observations from this period, they summarized that SM has five social features: dominance and submission, role-playing, consensuality, a sexual context, and a mutual definition. This was the first framework which provided a definition for what constituted SM and as such I discuss each of these features here.

*Domination and Submission (DS):* These were both central to the activities observed. The authors primarily witnessed this through psychological and physical pain – rather than see pain infliction as its own category, it was central to the assertion of power. The infliction of pain is not uncommon in many sexual contacts, more notably in the form of biting and scratching, in part due to the physiological similarities pain has with sexual orgasms - over 50% of men and women have an erotic response to biting or being bitten (Kinsey et al., 1953). In discussions with their participants, Weinberg et al. found that there were varying degrees to which participants wanted physical pain – some preferred relatively pain-free spankings, while others desired the sensation of pain, have skin change colour and provide a lasting discomfort. In terms of psychological pain, there was a focus on humiliation, anxiety (and anticipation) regarding what will happen next, alongside powerlessness and fear to promote the feel of an exchange of power.

DS was also explored through bondage; Weinberg et al. found bondage to be very common in SM scenes. While physical sensations played a role, bondage was viewed as the relinquishing of power. Regardless of the type of bondage used (e.g. gags, mummification, handcuffs, etc.) there is an element of vulnerability, and thus submission. The centrality of domination and submission is perhaps unsurprising given the history of kink discussed earlier.

*Role Playing:* This feature of SM is apparent in the terminology used to discuss engagement in SM; the words *play* and *scene* are common terminology and imply a sense of roleplay. It also links with the previous feature, domination and submission, as participants normally choose the role they take on during a scene: a dominant, a submissive, or a switch (There are extensions and preferences to the labels and they may change for the activities, but these are the generally well-known ones. For more

terms, see Weiss, 2011. A comprehensive list of terms related to kink are featured in appendix 1).

While dominant and submissive may be the overarching roles, there can also be a more specific engagement in role play. For example, role-sets such as ‘teacher and student’, ‘kidnapper and victim’, and ‘prisoner and prison guard’. These roles are the popular assumption of what is meant by role play. While some may invest resources into a scene to make it more believable, such as buying uniforms or renting a particular play space to reflect the nature of the role play, others see it as much more light-hearted and consider the roles more loose.

*Consent:* Central to all engagement in SM is consent – activities are done by willing individuals and consent is of paramount importance in distinguishing between SM and abuse. Weinberg et al. state consent is normally discussed beforehand by all parties – what activities can and cannot be done, what are the ‘hard’ (non-breakable) limits and what limits can be pushed, what activities bring enjoyment, and what is the goal of engaging in the scene. Weinberg et al. (1984) emphasise that consent is a complex issue in SM scenes, describing how even after negotiating consent and limits extensively beforehand, consent within a scene can change and limits may be pushed. Therefore, strategies are put in place to check ongoing consent throughout a scene. For example, safe-words can be introduced for the submissive to indicate if a SM scene needs to change direction or if they wish for an activity to stop. Alternatively, physical cues can be used instead to indicate to each other the same information as safe-words, which is useful if a submissive is gagged.

However, there is also an emphasis on the dominant in relation to consent. An experienced dominant is expected to be able to notice the physical cues from a submissive, listen to safewords and also check in with the submissive in other ways, such as asking directly if the submissive is enjoying the activity. Those who failed to recognise these signs often received a bad reputation, and the kink practitioners ‘avoided persons who did not abide by these rules [of consent]’ (ibid, p. 386).

While consent can be complex to negotiate in interactions where there is a willing transfer of power, even more so when SM is related to ‘pushing the limits’ (pushing how far an individual can go with a particular activity), there seems to be a general understanding of how consent can be given, and removed: this occurs through discussions beforehand and through ongoing consent with safewords during a scene.

While, there are those who play on the boundaries of consent, known as edge players, these people can often be seen as less sexually desirable by some SM practitioners (see Newmahr, 2011 for a full discussion of consent and edgeplay).

*Sexual Context:* Most of the participants that Weinberg et al. engaged with in their observations and interviews recognized some level of sexual context in their activities. For many of the SM scenes witnessed, males normally masturbated at the end of the scene, or there was an expectation that they would after leaving. While some activities can be explicitly sexual, e.g. giving oral sex, others can be of a sexual context, such as spanking/whipping erotic parts of the body. Furthermore, it is not uncommon to find revealing outfits or nudity at SM events (Kleinplatz and Moser, 2006).

*Mutual Definition:* For something to be labelled as kinky, it needs to be recognized as kinky by the people engaging in the activities. Even with the four previous features, there remains the need for self-identification. Weinberg et al. provide scenarios in their article where activities meet the previous criteria, but the participants and onlookers recognized the activity as something other than kink - the symbolic meaning held for those practicing compared to those viewing it were vastly different.

To summarize their classification, Weinberg et al.'s (1984) study was highly influential in helping to provide some example of what constitutes SM, and consequentially kink, and has been used as the foundation for further research investigating kink communities (e.g. Taylor and Ussher, 2001; Donnelly and Fraser, 1998; Hopkins, 1994). However, not all research is supportive of their classification system. For example, one of the authors of the original research and a colleague, Moser and Kleinplatz (2006, p. 4), argue that despite the classification system, 'it is sometimes easier to say what SM is not', and go on to argue the 'components provide description more than explanation and certainly do not constitute a definition'. Furthermore, different groups of individuals who engage in SM have been documented, with each group having a different understanding of what constitutes SM (Weinberg 2006).

Newmahr (2011) critiques the five aspects mentioned, specifically the sexual features of SM. She highlights a quote from the original article by Weinberg et al. which states, 'some people engaged in SM-type activities but did not give them sexual

meaning and thus were not considered to be ‘into SM’ (Weinberg et al., 1984, p. 382). Rather than excluding individuals, she argues that there should have been a recognition that for some individuals, SM is not sexual; instead, there is a focus on the possibility of using SM as a form of escapism from the ‘mundane, of the ordinariness or alienation of everyday life’ (Taylor and Ussher, 2001, p. 304), other stimulating sensations of some SM play, (e.g. the release of endorphins from sexual spanking [Plante, 2006]), or the benefits of being part of a community (Henkin, 2007).

Yet this is not to say that, for most, SM may be related to the sexual. Seeking to expand on the data provided by Weinberg et al (1984) and using instead more phenomenological based methodology, Taylor and Ussher (2001) conducted a study of sexual stories, interviewing kinky practitioners for their own understandings of SM. *Sexual arousal* was a prominent theme for all their participants – SM ‘must occur within a sexual context or in such a way to be sexually arousing’ (ibid, p. 300). Langdridge persuasively argues that ‘some recent moves within kink communities to minimize the sexual and instead focus on identities and practices that are more relational...at its core, [kink], at least, appears to be about sex and this cannot and, I would argue, should not be denied’ (Langdridge, 2006, p. 208). Given the power of sexual stigma in society, one must also wonder the extent to which denying the sexual of SM may be a way of managing one’s own reputation.

Since the features of SM put forward by Weinberg et al. (1984), there have been numerous other definitional attempts. Again building on their previous work, Moser and Kleinplatz (2007, p. 41) suggest SM is ‘a term used to describe a variety of sexual behaviours that have an implicit or explicit power differential as a significant aspect of the erotic interaction.’ They use interview data and manifestations of kink in media, books, film, support groups and academic studies to explore different themes of SM expression. Their themes include: the adoption of a role, the exchange of power, common activities to assert this power exchange including bondage, spanking, humiliation and pain, and the myriad of kink relationships which are possible (romantic or otherwise). In their concluding remarks, they highlight how the complex nature of SM means that there are any more possible themes, some will not be applicable to a practitioner, and are interesting questions which relate to an individual’s sexuality and the role of the sexual in SM.

Weinberg (2006) provides a review of the social scientific literature which has researched SM using surveys and questionnaires, content analysis of media, ethnographies of kink communities, and critical essays. Consistent across all studies in his systematic review of the literature is an understanding of the importance of domination and submission in definitions of SM. In helping to explain what SM is, the surveys and content analyses highlighted particular related activities (e.g. bondage, humiliation, pain, etc). The ethnographic accounts highlighted by Weinberg, and which are discussed more in the next chapter, noted the importance of intimacy and gear when engaging in SM. The critical essays Weinberg explored were separated into two core themes: challenges to DSM nosology, written by sexologists Moser and Kleinplatz (2003) addressing the presence of SM in the DSM; and critiques of legal decisions in relation to SM, which featured essays from Hoople (1996), who questions who has the authority to represent kinky individuals, and Green (2001) who examines kinky behaviours and if individuals are protected under the right to consent in a court of law.

Seeking to build on and address the critiques she made of previous definitions, Newmahr (2011, p. 18) views SM as, 'the collection of activities that involve the mutually consensual and conscious use, among two or more people, of pain, power, perceptions of power, or any combination thereof, for psychological, emotional, or sensory pleasure'. While this is a very broad definition and reflects the diversity of the activities involved in SM, it fails to address that, for some, SM is very much a sexual activity. Moreover, there is a failure to address that sex may feature *somewhere* in SM activities (Langdridge, 2006).

While no definition will be a complete fit, due to the wide variety and evolution of kinks and kink communities, there does need to be some common description of what classifies something as SM. Therefore, in keeping with other definitions, and leaning on Newmahr's definition above, I propose a definition of *kink* as the following:

Kink is the collection of activities that involve the mutually consensual and conscious use, among two or more people, of power exchange or the role playing of power exchange, for sensory, emotional, or psychological pleasure. These are mostly sex orientated and can include the infliction/receiving of pain, the wearing of gear (leather, rubber, hoods, etc), fetishism/partialism, and normally has a level of intimacy among those involved. There should also be a mutual understanding between those involved that what is being done is kinky.

While acknowledging that no definition will be accurate for all practitioners because of the social and symbolic nature of kink, a definition of kink is necessary for a mutual acknowledgement and understanding of the activities being discussed. It is my intention that this definition is more encompassing and inclusive of the range of perspectives about kinky activities. It is also interesting to consider *why* there has been such a strong focus on defining kink activities on the appropriateness of related terminology. Reasons for this focus relate to the initial understandings of kink (sadism, masochism, fetishes, etc) being rooted within medical/pathological discourses. On this matter, Lisa Downing, a researcher working in French discourse of sexuality, writes:

Given that sadism and masochism retain the status of mental disorders in the *DSM-IV* and the *ICD-10*, it is perhaps not surprising that counter-discourses about SM produced by the spokespeople of SM communities and support groups and by pro-SM academics, activists and mental health professionals often promote a rhetoric which attributes liberating and even therapeutic qualities the practices grouped under the terms SM or BDSM [or kink].

(Downing, 2007, p. 125).

While the earlier research into kink opened up new understandings about what constituted sexuality, discourses were framed around sexualities which differed from the *normal* (Weeks, 2010). In this way, pathology and stigma were still associated with kink. Indeed, there was, and still is, great motivation to leave behind these problematic framings and instead promote other aspects of kink (Langdridge and Barker, 2013). As a way of doing this, the focus moved from kink as *non-normal* to focusing on the 'trust, respect, safety, control and care that exists between those people involved in the relationship of erotic power exchange' (Downing, 2007, p. 126).

To highlight how kink could be thought of as a 'normal' activity and move the focus towards other aspects of kink, a mantra-like phrase was introduced to the populace which 'neatly encapsulates the spirit of this rhetoric' (ibid): 'Safe, Sane and Consensual' (SSC). This phrase is a cornerstone of the kink subculture, appearing in popular discourses, the media and academia (Langdridge and Barker, 2007). The creator of the phrase David Stein, a member of the Gay Male S/M Activists, used the term to 'preamble the statement of purpose that goes on to talk about such things as community, responsibility, tradition, education and gay liberation... SSC was originally

intended neither as an ideal to live up to nor as a way of defining SM in general' (Stein, 2003). He expands on this point, stating:

We did intend to draw a distinction and to leave some kinds of sadomasochistic behavior on one side of the line as indefensible while maintaining that whatever fell inside the line was defensible ethically and should be defended politically and legally. But what we intended to leave outside the line was things like sadistic serial killers and snuff scenes for money, coercive s/m of all sorts, not the edgier kinds of consensual play – unless there was a question of whether consent was even possible, as with the underage or the mentally unbalanced. We never intended to draw the line to leave out heavy s/m, real pain rather than symbolic pain, blood play, knife play, humiliation play, 24/7 Master/slave relationships, and so on. But all these things and more have come under the gun in recent years from self-righteous censors and 'dungeon monitors' within our community waving the SSC banner! (ibid)

However, it quickly became used a way of separating acceptable and unacceptable kink, with Stein adding, 'Once an idea is reduced to a slogan... no one can control its meaning. Everyone who sees it interprets it with his or her own prejudices and preconceptions' (ibid).

In her discussions of the problems around such phrases in relation to edge play, Downing (2007) highlights that Stein's quote mirrors the censors he is arguing against when he insists 'that there should be a 'proper' unitary domain that is SM, with a codified catalogue of acceptable practices' (ibid: 132). Downing argues that a labelling of acceptable and unacceptable forms of kink is problematic and moves the emphasis away from the original focus of kink, to use commentary of Michel Foucault, 'to exceed existing mainstream configurations... shatter the field of 'sexuality' and create new pleasures' (ibid: 135).

While SSC has been highly beneficial in communicating kink to popular society, it has been to the detriment of certain activities which fall under the kink spectrum, e.g. edge play. Edge play, rather than playing on the external boundaries set by SSC, instead focuses on the *internal* boundaries set within, for and by a kink community, and can involve playing with consent, consciousness, temporality and permanency (Newmahr 2011: 147). Indeed, Newmahr devotes a third of her monograph to a

discussion of edge play and the significant role it plays in the subculture she researched.

Critics of SSC (e.g. Williams et al. 2014; Downing 2007) believe the term forces a 'vanilla-fication' of kink behaviours to align more with non-kinky behaviours, arguably taking away the risk from kink which for some is the main motivation. Employing SSC does not allow for a conversation to occur which explores potential moral and ethical concerns related to certain activities. Moreover, dismissing activities which do not fall within SSC minimizes discussions around the risks associated with kink activities, both mental and physical. Finally, for some, edge play and playing with risk are the main motivations for engagement in kink – a mantra of good and bad kink should not delegitimize their kink activities or their kink identity.

To address problems around SSC, alternatives have been put forward. Most notably are Risk Awareness Consensual Kink (RACK), which has gained some traction within kink subcultures and the academic community, and the 4C's of Consent, Communication, Caring and Caution (Williams et al. 2014). These alternative aimed to address the pitfalls of the specifics related to SSC rather than addressing the broader issues mentioned above (Downing 2007). For example, RACK and the 4C's avoid the term *sane* due to the potential pathological history associated with kink. Partly due to the effectiveness of SSC as a political tool, the alternatives have not garnered similar popularity.

While Downing (2007) argues that discussions of appropriate ways of doing kink is extremely problematic, regardless of the terms used, such terms have been helpful for people to understand and convey what kink is to the masses, promoting a focus on how kink is done in non-pathological ways. The thesis will explore potential impacts of SSC and how kink relates to consent, ethics and morality in the results section.

### **Situating Kink in Changing Sexual Norms**

As discussed above, there is motivation to move away from pathological explanations of kink activities and towards understandings which frame kink as an activity which brings pleasure to individuals, can be sexual and moves away from rooting kink within medical terminologies. This framework should also recognize that individuals invest resources in kink to varying degrees; for some, kink engagement is a lifestyle which

intertwines with friendship circles, while for others kink is a separate part of their life and/or identity. Chapter 3 examines how cultural studies has understood communities and subcultures in detail, and it is important to highlight here how research on kink practitioners has tended to focus on those who are heavily involved in kink communities.

The leisure perspective can be a useful way to think about the range of levels of engagement and identity with kink. The leisure perspective has been pioneered through the work of sociologist Robert Stebbins. While it was discussed prior to this (e.g. Glasser, 1970; Kaplan, 1975), Stebbins helped to create a field of leisure studies where amateurism (an engagement in an activity as a pastime which requires investment of resources and skill to perform competently) and hobbies could be studied. Prior to this, the cultural studies and social sciences did not have a definition or place to study leisure activities (Elkington and Stebbins, 2014). Studies of leisure pursuits were particularly important given post-industrial changes and the increase in free time (Rojek, 2000).

In his research with a variety of different leisure activities (Stebbins, 1979; 1982; 1997), Stebbins observed that there were two primary types of leisure: casual and serious leisure. Firstly, Stebbins (2001, p. 305) defined an act of *casual leisure* as an 'immediately, intrinsically rewarding, relatively short-lived pleasurable activity requiring little or no special training to enjoy it.' He separated casual leisure into eight types: play; relaxation; passive entertainment; active entertainment; sociable conversation; sensory stimulation; casual volunteering; and pleasurable aerobic activity (Stebbins, 2014). Examples of casual leisure include watching television (passive entertainment), eating or drinking (sensory stimulation) and chatting with friends (sociable conversation). Activities can be categorized as more than one type and are open to interpretation – one activity may be perceived differently by several people.

At the other end of the spectrum, Stebbins (1982) proposed *serious leisure*. Serious leisure is distinct from casual forms through recognition of the significant time and energy that can be devoted to leisure activities (Stebbins, 2007), and is 'important to the wellbeing of the individual and society' (Rojek, 2000, p. 18). Rather than list the 18 subsections Stebbins' gives serious leisure, Figure 1 provides visual representation of serious leisure and its alternatives of casual and project based leisure<sup>2</sup>. Examples of

serious leisure are activities to which individuals tend to devote more resources, such as time or money. Examples can include rock climbing (sport), learning a second language (hobbyist) and volunteering for a local charity (volunteer). As with the casual leisure perspective, categorization of activities is open to interpretation. Newmahr (2011, p. 318) succinctly summarizes the qualities of serious leisure that make it distinguishably different from casual leisure into six characteristics. These are: the need for perseverance; the leisure pursuit as a career; effort involving the acquisition of knowledge, training, experience and/or specialized skills; durable benefits; unique ethos; and a personal identification with the leisure activity.

A third conceptualization of leisure is deviant leisure. This refers to leisure activities that are illegal in society or that are thought to be damaging to the fabric of society. Half a century ago, it would have been possible to see kink as a form of deviant leisure because of the stigma it received in society and the questionable legality of certain acts (particularly when homosexuality was criminalized). Furthermore, the strong association between kink as a symptom of mental illness described earlier framed kink as damaging to society.

An understanding of kink as a form of deviant leisure has been particularly pertinent to legal cases related to kink, where kink was often regulated through issues of consent, violence and concerns of extreme images (Khan, 2014). While Weait, an expert of law and social policy, reminds us, 'S/M is not a crime' (Weait, 2007, p. 70), it does break social norms. The law has been used countless times as a way of regulating kink, and other non-normative sexualities (see Rubin, 1982).

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to fully interrogate how kink has been dealt with in legal settings, and indeed how it is currently treated (see Khan, 2014; Attwood and Walters, 2013; Weait, 2007; Chaline, 2005). However, framing kink under deviant leisure is unhelpful for this thesis. Indeed, such an approach would fit the pathological model of kink that has been rejected in recent years.

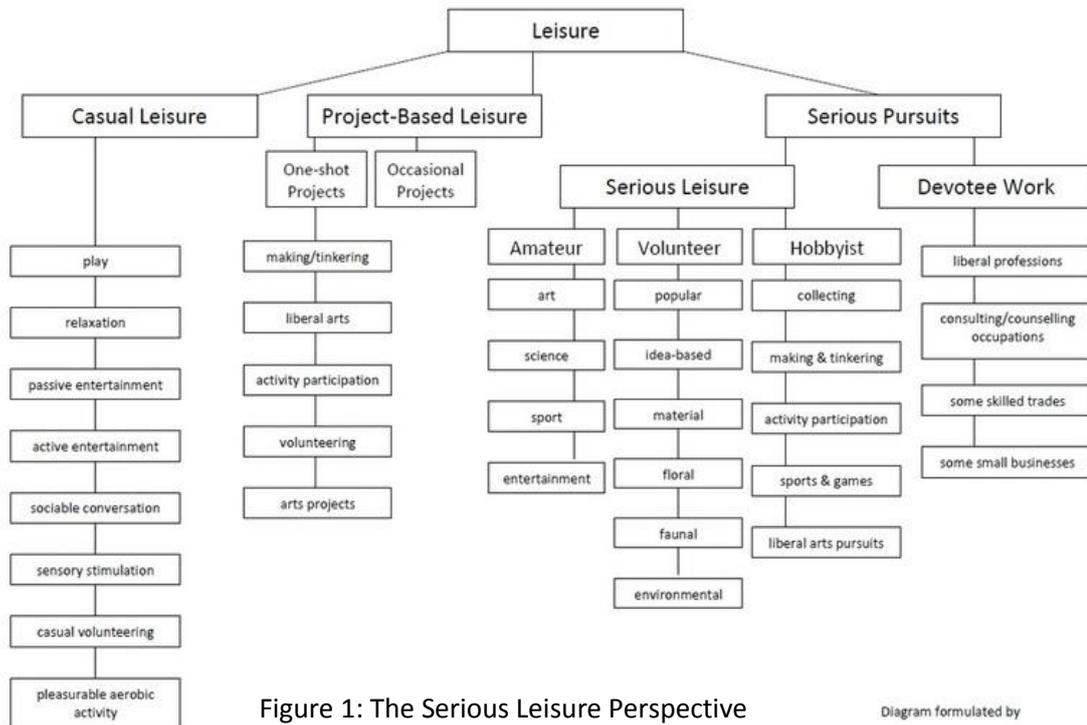


Figure 1: The Serious Leisure Perspective

Diagram formulated by

While I will discuss the use of the leisure perspective about kink, it is also interesting to examine the benefits of the perspective with regards to sex more generally. The conceptual power of framing sex as a leisure activity is that it highlights the flaws of previous understandings of sex which adopted a medicalized framework and sought to pathologize non-heteronormative and non-normative sexual practices. Historically, and similar to kink described earlier, sex has been viewed through frameworks of risk which focused on perceived physical and moral damage (Rubin, 1984).

Yet there is a broad change in discourses related to sex; it is no longer viewed for primarily procreational purposes and there is more focus on the recreational and pleasurable aspects of sex instead (Giddens, 1992; Twenge et al., 2015). Alongside a greater acceptance of gay men and lesbian women (Keleher and Smith, 2012), liberal attitudes toward sexuality have resulted in a fundamental shift in societal perception of and rationale for sexual intercourse (Treas, Lui and Gubernskaya, 2014). Sex is now a common conversation topic among friends (Evans and Riley, 2014) and sexual media is easily accessible (Edelman, 2009). With these new social trends, new frameworks are required.

Through a leisure model, sexual acts are ranked as part of a complex social structure in which pleasure and risk are balanced. There are risks associated with engaging in casual sex, such as the transfer of sexually transmitted infections, but risks are managed through the use of contraception and regular sexual health screenings (Hammack et al., 2017).

Stebbins (1982; 1997) originally characterizes sex as a form of casual leisure, with a focus on sensory stimulation and relatively fleeting pleasures. However, this positioning has been critiqued on several grounds. Blackshaw (2010) describes Stebbin's dismissal of sex as a form of casual leisure as 'scornful', failing to recognize that for some sex is more than a frivolous activity. Attwood and Smith (2013) expand on this in their discussion of sex and leisure:

We wouldn't want to deny that sex can be playful, entertaining, stimulating and experienced in the here-and-now...[but] for yet others, sex may be more like an 'extreme sport,' where orgasm (temporary pleasure) is less important than as a side-effect of testing the body's limits, or creating new and exciting forms of intimacy with one or more partners, of acquiring skills and knowledges, of thrill seeking and risk taking, sought as pleasures in their own right (ibid, p. 330).

Instead of placing sex in a dichotomy of casual or serious leisure, they argue for *leisure sex* – a recognition of sex as a leisure activity but an avoidance of characterizing it as either casual or serious leisure. They argue that sex has 'significant benefits (and costs) for individuals and society, offering considerable potential for productivity, development of skills and knowledge, and thereby might engender self-confidence, identity and community through achievement' (ibid). They expand on this point:

Thinking about sex as leisure we draw here on Csikszentmihalyi's definition of leisure as a crossover of free time, activity and attitude (1975); 'leisured sex' isn't simply about having sex, clashing genitals or some other body parts in pursuit of orgasm, it is about having the time to give to exercise one's interests in sex, to engage in sex as a form of relation, entertainment, self-realization, self-gratification and gratification of others, and personal development.

(Attwood and Smith, 2013, pp. 330-331).

The benefit of using leisure frameworks for sex is clearly present when employed in a research perspective. For example, employing a leisure perspective to understand pornography consumption, which includes viewing pornography as a form of

entertainment in some contexts (McKee, 2012), allows alternative questions to be posited, which move beyond concern about harm to recognizing the diverse experiences of porn consumption that include possibilities for pleasure. This compliments a 'new paradigm' of porn research (Attwood, 2010) that places porn within its social and historical context.

As well as in sexology research more generally, the benefits of the leisure perspective have been taken up in research on kinky individuals. Framing which views pleasure alongside risk, something central to the leisure perspective, is not a novel idea in research around kink. Indeed, this is reflected in how practitioners have extensive measures in place to minimize the risks associated with the activities (this is discussed more in the next chapter with Rubin's Leathermen). There has also been a call to characterize kink as a form of *serious* leisure.

In her article, '*Rethinking Kink: Sadomasochism as Serious Leisure*', Newmahr (2010) provides a powerful argument to view kink as a form of serious leisure to move beyond mainstream assumptions of kink as simply 'naughty' sex. Moving towards a more nuanced perspective allows for the consideration of the complex social structures involved in kink communities (Weiss, 2006; Williams, 2006) and helps move beyond pathological perspectives.

The utility and applicability of the leisure perspective can be seen by comparing kink cultures with sporting cultures. For example, in both kink and sport there are clear rules (Rubin, 1991), equipment and uniform (Chaline, 2010), nuanced terminology (Williams, 2009) and people frequently participate together over an extended period (Williams, 2006), effectively forming teams. In this way, kink cultures are little different from the cultures of sporting teams—apart from sport has a higher incidence of reported injury (Sumilo and Stewart-Brown, 2006). Related to this, Taylor and Usher (2001) discuss the immersive aspects of individuals involved in kink, showing that community members dedicate a significant amount of time to their activities, arguing that this time investment and the honing of skills are two of the lesser known ways in which kink should be framed as serious leisure. Despite this, it is the management of risk which receives the most attention from the literature—not least because of the perceived threat from societal stigma that such practices are inherently dangerous (Attwood and Walters, 2013). As such, there has been greater focus by academia and

activists on the management of risk and boundaries of kink. However, these rules only help to solidify the framing of kink as serious leisure.

### **Chapter Summary**

The purpose of this literature review chapter was to explore the rich political background of kink and understand how its history of pathology and stigma has informed its current conceptualisation and related discourses around terminology and definitions. There is an overarching narrative of a movement away from the older understandings of kink as a mental illness and moral deviance towards more progressive and sex positive frameworks which understand kink as a form of leisure, akin to other hobbies.

These changes have not occurred on their own and are part of a broader trend towards more liberal attitudes towards sexuality. Definitions of sex and their moral framings are never static and change over time and culture. Indeed, rather than the viewing sex and kink through a lens of risk, there is a call to view them as activities which feature potential harms, but also has benefits for the individual and the society (Attwood and Smith, 2013). Therefore, this chapter argues for the leisure perspective to understand kink participation. Moreover, the leisure perspective allows a new discourse to occur related to individuals who may view kink as a form of casual leisure rather than serious leisure.

In keeping with this reconceptualization, definitions and language related to kink were discussed. Reviewing this literature, I argued for the use of the term *kink*, positing my own definition which recognises the fluid boundaries of what individuals understand as kinky while allowing for further discourses to occur. However, kink is an activity which holds symbolic meaning for practitioners, with each individual possessing a unique view of what kink is and what it means to them. An individual's meanings of what kink is and how it should be done are informed through how they were introduced to kink, the circuit in which they carry out their activities and the cultural and social discourses they are exposed to (Weiss, 2011; Newmahr, 2011). Furthermore, definitions of kink and what it means to practitioners can be vastly different between and within kink subcultures. As such, this raises interesting questions around how viable an overarching definition of kink is – this question will be looked at in further detail.

Despite changing social trends, kink is still often conceived as a form of sexual deviance, with this label often being an appealing factor for some practitioners. However, it is not stigmatised to the same extent as it was in the days of Krafft-Ebing and Freud. There is a greater cultural visibility; the treatment of kinky individuals in legal perspectives is changing; there are changes in the treatment of practitioners from a psychological perspective. While there have been great improvements in how kink is discussed and treated within Western societies, kinksters still do not receive the same sexual citizenship afforded to monogamous, vanilla heterosexual and same-sex couples. It is important to understand how the history of kink and its current framing within society impacts upon kink practitioners' narratives and experiences.

This chapter has tended to focus more on the kink practitioner, such as how kinky individuals were labelled as having a mental disorder or how one may communicate their interests through definitions and terminology. However, kink is not performed in a vacuum. Indeed, central to understandings of kink is how it can be a social activity for those who engage in it, allowing opportunities to create intimate connections and engage with others with similar interests. As such, it's important to think about how individuals with kink interests form collectives and what the consequences of these collectives are, such as group narratives or the creation of alternative group norms. Kink is a collection of activities and as such, individuals will have preference to certain activities over others – this leads to groups and communities forming under the guise of a kink subculture. Issues of pathology, deviancy and changing kink cultures will be brought forward to the next chapter where collective groups of individuals with kink interests are conceptualised.

<sup>1</sup> The articles also document how sadism and masochism have appeared in the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD). However, the DSM is what is mainly used by psychologists in order to determine mental illness due to the manuals focus on mental and behavioural disorders.

<sup>2</sup> Project based leisure (PBL) is normally a one-time creative project which requires significant investment (Stebbins, 2005). PBL is defined as occasional, widely spaced throughout a year/life or a one-time occurrence, and creative, normally each PBL

requires different types of investment and consequentially each PBL is different. PBL is not deemed related to kink and so is not discussed more in depth.

# Chapter 3: Subcultural Theory

## **Introduction**

Chapter 2 focused on how kink can be understood conceptually, alongside the importance behind its history and distinctions in terminology. This chapter examines the other main aspect of the research project – the best way to conceptualize and understand groups of people interested in kink. In this chapter I explore the term *subculture* and the utility it has for understanding individual engagement with kink communities. with a focus on how understandings of subcultures have developed over time since their initial conception in the Chicago School through to current definitions that have spanned countries and disciplinary contexts. The historic concept of subculture and the accompanying subcultural theory more generally is difficult to define. There are multiple questions, including: what is a subculture; how is it different from culture more generally; where do the boundaries of a subculture rest; and how do they fit in with alternative labels such as neo-tribes? This chapter develops my broader theoretical arguments before discussing sexual subcultures in more detail in Chapter 4.

## **Subcultural Roots**

In tracing an outline of the history of subcultural theory, I have categorized subcultures into three dominant trends: subcultures understood as deviance, as resistance and as distinction. While these could occur simultaneously, these three periods mark the dominant conceptions in the literature at different periods.

### ***Subcultures as Deviance***

Interest in individuals who engage in non-normative practices or whose identities exist beyond the dominant norms of society are normally analysed through a lens of curiosity, or their behaviours are framed as a form of pathology. While part of this transgression may be due to human nature and an interest in those things we know little about, it is also a way of regulating others and maintaining the dominant way of thinking (Rubin, 2002). One of the earliest documented informal research projects on alternative cultures was carried out by Henry Mayhew in 1849. Working for the Morning Chronicle, a London newspaper, Mayhew collected character profiles or descriptions of working-class Londoners through interview-style conversations. The interest of these character profiles was vast – the middle-class readers of the paper

were given an insight into a working-class subculture that they knew very little about (through a medium deemed appropriate to them - a respectable newspaper). Such was the popularity of these articles that they were turned into a book, *London Labour and the London Poor*, (1851). While not academic or explicitly about a subculture, this example is noteworthy because of the popularity of Mayhew's stories and how he played on the readers' natural curiosity for information about cultures unlike their own.

### ***The Influence of the Chicago School***

The academic history of subcultures is rooted in the Chicago School of Sociology and heralded as the catalyst for how we understand subcultures today. As Shils, a sociologist who later worked in the school, notes:

[The Chicago School studies] have fulfilled a momentarily important function in the development of social science [ergo subcultural research] by establishing an unbreakable tradition of first-hand observation, a circumspect and critical attitude towards sources of information, and the conviction that the way to the understanding of human behavior lies in the study of institutions in operation and of the concrete individuals through whom they operate. (Shils, 1948, pp 54-55).

There are several reasons why the School became the birthplace of modern subcultural research. Firstly, Chicago was recognised as a prime location for urban and suburban sociology due to its population increase of just under two million people between 1860 and 1910. Such an increase in the population led to vast social and cultural changes. Increases in transport links and the changes in how inhabitants communicated with each other had altered the social organization of the city and the everyday culture, which in turn also affected subcultures within the city (Park, 1915). As Ritzer (1994, p. 71) notes, 'The city of Chicago is one of the most complete social laboratories in the world...no city in the world represents a wider variety of typical social problems than Chicago.'

Secondly, the earlier researchers in the department helped to provide pioneering research on urban sociology, particularly the work of sociologist William Thomas, a notable member of the school who is best known for his publication of *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (Thomas and Znaniecki, 1918-1920). However, he

also had other sociological interests; he published a treatise on sexuality, *Sex and Society: Studies in the Social Psychology of Sex* (Thomas, 1907), which provided a commentary on previously published data related to sex and sexuality. Given the School's broader interests in the sociology of deviance, and how sex at the time was framed as a moral vice that only deviants engaged in, it is natural that research into urban, suburban and deviant cultures would uncover sex as a strong discourse (Heap, 2003). On the study of sex, Thomas noted '[S]ex is a dangerous subject of study... because it is the only remaining subject which has not been opened up freely to scientific investigation' (Thomas, 1918, p. 16). Rubin highlights the irony here, noting that, 'much of what we know about 'vice' in U.S cities in the early twentieth century results from data collected to assist in attempts at its elimination' (Rubin, 2002, p. 23).

Despite Thomas' departure from the School, research continued into subcultures, particularly by the work of Thomas' colleague, Robert Park. Park shared a passion for studying different cultures and highlighted the role of vice and deviancy in subcultural groups. One of his interests was how individuals from non-metropolitan cities adapted to life in Chicago, highlighting that:

The attraction of the metropolis is due in part...to the fact that in the long run every individual finds somewhere among the varied manifestations of city like the sort of environment in which he expands and feels at ease; finds, in short, the moral climate in which his peculiar nature obtains the stimulations that bring his innate dispositions to full and free expression. (Park, 1915, p. 608)

The third reason why the Chicago school is understood as the birthplace of subcultural research is due to the teaching and research methods used within the school, especially pioneered by Park, which led to a vast amount ethnographic material being collected. Students were encouraged to go into the city and collect primary research from subcultures across Chicago to 'seek rich and personal experience with the topics of their interest; to get inside the subject and even live it as far as possible' (Faris, 1967, p. 30). Park's teaching methods were echoed in his research methodology where he used interviews and participant observations in his research, despite the methods being associated with anthropology rather than sociology. Early sociologists were dubious of using interviews in research because, as fictitious TV medical practitioner Dr Gregory House reminds us, 'Everybody lies' (House, 2004). Yet, Park aimed to change

and broaden the scope of social science methodology, improving sociology's theoretical and explanatory strength (Williams, 2011).

The School's approach to understanding subcultures was pioneering in subcultural theory and influential in future research. Indeed, subcultures were interpreted as forms of deviance and delinquency, particularly given the link between subcultural membership and crime in the city. While not using the term subculture, Thrasher, in his book *The Gang* (1927), discussed the marginality and devaluation felt by lower/working class boys leading to the formation of delinquent youth gangs, particularly prominent in the inner-slums of larger cities or moral regions mentioned above (Park, 1915). Other scholars in the School shared the view of subcultures forming as a lack of integration and socialisation of working/lower class cultures into the mainstream.

### ***Theoretical Developments***

While deviance was the focus of early subcultural theory, there was also a recognition that subcultures were the reaction to being labelled in particular ways by dominant groups in society (e.g. Cressey, 1932). These labels would effectively be self-fulfilling prophecies where individuals would do the label society gave them (Becker, 1963). This model understands deviancy to be a social construct and a consequence of *the majority* labelling *the minority* as deviant from standard norms, leading the minority to live up to this stereotype (Gagnon and Simon, 1973). In his book on subcultural theory, symbolic interactionist and sociologist Patrick Williams (2011, p. 22) highlights:

Significant effort was therefore put into the empirical – both quantitative and qualitative – study of deviance, primarily because sociologists were convinced that the roots of deviant behaviour were to be found in *social* phenomena rather than reduced to biological or psychological profiles of delinquents, which was common practice among physicians, psychologists, and correctional officers.

The focus on subcultures as a social phenomenon constructed through labelling processes and a deviant behaviour was carried through to other research outside of the school. For example, prominent criminologist Albert Cohen (1955) researched urban gang cultures with a focus on motivations for subcultural membership. The following quote summarises his theoretical perspective:

Our ability to achieve [social status and popularity with our peers] depends upon the criteria of status applied by our fellows, that is, the standards or norms they go by in evaluating people. These criteria are an aspect of their cultural frame of reference. If we lack characteristics or capacities which give status in terms of these criteria, we are beset by one of the most typical and distressing of human problems of adjustment. One solution is for individuals who share such problems to gravitate towards one another and jointly to establish new norms, new criteria of status which define as meritorious the characteristics which they do possess, the kinds of conduct of which they are capable. (Cohen, 1955, p. 56).

Cohen described subcultures as a collective of deviant individuals for whom societal norms and rules did not apply in the same way. A subculture would have different rules, styles, a sense of community, demeanour and language different to, and often pitted against, the broader societal norms. Indeed, status could be achieved within a subculture at the detriment of status within a broader social context.

Similar to Cohen, sociologist Howard Becker (1963) highlighted how a collective group of individuals engaging in deviant actions or beliefs would form a subcultural group when they saw themselves as actively different from the broader societal culture. While not labelling himself as such, Becker has been called a symbolic interactionist and used labelling theory to help explain deviant behaviour. For example, his research with jazz musicians found that they would often consciously pit themselves against the mainstream musical culture and society more generally as a way of forging their own identity.

Most interesting about Becker's research is his reframing of deviance; he moved away from seeing deviance as a moral failing to understanding it as differing from the norm. Becker's approach conformed with other scholars who believed individuals could engage in deviant behaviours for a range of social and cultural reasons, including prejudice, oppression and poverty. The behaviours were deviant not because of any inherent nature but because of the way society viewed them. This argument mirrors the debates discussed in Chapter 2 where it was recognised that individuals could engage in kink behaviours without being pathologized; the same broader theoretical framework is adopted where the meanings of social life are interpreted through how people interact in society. Alongside this theoretical

reframing, Becker argued that the opinions and beliefs of deviant groups were just as important as those part of the dominant order:

In any system of ranked groups, participants take it as a given that members of the highest group have the right to define the way things really are... [T]hus credibility and the right to be heard are differentially distributed through the ranks of the system. As sociologists, we provoke the change of bias... by refusing to give credence and deference to an established order, in which knowledge of trust and the right to be heard are not equally distributed.

(Becker, 1967, pp. 126-127)

This reframing of deviance had a significant impact upon future research, particularly in the study of sexual subcultures. Research moved from framing subcultures as expressions of deviance to resistance to the dominant norms in society.

### ***Subcultures as Resistance***

When understanding subcultures as deviant from the broader culture, is important to highlight what is meant by *mainstream culture* – as subculture is a nebulous term to define, so is culture. When can something be classified as mainstream culture and when can something be understood as deviant? Faris (1967) highlights it is important for research to explain what the subculture is in opposition to. This point is echoed by Clarke (1997, p. 178) who argues that there is no culture that is ‘straight, incorporated in a consensus, and willing to scream undividedly loud in any moral panic’. In other words, culture is always contested, multi-faceted and dynamic. To try and address this pitfall of understanding subcultures as deviant and formed through a labelling process against a unified broader culture, subcultural theory began to identify what subcultures were in opposition to – the power of the dominant group. This framing was used by the University of Birmingham’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS).

### ***Birmingham’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies***

Subcultures were emerging all over the UK, with particular cultural visibility in the 1960’s and 1970’s. Better known examples include teddy boys, mods, rockers, punks, and skins. At the CCCS, academics from varied background formed a collective to

research subcultures and built on the theoretical tools of the Chicago School – specifically how they collected and analysed data.

Indeed, there were some similarities in how the CCCS operated compared with the Chicago School. The CCCS produced graduate students who carried out research into subcultures, leading to a wealth of publications. Furthermore, the CCCS highlighted the benefits of ethnographic research in understanding subcultures, emphasising the importance of observational analyses. It was also guided by some influential leading scholars such as Stuart Hall, Dick Hebdige and Angela McRobbie.

However, rather than understand subcultures through a model of deviancy, the CCCS understood them through a neo-Marxist perspective that framed them as a form of cultural resistance. As Williams (2011, p. 28) explains, ‘Subcultures were not understood in terms of *psychological* strain or deviance, but rather as forms of collective resistance to cultural hegemony.’ Hegemony was a key concept in their work.

Antonio Gramsci (1971) wrote about the theory of hegemony while incarcerated. He was feared as a Marxist thinker whose ideas could potentially provoke political unrest in what was, at the time, a fascist Italy. Gramsci analysed how individuals conformed and obeyed authority voluntarily. Even when people are not compelled by force to obey social norms and laws, people still obey them and punish those who transgress them even when the rules are not to their benefit. It is interesting that Gramsci was concerned with power in these environments, when at the time of writing he was in a total institution (Goffman, 1963) in which agency is removed and power is maintained by the dominant prison authority.

Gramsci began from a constructionist perspective, recognising that stratifications of society are not predetermined, but are constructed and reproduced through social interactions. He provided a framework for understanding how we are conditioned into believing particular ideas, and view events from particular standpoints. This conditioning and the maintaining of the social order is seldom done through force – while it may play a role in some parts of society, force is not central to the privileging of the dominant group. As sociologist Eric Anderson (2005, p. 21) notes, ‘While there is often the threat of rules or force structuring a belief, the key element to hegemony is that force cannot be the causative factor in order to elicit complicity’.

Instead of physical force, hegemony is maintained through the less dominant groups' acceptance of their position. Expanding on Gramsci's work, Femia writing on hegemonic theory (1981) differentiates between domination and coercion. Domination is described as an external force that controls individuals' behaviour through rewards and punishments, with an example being how adults condition a baby's behaviour through sweets as rewards or shouting as a deterrent (Skinner, 1938). Coercion is described as an internal control which changes individuals' internal beliefs, with Femia (1981, p. 24) seeing coercion as hegemony. An individual is coerced through social interactions and an acknowledgement of societal hierarchies – an acceptance of this power structure constitutes the maintenance of hegemony. Echoing the writings of Gramsci, Arendt (1972, p. 143) highlights how, 'power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together.' This power is maintained through coercion (Femia, 1981).

The CCCS at the time built on sociological research that argued the UK is a society stratified by class groups (Goldthorpe, 1982). This recognized that each class group had its own norms and class cultures: the working/lower class, who were a poorer, less educated and less socially privileged collective compared to the dominant middle-class. The bourgeoisie maintained power through an acceptance of a ruling class. When individuals behaved as expected, based on their class position, and followed dominant social and cultural norms, they were praised; alternative behaviours were viewed as delinquent or simply wrong. In this way, rules were policed, not through force, but through norms and social conditioning. This helped to explain why the proletariat did not rise up against the unfair distribution of wealth and power during the 20<sup>th</sup> century in England. When a collective group initiated these behaviours as a collective, they were labelled as a subculture (Hall and Jefferson, 1993).

Hegemony was a particularly important focus within the CCCS and was central to conceptualisations of subcultures, as well as culture more generally. In their book on cultural theory, on hegemony Edgar and Sedgwick (2005, p. 110) state:

The theory of hegemony was of central importance to the development of British cultural studies (not least in the work of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies). It facilitated analysis of the ways in which subordinate groups actively respond to and resist political and economic

domination. The subordinate groups need not then be seen merely as the passive dupes of the dominant class and its ideology.

The research conducted by the CCCS which used hegemony as an understanding for the formation of subcultures was compiled into an edited book, *Resistance Through Rituals*, Hall and Jefferson (1993). Subcultures were understood as collective identities of symbolic resistance – while they cannot have real changes within the class system due to hegemony, subcultural engagement offered imagery solutions to their problems. While subcultures did little to combat the broader power struggles, membership provided a *feeling* that they were contributing towards change. While the resistance was symbolic, in that it did not result in social change, the fact of resistance itself was cathartic (ibid).

Examples of subcultures which were understood to form as a collective resistance to power were the Teddy Boys (Jefferson, 1993) and the Skinheads (Clarke, 1993). For both groups, there was an 'intense loyalty' (Jefferson, 1993, p. 67) to their subculture, a stylistic uniform which made them easily identifiable as belonging to the group (Hebdige, 1979), and a strong sense of resistance (Brake, 1985). There were also the hierarchies of status that Cohen (1955) discussed, where value and privilege could be achieved within the subculture to the detriment of status within broader society. Communities were created within the subcultures of the Teddy Boys and the Skinheads where members were often friends with shared values and a strong sense of group mentality. The terms subculture and community were, and indeed often still are, used almost interchangeably because of the closeness of these terms. However, community seems to relate more to the social nature of the subcultures rather than the pursuit of a common activity.

The theory that subcultures are rooted in resistance was pioneered by the CCCS and has been greatly influential in consequential research into subcultures. However, the CCCS and their ways of thinking have been heavily critiqued.

Given the importance of hegemony in understandings of subcultures, it was assumed that subcultures mainly consisted of working class individuals and that all working class individuals would eventually join a subculture as a form of resistance (Muggleton, 2000). While not only reductionist, it does not explain why an individual would join one subculture over another. As Murdock and McCron (1976, p. 25) highlight:

[The CCCS model] tends to draw too tight a relation between class location and sub-cultural style and to underestimate the range of alternative responses. The problem is not only to explain why styles such as the mods or skinheads developed within a particular class strata at the same times and in the forms they did, but also to explain why adolescents in essentially the same basic class location adopted other modes of negotiation and resolution.

The CCCS had two foci when researching subcultures: youth and males. This was problematic in how it limited the scope of the research in the group. There was a specific idea of what they meant by youth, 16-21 years old, thus failing to recognise the symbolic meaning behind youth, including the elasticity of the term (Arnett, 2000), and that non-youth engage in subcultural participation. Given the focus on male subcultures, there was a near total absence of recognition of female subcultural participation, with only one notable study conducted on young women in subcultures. McRobbie and Garber (1976) studied young girls and formed the concept of 'Bedroom Culture' where girls would socialise in their bedrooms to codes around romance, fashion and pop music.

Rather than providing research into subcultures which could be generalised and applied to a broad range of subcultures, the CCCS were providing a subcultural analysis of British, white, working-class males (Waters, 1981). Theories of hegemony based in class would have little impact in American or non-Western cultures for the explanation of subcultures. Furthermore, the CCCS subcultural theories would have little application to sexual cultures, given that sexual cultures are not always constrained by class boundaries and spaces related to sexuality feature individuals from different backgrounds, races, genders, and classes. Critiques of both the CCCS and Chicago schools of thinking are rooted in the understanding that subcultures are formed consequently either as a form of deviancy related to crime and gang subcultures or as a form of resistance to power struggles within society. Therefore, more recent subcultural research has tried to understand subcultures from alternative perspectives.

### ***(Post) Subcultures as Distinction***

Contemporary discourses around subcultures move beyond seeing subcultures as either deviant or as forms of resistance. Instead, subcultures are viewed as collective expressions of individuality. Subcultures are viewed as distinct and heterogenous from

the broader society with a level of similarities internally (Hodkinson, 2005). This is done alongside an acknowledgement that the idea of a broader society or dominant culture should be carefully considered. Recent subcultural theories also recognise the importance of the individual within a subculture, affording members a level of subcultural capital and agency missing in earlier framings (Thornton, 1995).

For example, in her book *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*, ethnographer and cultural sociologist Sarah Thornton (1995, p. 2) focuses on contemporary youth dance cultures, exploring 'the attitudes and ideals of the youthful insiders whose social lives revolve around clubs and raves'. She coins the term 'taste cultures' to explain how a collective of individuals come together through shared taste in music, media and a preference for others with similar tastes, rather than as collective forms of political resistance. She frames this taste culture as a subculture of distinction, different to earlier subcultural framings which were 'empirically unworkable' (ibid, p. 8). The subcultures Thornton describes are: 'of the moment' and may not last a significant amount of time due to changing taste cultures; their boundaries are fluid and allow a variety of people to permeate them; and there are no clear set of rules on how an individual can gain subcultural capital within a subculture.

Exemplifying how meanings behind subcultural identity have changed over time, Polhemus (1997, p. 132) argues that a 'Supermarket of Style' exists where individuals can 'be an anarchic Punk, a bohemian Beatnik or a bad ass Raggamuffin. If only for a day'. There seems to be less focus on the politics behind subcultures - an individual can claim to be 'into' something rather than to 'be' something (ibid, p. 131). He summarises his view, asking, 'Who is real? Who is a replicant? Who cares. Enjoy' (ibid, p. 151).

As part of a reconceptualization of subcultures, there have been attempts to *move beyond subcultures* with alternative terms. Examples include counterculture (Roberts, 1978), contraculture (Yinger, 1960), idioculture (Fine, 1979) and lifestyle (Reimer, 1995; Miles, 2000). While Williams (2011, p. 12) highlights that 'most of these concepts have found limited theoretical utility', there are some notable alternatives which have gained headway into subcultural discourses. For example, Irwin (1977) proposed the term *scene* which is 'a mutually recognised subcultural 'space' where the production and consumption of esoteric activities flourish' (Young and Atkinson, 2008, p. 30). Scenes tend to be oriented around entertainment activities, offer direct

gratification from the activity and have a link with consumerism in that activities can occasionally have admin fees associated with them (Kotarba and LaLone, 2014). In his research on hippies and surfers, Irwin argued the label of subculture was an inaccurate description of the fluidness demonstrated by his participants, saying:

[The Chicago School's concepts of] gangs, subcultures, and behaviour systems did not approach the casualness of the worlds I was involved in. All such gangs and subcultures suggested too much commitment, determinism, instrumentality, and stability in membership... concepts such as milieu, ambience, fad, and craze, on the other hand, did not suggest enough permanence, cohesion, or complexity of form (Irwin, 1977, p. 18).

A scene, according to Shibutani (1955), is a social world whose members have a shared perspective. While social worlds were discussed by the Chicago School, they are recycled by Irwin and described as having fluid boundaries and different political motivations compared to previous examples (see Wirth, 1928 as an example of where scene was used in the Chicago School). Instead of rigid boundaries and inclusive membership, scenes are understood more through production and consumption of activities. Indeed, the term scene can therefore be applied to numerous groups, particularly if there is a conscious understanding from the group that they see themselves as 'subcultural' (Gelder, 2005). It has been useful in helping to conceptualise popular music cultures (e.g. Kotarba and LaLone, 2014; Straw, 2004).

An alternative example to subculture which has gained some popularity is neo-tribe (Halfacree and Kitchin, 1996; Hetherington, 1998; Malbon, 1999; Robards and Bennett, 2011). The term developed from French sociologist Maffesoli's (1996) book *The Times of the Tribes* where he argues that conventional approaches to understanding modern society are flawed and that new terms are required to understand social change. He states a tribe is 'without the rigidity of the forms of organization with which we are familiar, it refers more to a certain ambience, a state of mind, and is preferably to be expressed through lifestyles that favour appearance and form' (ibid, p. 98). Importantly, he argues this in a context where social structures, such as class, are seen as less rigid with greater scope to move between subcultures.

Neo-tribes, while similar to scenes, focus more on the collective activities and temporary physical or emotional pleasure, or *jouissance*, offered (Fiske, 1989) and the bonding of the individuals (Maffesoli, 1996). Bennett (1999, p. 605) wanted to use a

term which captured the “unstable and shifting cultural affiliations which characterise late modern consumer-based identities.’ Hodkinson (2002) highlights that there is a collected focus on experiencing a symbolic loss of the self and immersing oneself into the activity or subcultural space. Young and Atkinson (2008, p. 31) summarise their understanding of neo-tribes as ‘aesthetically orientated style cultures not necessarily bound by definitive political-ideological frameworks, and thus [are] flexibly structured to allow for membership expansion and change.’

One of the key features for neo-tribes, as discussed by Shields (1992), is that individuals do not restrict themselves to one neo-tribe and they can float freely between several of them. Arguably, this ability to move between neo-tribes reflects modern society and the temporal nature of collective identities (Bennett, 1999). Echoing this mobility in his reading on post-subcultural identity, Muggleton (2000) discusses how an individual can claim membership of a neo-tribe without the pressure of taking on all the features of the group. For example, one can engage in the drag subculture/neo-tribe by watching Ru Paul’s Drag Race without the pressure to perform drag themselves.

The neo-tribal approach has been beneficial in readings of social media use by Robards and Bennett (2011). They argue:

[Participants] partial sense of belonging, or belonging to multiple categories is a clear demonstration of a post-subcultural trend emerging in the reflexive construction of identity amongst young people. Rather than belonging exclusively to a subsection of a parent culture and being aware of how (and why) that respective group deviates from general culture, subculture has become a discursive construct, more akin to a palette of tastes that the individual can draw from, modify and remix in achieving a reflexive understanding of self... Conceptually speaking, [their practices are] far more closely aligned with current sociological interpretations and applications of neo-tribalism than with subcultural theory (ibid, p. 313).

Hesmondhalgh (2005) adds to the discussion of appropriate terminology in research around youth and popular music. As a cultural studies scholar interested in the value of music and how it is placed within cultures, he echoes the critiques of how the term subculture was used by the CCCS and acknowledges that scene and tribe ‘indicate a potentially fertile area of debate’ (ibid, p. 22) regarding alternatives to subculture. An

important issue for Hesmondhalgh is how permeable groups of people are and how open they are to change. He states that tribe recognises that collective groups can have 'instability and fluidity', whereas subcultures were understood through more Marxist terms as 'fixity and rigidity' (ibid: 24). However, Hesmondhalgh argues that:

This is too polarised a presentation of the alternatives. The CCCS subculturalists might have overestimated the boundedness and permanence of the group identities they were studying, but simply to offer instability and temporariness as alternatives does not get us very far. (ibid, p. 24)

He adds:

Confusingly, 'tribes' carries very strong connotations of precisely the kind of fixity and rigidity that Bennett [1999] is troubled by in the work of the subculturalists. Indeed, it would be hard to find a concept more imbued with such connotations than 'tribe' (Hesmondhalgh, 2005, p. 24).

Hesmondhalgh also provides a critique of the term 'scene' in relation to music and youth cultures. Despite the term scene as a 'fruitfully muddled' (ibid, p. 27) concept, it has had a strong footing within research in popular music (Firth, 1996). However, as with tribe, Hesmondhalgh deconstructs how the term scene has been used and its varied meanings (Straw, 2001; Shank, 1994). On this point, he writes:

Both Shank and Straw borrow this vernacular musical and cultural term and put it to stimulating use, but they do so in widely disparate ways... The problem is that, as noted earlier, the concept of scene has become very widely used in popular music studies as a result of these two crucial contributions, and in many cases the term has been presented as a superior alternative to 'subculture' (for example, Harris 2001). But its use has been very ambiguous, or perhaps more accurately, downright confusing... The term has been used for too long in too many different and imprecise ways for those involved in popular music studies to be sure that it can register the ambivalences that Straw hopes it will. (Hesmondhalgh, 2005, pp. 28-30)

Hesmondhalgh believes that there has not been a substantial case made for the use of the term scene or (neo)tribe as a replacement for subculture. Ultimately, he argues against the privileging of the relationship between youth research and music research and calls for an amicable separation between the two areas of investigation.

Hesmondhalgh powerfully captures how scenes and neo-tribes have been used in different and divergent ways. However, such differentiation has often led to confusing understandings of these terms. Moreover, they lack the consistency and ready application of subcultures, moving the focus towards debates around meaning and away from the empirical research.

A final alternative to subculture comes in the form of *post-subculture* as a way of using the well-known term, but acknowledging social and linguistic changes. Early examples of its use come from Polhemus (1996, p. 91) who described clubbing as a post-subcultural phenomenon and Muggleton (1997) in his essay *The Post-Subculturalist*. However, the term was significantly developed and theorised by Muggleton (2000) in relation to youth subcultures. He argued youth identities have more autonomy and are products of individual actions and beliefs because of more modern consumer based societies, rather than simply products of social classes. As a way of conceptualising and addressing this change, he argues we should think of these groups as being 'post-subcultural.' While discussing fashion changes among youth subcultures, he describes the processes of change:

Stylistic change... is best understood in transformative terms, as a gradual, partial, and evolutionary process, not as sudden shifts in whole identities, as some postmodern commentators would have it... Appearance is not free-floating, available to be put on and cast off as a mere whim. To engage in such acts would be seen as evidence of one's superficiality and inauthenticity, for style is viewed as an expression of one's inner self. (ibid, p. 103)

Similarly, Redhead (1990) noticed changes in his research on the British rave scene, commenting how the scene was 'notorious for mixing all kinds of styles on the same dance floor and attracting a range of previously opposing subcultures' (Redhead, 1993, pp. 3-4). Several explanations were given for this post-subcultural change including mediatisation of society, an increase in free time, the commercialisation of culture and the effects of post-industrialisation.

While there are nuanced differences between neo-tribe, scene, and post-subculture, they are all attempting to address the critiques of previous subcultural theories and account for changes. Alternative descriptions are offered, yet perhaps it would be better to adopt a changing and more flexible definition for subculture. Indeed, Williams (2007) contends that debates around terminology has led to a lack of

appreciation and recognition for work which sought to address the problem of the term subculture while emphasising its benefits (e.g. Fine and Kleinman, 1979), suggesting there has been a rush to employ new terminology. Echoing this, Gelder (2005, p. 1) discusses a 'rhetoric of newness' in regard to subcultural research and how to conceptualise them that means the value of older terms is downplayed. Williams (2011, p. 36) adds:

[There is an] ignorance of, or an avoidance of, the fact that multiple layers of analytic concepts may be usefully employed to make sense of the incredible diversity of cultural phenomena being studied today. For example, 'subculture' and 'scene' do not need to compete head-to-head when we could more usefully recognize subculture as a cultural concept and scene as a social concept, each performing a complementary role... (Post)-subcultural scholars might instead focus on the cleavages and boundaries among these concepts, recognizing and exploring how they may be used in concert to better understand youth cultural activities today.

Despite debates relating to the use of the term subculture and arguments which call for alternatives to be used, I concur with Williams and others who highlight that there are benefits in still using the term subculture. While earlier uses of the term subculture in academia understood subcultures as deviant or as a form of political resistance, recent research addresses these critiques, by clearly defining what they mean by the term subculture in a 'post-subcultural' world.

Another reason to use the term subculture is because of the popularity of the term among the participants I interviewed. This is largely because the phrase 'Subculture' entered into and remained within popular discourses, while terms such as neo-tribe or counter-culture have so far failed to gain similar momentum. As it is important that the kink communities I study are familiar with and can understand the terms I use, I continue to employ *subculture* throughout this research.

### **Breaking Down Subculture**

For the benefit of this study, it is important to dissect what I believe are the main tenets of a subcultures. My understanding of the term subculture is informed by the literature previously discussed, particularly research which views subcultures as forms of distinction, and through my experiences attending subcultural events and

interacting with the members. While there are numerous examples of different subcultures and they can be very distinctly different, there are similarities across them which connect them as forms of subcultures. While not in any particular order, these examples, and my defining features of a subculture, are:

- There should be a shared interest between members of a subculture and it is normally the main reason the subculture exists. This interest can be based around an activity, aesthetic tastes in something, or an attitude/belief (Thornton 1995). Examples of these interests may be horse-riding, rap music or recycling.
- There is normally a shared geographical space used by the subculture. This space serves the role of allowing members of a subculture to interact with each other (Ghaziani 2014). While it may be related to the shared interest, such as a music venue for a rap subculture, it does not have to be – a pub may serve as a symbolic venue which accommodates a subculture. The space doesn't have to be physical – a forum page which allows a subculture to communicate online may serve the same role as the pub, but without physical or geographical constraints.
- There is a level of investment made by members of a subculture into the collective interest. While this does not have to be to the same extent as previous examples, such as donning a punk look and attitude continually, some level of investment needs to be made for subcultural membership (Rubin 1991). Investment of resources may be financial or temporal. Examples include paying for a ticket at a music gig, learning how to perform a knot in rock climbing or attending a political protest.
- There is a hierarchy within the subculture which gives individuals more influence within the subculture (Cohen 1955). These roles are normally related to the amount of investment an individual has contributed towards the interest. For example, individuals who can perform complicated activities which require skill or who have expensive items related to the subculture may afford more influence within a hierarchy. These hierarchies can be fluid and change over time.
- There should be a shared set of norms within the subculture. These norms are normally learned through interactions with other members and can be explicit

or implicit (Newmahr 2011). For example, all individuals may only be referred to using an avatar or codename, there may be a way of greeting somebody or broader social norms (such as how close to stand to somebody when talking to them) may not apply.

- The members of a subculture should *feel* part of the subculture. While the subculture does not have to be an individuals' main identity, one should possess a level of subcultural identity (Halls and Jefferson 1991). For example, an individual may not have to style themselves in a particular way all the time or live the subculture as a lifestyle, their subcultural membership should hold a level of importance to the individual.
- There is normally a community feeling and identity within the subculture. While the terms are not synonymous, and certainly many communities exist that are not subcultures, there is a sizeable trend within the literature on sexual subcultures that either uses the terms interchangeably (e.g. Ortmann and Sprott 2013) or sees community as a central component of these sexual subcultures (Cohen 1985). I discuss the importance of community in sexual subcultures in the next section, but highlight here the significance of community within contemporary subcultures.
- There should be boundaries which separate the subculture from other (sub)cultures (Irwin 1977). These are often fluid and can be hard to define. For some subcultures, an existing member may need to introduce anybody new, while others may be public and accept all newcomers. A level of investment may be needed initially to gain access to a subculture or to gain a level of recognised membership. This includes an internal understanding of who the 'other' is.

### **Chapter Summary**

Subcultures have developed substantially since the earlier research conducted by the Chicago School of sociology. In researching groups of individuals with similar interests that differ from a dominant cultural norm, many different frameworks have emerged to conceptualize these groups of people. Original understandings of subcultures understood them through frameworks of deviance, with groups of individuals coming

together in an attempt to address the cultural problems they faced through imaginary and cathartic solutions. Furthermore, subcultures were also understood to be living up to the labels and expectations the mainstream culture placed on them. Not only did the school pioneer subcultural research, but also research methods which understood the importance of a qualitative ethnographic perspective – the narratives of individuals, informed by their experiences and interactions, formed the basis of early subcultural research by the school.

Subcultural research in the UK developed from the CCCS offering the concept of hegemony and political resistance to explain subcultural participation. They were collective forms of imaginary and metaphorical forms of resistance to the broader hegemonic structures faced by working class youths. Again, subcultures were viewed as mostly problematic groups who were trying to address the problems they faced with their own type of solutions. However, the foci of the school were youth, males and class, which left little explanatory power for subcultures in other demographics or cultures.

More recently, reductionist views of subcultures have become less popular and there is a focus on the role of the individual, with subcultures understood as collective expressions of individuality normally constructed because of common tastes or shared interests. As such, subcultures can forego rigid boundaries of class or gender. Furthermore, there is less focus on creating a subcultural identity and instead an individual can flirt between numerous subcultures as a way of forging a collective identity.

While offering alternatives to subculture, this chapter argues for the use of the term subculture to avoid a rhetoric of newness and move beyond debates around discourses. Moreover, those deemed part of a subculture recognise the term easily compared with some of its alternatives – this is particularly important in allowing accessibility of the literature being wrote about them. However, the chapter does engage with debates in subcultural theory by providing a definition of subculture rooted in the literature, allowing for the inclusion of sexual and kink subcultures traditionally missing from these debates. This definition will be carried forward in the study to understand its utility in relation to kink subcultures.

This chapter has focused on subcultures more generally to provide a strong theoretical standpoint with which to examine contemporary kinky sexual subcultures.

Understandings of subcultures as moving from forms of deviancy and resistance to collective forms of individualisation resonate strongly with the history of kink discussed in Chapter 2, but also with narratives related to sexuality more broadly. The next chapter will begin to examine sexual and kink subcultures, bringing forward from this chapter the importance of the individual narratives and meanings in forming the collective kink subcultures.

# **Chapter 4: Sexual and Kink Subcultures**

## **Introduction**

The previous chapter examined how to understand cultures that were not part of dominant society, focusing specifically on subcultural theory. In this chapter, I examine how the concept of subculture can be applied to sexual communities before narrowing the focus to kink communities. Again, these arguments are rooted in an understanding of sex and sexual practices as social and cultural acts, not mere expressions of biological drives and urges (Ghaziani, 2017), and therefore social theories are needed to understand these ideas. As such, there is emphasis on the individual understandings of activities and the symbolic meaning that engagement in sex and kink can have.

## **Framing Sexual Subcultures**

Research into sexual subcultures developed from a rich history of studies into sex and sexuality more broadly. It is important to explore how the *social* was present in these studies of sexuality and sexology, before then discussing sexual subcultures in detail. As discussed in Chapter 2, for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century there was a culturally hegemonic dominant mode of sex in the Western world with alternatives framed as deviant, unhealthy, pathological or simply bad (Foucault, 1977). Indeed, early research into non-normative sexual subcultures was rooted within medical frameworks which focused on explaining alternative sexualities and how they could be treated. As Rubin (2002, p. 311) notes:

For much of the twentieth century, sexual practice that varied from a norm of fairly straightforward, generally monogamous, and preferably marital heterosexuality with a possibility of procreation was cast not only as undesirable but also physically unhealthy, socially inferior, or symptomatic of psychological impairment.

A movement away from pathology in sexology gained momentum with the publications of Alfred Kinsey (1948; 1953). He was a biologist and zoologist whose interests shifted towards human sexuality, documenting sexual similarities and differences in males and females. His research findings of higher rates of non-heterosexuality than previously thought shocked society at the time and led to a re-evaluation of sexual theories. While some of his findings were controversial at the time, they paved the way for future sexological research (e.g. Ford and Beach, 1951).

However, while ground-breaking and important sexological work, Kinsey's research was oriented around individual sexual characteristics and there was distinct lack of the *social* complexities involved in sexualities and sexual cultures. In the context of critiquing the work of Kinsey, Kuhn wrote:

Sex acts, sexual objects, sexual partners (human or otherwise) like all other objects toward which human beings behave are social objects; that is they have meaning because meanings are assigned to them by groups of which human beings are members for there is nothing in the physiology of man which gives a dependable clue as to what pattern of activity will be followed toward them (Kuhn, 1954, p. 123).

Indeed, research at the time 'offered no accounts of the social making of modern bodies and sexualities' (Seidman, 1994, p. 167). Even so, the social constructs of sexuality were discussed by other scholars in non-stigmatising ways, notably in the Chicago School of Sociology, as discussed previously.

While the focus of the Chicago School was on urban and suburban cultures, the school inadvertently collected significant data on sexual subcultures within Chicago. William Thomas, as part of the anti-vice crusades with which he was a member of, ironically amassed data on sexual cultures in the U.S. in the early twentieth century. Thomas used this data to publish a sexological treatise (Thomas, 1907), which was a commentary on sexual cultures.

Heap (2003), a sociologist who deconstructed how urban culture and space shaped understandings of sexual practices and identities, highlights how there was a plethora of research conducted by the Chicago school into different aspects of sexuality, but that most it has been overlooked due to the school's primary focus on studying deviance. Heap draws on archival artefacts and publications from the school, analysing how sexuality was understood and situated within a social context by researchers within the school. He comments, 'Although it has become commonplace in recent years, at least within academic circles, to think of sexual practices and identities as social constructions, the Chicago School's investigations of the social organization of sexuality were quite remarkable for their day' (ibid, p. 458). While not explicitly researching sexuality:

The department's later studies of sexuality were largely submerged in broader sociological investigations of urban social groups, such as hobos, bohemian

radicals, African Americans and Chinese laundrymen... or in more quantitatively focused studies of intermarriage that approached issues of cross-ethnic and - racial sexuality only obliquely. (ibid, p. 463)

In some ways, Heap is effectively arguing that sexuality was incorporated as a component of a broader understanding in the way that many scholars who call for intersectionality desire.

Supporting Heap's arguments, Park highlighted how cities are a laboratory to study social and cultural life. He discussed 'moral regions' in the city; places where individuals would segregate themselves from the broader city through common interests or unique passions – some of these passions could be sexual. He added, 'The population tends to segregate itself, not merely in accordance with its interests, but in accordance with its tastes or its temperaments' (Park et al., 1925, p. 43). Contrary to viewing these as bad things, Park argued that 'we must then accept these 'moral regions' and the more or less eccentric and exceptional people who inhabit them, in a sense, at least, as part of the natural, if not normal, life of a city' (Park et al., 1925, p. 612). Park recognised the importance of these moral regions for the individuals who inhabit them and the function they have for city in which they are in.

Park's understanding of the social constructs of subcultures, including sexual subcultures, was greatly influential for other scholars of the school, particularly sociologists of human sexuality John Gagnon and William Simon. On Gagnon and Simon, Rubin comments:

[They] quickly grasped the implications of their sociological perspectives for the conduct of sex research and the reshaping of sexual theory. During the course of the 1960s and 1970s, they produced a body of work that virtually reinvented sex research as a social science. They also aggressively contested the hegemony of psychiatry and the paucity of its interests (Rubin, 2002, p. 320).

Gagnon and Simon (1967) understood sexuality as being determined by social factors and rooted as a social and cultural phenomenon. In one of their earlier works, they challenged the pre-existing notions of popular sexology rooted in Freudian analyses and medical discourses:

There is some evidence that suggests [sex's] power to shape social behavior is substantially less than that of other biologically rooted behaviors. We would like to argue, somewhat tentatively, that if sex plays an important role in the

conduct of human affairs, it is because societies have invented or created its importance, and not because of some nearly irresistible urgency stemming from the biological substratum. In other words, it is possible that most human societies have proscribed most of the possible outlets of sexual expression not to constrain some inherently anti-social force, but to assign it an importance it might not otherwise possess; constraint and proscription thus making the activity intense, passionate, and special. (Simon and Gagnon, 1968, pp. 173-174)

They began to address the critiques which highlighted the lack of emphasis on the social aspects of sexological research, which included recognizing that sexual practices were not inherently exotic or deviant if they deviated from a restricted norm. As sociologist Ken Plummer comments:

One of the central ideological thrusts in [Gagnon and Simon's] writings is their wish to take the study of human sexuality out of the realm of the extraordinary and replace it where they believe it belongs: in the world of the ordinary (Plummer, 1981, p. 24).

From this perspective, Gagnon and Simon conducted research related to different aspects of sexuality, such as pornography and lesbianism. While not dismissing the importance of childhood or biology highlighted in Chapter 2, they emphasised how the sexual emerges through complex interactions within the social, conceptualising 'sexual script theory' to help explain their ideas (Simon and Gagnon, 1968; Simon, 1999; Simon and Gagnon, 1984; Simon and Gagnon, 1987). Sexual scripts are stereotyped patterns of expectations for how people should sexually behave. With sexual script theory, they drew on the interactionist tradition to argue that sex is experienced not just through bodily urges and feelings but through cultural, interpersonal and psychological symbols and signs.

This approach has been influential in both sexology and social studies of sex (Ghaziani, 2017; Weinberg and Newmahr, 2014). Rubin comments on the impact of the theory and these studies:

By dismembering deviance in general and sexual deviance in particular, and by producing ethnographic studies of urban gay life, this small sociological literature would have many reverberations. It would be a major influence in the earliest ethnographic research conducted by anthropologists on gay

communities in urban North America. In the mid-1970s it would also help instigate a profound, extensive, and aggressive reappropriation of sexuality as a topic by sociologists, historians, and anthropologists. (Rubin, 2002, p. 327)

Addressing previous critiques of sexology research was especially influential in the research on homosexuality. Insights into social aspects of homosexuality called for a reconceptualisation of it and other sexualities; homosexuality was no longer viewed as a psychiatric and treatable condition, but as a structured and stable identity (Plummer, 1981, p. 1992)—which included the shift from the medical ‘homosexual’ orientation to the social ‘gay’ identity. While men and women have engaged in same-sex behaviour for thousands of years (Berkowitz 2013), research was acknowledging the homosexual as a culturally and historically specific social role (McIntosh, 1968).

The anthropological and social perspective was called for in future research. For example, Sonenschein, in his essay *Homosexuality as a Subject for Anthropological Inquiry*, said:

The application of anthropological investigation of homosexuality in contemporary Western society...[T]he anthropological approach assumes that homosexual groups and individuals transmit, learn, share, create, and change the content of various forms (such as speech, dress, behavior, artifacts) so as to establish and maintain what can be called a relatively distinct ‘culture.’...At least in Western Urban tradition, homosexual behavior manifests itself in special kinds of culturally distinct groups and artifacts. (Sonenschein, 1966, pp. 76-80).

Sonenschein emphasised the benefits of anthropological/sociological research tools, much like how the research in the Chicago School was conducted. He also highlighted (sub)cultural constructs of homosexuals, such as the distinct styles and language of the subculture, alongside a level of separation from the dominant heterosexual culture.

Similarly to Sonenschein, sociologist Jeffery Weeks also highlights how homosexuals were forming subcultures. He noted:

Homosexuality has everywhere existed, but it is online in some cultures that it has become structured into a sub-culture... By the mid-century [nineteenth] the sub-culture is much more complex and variegated. The records of the court cases from this period show the spread of a homosexual underworld in the

major cities... A network of meeting-places had developed (Weeks, 1977, pp. 35-37).

The complexities of sexual subcultures were highlighted in two important contributions to sexological research. First is the work of Albert Reiss and his article *The Social Integration of Queers and Peers* (1961). Coming from the same theoretical perspective as Gagnon and Simon, Reiss carried out an exploratory study on the 'social aspects of male homosexual prostitution' as there was relatively little research on this area (ibid, p. 102). In particular, he researched male adolescent hustlers (the 'peers' who sold sex) and their clientele (queers), analysing the complex social, sexual and economic exchanges between them. The exchanges between the peers and queers was almost scripted: individuals met within a community space and queers payed a sum of money to the peers to be able to give them oral sex. The activities were limited to oral sex with queer performing the fellatio. Also, only the queer could acknowledge sexual gratification from the act: this meant that the heterosexual identity of the 'peer' was maintained—like an early iteration of 'gay-for-pay' porn actors (Mercer, 2017). There were also social limitations to the transactions; conversation is kept to a minimum, anonymity is normally maintained by both parties, apart from some queers who would 'keep a [regularly] boy' or give their phone number out selectively (ibid, p. 108).

Reiss' observations complicated notions of sexual identity and how individuals can be categorised, building on previous research which argued for better understandings of the experiences of sexual minorities. Discussing Reiss' work, Rubin (2002, p. 326) highlights how, 'This pattern of conduct led Reiss to distinguish between 'homosexual behaviour' and the 'homosexual role' and to think about the mechanisms by which boundaries between 'homosexual acts' and 'homosexual identities' were maintained by the rules governing these transactions.'

Reiss conducted the first empirical sociological study which explicitly examined the link between sexual identity and behaviour (Irvine, 2003). This had significant impact in future research examining sexual subcultures (e.g. Humphreys, 1970; McIntosh, 1968)

Another study which had a great impact on research into sexual subcultures was the controversial work of sociologist Laud Humphreys. In his book, *Tearoom Trade* (1970), Humphreys describes conducting ethnographic research in 'Tearooms' – public

restrooms where men would go to have anonymous and casual sexual encounters. At the time when homosexual acts were criminalized and homosexuality a mental disorder, gay men were culturally compelled to have same-sex sex inconspicuously and in illegal ways. Humphreys was aware of these happenings and was interested in learning about 'the social structure of impersonal sex [and] the mechanisms that make it possible' (ibid, p. 14). He began his research as a 'watch queen' for the users of the Tearoom, alerting them to others entering the bathroom. With this role he could systematically record what happened in the Tearooms. He also engaged in follow up interviews with some of the participants through recording car license plate numbers and tracking individuals down using public records. Under the guise of conducting a 'mental health survey', he interviewed users of the Tearoom in their homes.

There are serious ethical concerns about Humphreys' study, not least that he put his participants at serious risk: if his private field notes had been stolen or seized by police, his covert study could have resulted in arrests and imprisonment for the users of the Tearooms (Israel and Hay, 2006). Yet, these behaviours were illicit at the time and were extremely difficult to study – ethnographies in sexual subcultures are inherently hard to conduct due to the need for gatekeepers and trust needed by the participants (Weinberg, 2006); the Tearooms were a very different type of a sexual subculture with a different roster of research difficulties. Humphreys commented on how some could view his behaviour as immoral and that the follow up questionnaires bordered on violations of ethical boundaries (Humphreys, 1975).

Despite issues around ethics and methodology, there were numerous important findings from the study. For example, we were given an insight into behaviours that most of the country did not know were occurring at the time, with Humphreys arguing that legalising homosexuality would mean a reduction in the use of Tearooms and promote safer sexual engagements. Also, the Tearooms were shown to have complex social norms and rules, similar to other more formalised sexual subcultures (e.g. Leznoff and Westley, 1961). Humphreys describes how individuals would differentiate between a Tearoom Trade user and a general member of the public through bodily interactions, motions, and gestures (Humphreys, 1975, p. 64). Again, Humphreys was emphasising the importance of understanding the role of the social within sexual subcultures.

On the topic of sexual subcultures and how sex and sexuality are treated in society, Gayle Rubin wrote a landmark essay *Thinking Sex* (1984). Rubin's essay provides an important contribution for helping to explain kink and other forms of sexuality's positioning within society. She discussed the need for a radical theory of sex, which must:

Identify, describe, explain and denounce erotic injustice and sexual oppression. Such a theory needs refined conceptual tools which can grasp the subject and hold it in view. It must build rich descriptions of sexuality as it exists in society and history. It requires a convincing critical language that can convey the barbarity of sexual persecution. (Rubin, 1984, p. 145).

As a way of helping to achieve such a radical theory of sex, Rubin discussed how a sex hierarchy operates within society in which sexual activities and sexualities are positioned and ranked through societal values and beliefs. Rubin presented the Charmed Circle, which represents 'good' sexual activities that are accepted and privileged within society, alongside the Outer Limits, which represents 'bad' sexual activities viewed as abnormal within society and have historically been pathologized. Activities deemed as good sex, within the Charmed Circle, were 'coupled, relational,



Figure 2: The Charmed Circle - Gayle Rubin (1984)

within the same generation, and occur at home' (ibid, p. 151), while bad sex, in the Outer Limits, involved 'pornography, fetish objects, sex toys of any sort, or roles other than male and female' (ibid, p. 154). Figure 2 (Rubin, 1984) shows the Charmed Circle and the Outer Limits with the good and bad activities.

Rubin is clear to highlight that the boundaries between good and bad sex are not easily definable. Furthermore, different levels of stigma and persecution were given to people depending on how much of their sexual life landed outside of the Charmed Circle (Khan, 2014). For example, a heterosexual, similarly aged, married couple engaging in vanilla sex in a public place, such as a farm, would arguably cause less public outcry than gay strangers of different ages cheating on their partners in a kinky sex club.

Using the term S/M, Rubin argued that kink had a deeply entrenched position of being on the Outer Limits—of being 'bad sex'. In addition, it was also posited as one of the worst types of sexual activities (Rubin, 1981). Such a positioning of kink in the Outer Limits was a consequence of public perception of kink at the time in Western cultures. Rubin (1982) discussed how kinky gay men were used as a scapegoat for evidence that the state was addressing 'vices' within the cities with numerous examples of gay kinky men being persecuted (Khan, 2014).

There are numerous other studies into sexual (sub)cultures which argued for the importance of or used a social constructivist perspective. For example, Walshok (1971) discussed the middle-class deviant subculture of swingers in American society. At the time of writing, she noted how, despite a growing popularity within a puritan culture, there was a significant absence of 'systematic research on this topic' (ibid, p. 488). Attempting to theorize this behaviour, Walshok does not conceptualize swinging as a frivolous form of casual leisure (c.f. Stebbins, 1997), instead emphasizing the complexities involved in this activity, many of which have a social basis.

In another example, sociologist of gender and sexuality Peter Hennen (2008) examined how gender and sexuality are constructed and deployed in varying social, cultural and historical formations. He uses queer theory to analyse three different male subcultures. Focusing on how masculinity is constructed in and by each subculture, and rooting his analyses in historical connotations of 'effeminacy and male homosexuality' (ibid: 33, and see also Richardson, 2016). The first subculture is the Radical Faeries which was created to provide a 'spiritual and political alternatives for

gay men' (ibid, p. 65). The Faeries play with gender and femininity through donning various forms of drag and contest the stigmatising power of hegemonic masculinity (ibid, p. 9). The second subculture is the Bear community, which developed in opposition to hegemonic ideals of what gay masculinities looked like and is orientated around a particularly somatotype – large and hairy bodies. Masculinity here mirrors 'regular guys' who wear 'jeans, baseball caps, T-shirts, flannel shirts, and beards' (ibid, p. 97). The final subculture is the Leathermen, similar to those described by Rubin (1982), who tend to wear items consisting of all leather, normally with similar body types to the Bears. Hennen describe the Leathermen as viewing themselves as 'more masculine than heterosexual men and virulently reject effeminacy' (Hennen, 2008, p. 144).

Hennen's examples show how masculinity is constructed across various gay male subcultures, demonstrating how gender and sexuality interact with popular notions of masculinity. However, Hennen clearly shows that within these three subcultures, there is also a strong sense of community – the men are defying dominant hegemony and heteronormativity together, forming friendships, and providing support in a safe environment free from stigma. An understanding of how hegemonic masculinity is played with by these three subcultures could not be done without a mixture of interviews and ethnographic analyses – we are given insights into motivations by participants that are normally unexplored. This ethnographic approach is extremely useful in understanding sexual subcultures.

Emphasising the importance of locating the social within the sexual, Plummer (1995) in his book *Telling Sexual Stories*, describes hearing the narratives of different sexual subcultures when collecting research and tells us some of their stories. Plummer uses narratives as a powerful way of exploring identities within different subcultures, examining how, why and for whom they are constructed. Particularly for Queer individuals, Plummer describes the process of searching for support and reassurance from others within the Queer community. Indeed, Plummer argues that we undertake a process of turning our own experiences into stories in a way that we narrate our experiences and integrate them into our social identity. The role of narrative in understanding sexuality is discussed in the methods section of this thesis, and Plummer's (1995) writing is an important intervention in these debates (see also Coleman-Fountain, 2014; Savin-Williams, 1998).

The examples mentioned are not exhaustive and there are numerous more studies into sexual subcultures. However, Irvine succinctly summarises the important elements which feature across the majority of these studies:

1) Sexual identities and categories are diffuse and internally fragmented rather than stable formations; 2) Relations of power not only regulate but also produce sexualities; 3) The practices of both sexuality and gender are fluid, and best understood as social accomplishments rather than as manifestations of an immanent self (Irvine, 2003, p. 431).

In summarising, Rubin notes:

In both theoretical innovations and ethnographic contributions, the texts [above] have been major forces in displacing 'perversion' models of sexual variation, which presume pathology, with 'diversity' models, which imply moral equality and levelled legitimacy (Rubin, 2002, p. 346).

### ***Kinky Sexual Subcultures***

Important as it is to understand the broader social elements of sexuality and sexual communities, it is also necessary to turn attention toward kink subcultures, which in many ways have deviated from mainstream gay and lesbian cultures (Rubin, 1981). While I discuss the etymology of the word kink in Chapter 2, as well as examining debates around particular terms and how best to define them, I focus now on sexual cultures that are 'kinky' because they deviate from traditional normative views of sexual practice.

Rubin (1991) undertook one of the earliest ethnographies of a kink community when she documented the San Francisco Catacombs between 1975 and 1981, a place known for its fisting and leather parties. The Catacombs never initially set out to provide a play space for kinky residents of San Francisco, but rather was an intimate birthday present from one gay lover to another. However, it eventually served as a symbolic home for the gay fisting community in the city and indeed the world: 'The Catacombs was a Mecca of handballing. Fisters from all over the Western world made the pilgrimage to San Francisco to attend parties at the Catacombs' (Rubin, 1991, p. 226).

Rubin's ethnography of the Catacombs was a landmark study, and important for sexological research. It provided an insight into a very private kink subculture. At

the time, and even today, it was difficult to find or study kink groups without a gatekeeper of some sort – somebody who could vouch for the researcher and provide a route into the subculture. Often surveys and questionnaires were used to combat this problem, distributed through online and offline networks and answered anonymously (e.g. Sandnabba et al., 1999; Alison et al., 2001; Santilla et al., 2002). However, as highlighted above in relation to non-kinky sexual subcultures, questionnaires could not grasp the social complexities of kink participation. Ethnographic research allows for interactions and operations of kink behaviours, ‘providing fertile ground for theory development’ (Weinberg, 2006, p. 27).

Despite the almost global popularity of the Catacombs, it was not a kink club in the usual sense of the word ‘club’ (Steinmetz and Maginn, 2014). Given stigma towards kink at the time, and the impact it could have on employment, positions in society, and child custody (Rubin, 1981; Khan, 2014), a level of discretion and secrecy was needed to access the club with several steps involved to gain admission. Most, if not all, of the interactions occurred in person and there were several vetting procedures. She wrote:

It was not easy to get into the Catacombs... To be invited to the parties, you had to be on Steve’s list. To get on Steve’s list, you had to be recommended by someone he knew, and often had to be interviewed by him as well. (1991, p. 227).

A level of commitment was needed to gain access to this ‘Old Guard’ type of kink setting – you needed to completely identify as a community member or a *lifestyler* regarding kink. On ethnographic research, Weinberg (2006, p. 27) comments ‘The greatest challenge for researchers is gaining entree into the SM world, and finding a role within it, which explains the paucity of ethnographic data.’ Rubin acknowledges how lucky and privileged she felt being able to attend the events.

Once Rubin gained access to the Catacombs, she documented what happened, how they were organized, and more importantly what engaging in these acts and attending the Catacombs meant for the participants. The space served two primary functions: to allow individuals to engage in kinky behaviours and to socialise with other likeminded individuals in an inclusive environment – normally these conversations occurred with most people naked, with Rubin writing, ‘[The owner] deliberately kept

the temperature warm enough so that naked people would be comfortable and anyone in clothes miserably hot' (ibid, p. 228).

Throughout Rubin's descriptions of the Catacombs, there is a clear sense of attendees flirting between the social and the sexual. Individuals would drink and engage in conversations at the front of the Catacombs, but still naked, often flirting in the erotic environment or doing so between sessions of serious play (ibid, p. 228). She writes, 'Once you made it into the Catacombs, you entered an environment that was both intensely sexual and positively cozy' (ibid, p. 227). The only clear line between social and sexual occurred in the back of the Catacombs: 'The back was not for casual socializing. The back was for sex' (ibid).

It is worth examining precisely what Rubin describes occurring in this backroom. There were two rooms, a 'Bridal Suite' and a Dungeon. The bridal suite featured a water bed, with speakers that provided 'music to fuck by' (ibid, p. 231), as groups of people engaged in sex acts using the bed alongside the rubber-covered benches that lined the walls and the chains and springs that fell from the ceiling. The Dungeon had a walkway that 'could put a person in a leathery mood' (ibid, p. 229). It contained lots of wood – beams, a wooden floor, posts on the walls – all with a thin layer of Crisco on them (Crisco is a cooking butter which was used as a lubricating aid for fisting). There was all manner of kink equipment in the room, including a black iron cage, a suspension hoist (which could only be used with clearance from Steve), a large wooden cross, a padded table with stirrups, and two operating tables in the back of the room.

The Catacombs was a venue which catered to individuals' fetishistic needs - if you were lucky enough to be on the guest list. It also served as a symbolic community centre for the kink practitioners in San Francisco. Indeed, the community feel was promoted through the conversations which occurred nearer the front of the venue, the exclusivity of the membership to the Catacombs and the familiarity of the members with each other. This dual nature of the space epitomises the complexities which surround kink: what and how is the balance between social and sexual negotiated within kink subcultures? While kink was deconstructed more in Chapter 2, there is a dearth of knowledge in how kink is conceptualised within different kink subcultures. I explore these more in the rest of the thesis.

Rubin's discussions of the attendees of the Catacombs were markedly different to those described in other research. Psychiatric perspectives on kink viewed it as evidence of underlying pathology, which was understandable given that kink practitioners' clinicians encountered were patients, often seeking help for other mental health issues (Stekel, 1964). However, Rubin instead took an anthropological approach and avoided pathologising perspectives, mirroring sociological research that treated kink as a social phenomenon with inherent meaning for its participants (Weinberg, 1987). Rather than engaging in unhelpful discussions of roots into kink, she focused more on the subcultural composition of the Catacombs and highlighted how the non-sexual aspects of kink related to the community feel, were as integral to the members as the subcultural activities which occurred.

While relatively few studies provide such an insight into a kink subculture as Rubin's, there has been research exploring other areas of kink subcultures (e.g. Kleinplatz and Moser, 2006). Weinberg (2006) provides a review of the social science literature in relation to kink up until 2006. He discusses how social scientific research into kink was moving beyond pathological perspectives and exploring kink from different methodological angles, including survey data, questionnaires, content analysis of various media, and critical essays which target flaws in legal and medical frameworks related to kink. While there are examples of research that has examined differences between subcultures (e.g. Nordling et al., 2006), they tended to focus on psychometrics rather than ethnographic experiences. Related to more qualitative experiences, Weinberg highlights two notable ethnographies.

Firstly, Lieshout (1995) studied 'homosexual encounters' in a rest area of a Dutch highway. On a Monday night, this rest area was a popular meeting place for kinky individuals – Lieshout made the distinction between Leathermen and SMers [those who practice SM] in his research. The rest area space served multiple purposes on a Monday night – a place to meet and engage in sexual encounters, to see acquaintances or friends, and to exchange news and information, sometimes relating to the leather scene (Lieshout, 1995, p. 28).

The second notable ethnography was a retrospective analysis of kink parties. Moser (1998) used 25 years of observational analysis attending kink parties to discuss what a kink party was like – while varied in scope, exclusiveness, style and environment, there were common features of the parties. Moser highlights that all

parties had social rules which were 'quite serious and explicitly stated' (ibid, p. 20). He also highlights that the parties allowed kinky individuals to meet, interact and 'display their personal style of S/M [sado/masochism – see Chapter 2] behaviour for a semi-public setting' (ibid, p. 19) – something which was unusual at the time. The main reason for the parties however, was to serve a social role and provide a community feel for the subculture. While levels of eroticism were not uncommon at these parties, penetration or orgasmic behaviour was uncommon. Moser writes, 'Clearly individuals are attracted by an atmosphere that encourages them to be themselves and validates their behaviour. An acceptance of S/M identity and role is clearly part of the reason that individual attend' (Ibid, p. 25).

On the topic of the kinky subculture, Weinberg (2006, pp. 35-36) notes that it is inaccurate to see only one subculture, arguing, 'There are many different sadomasochistic worlds organized around sexual orientation, gender, and preferred activities.' Furthermore, these subcultures serve a variety of different purposes. For some, there is a focus on the kink activities and emphasis pleasure, while for others the focus is on providing a space where individuals with kink interests can merely socialize.

Aiming to bridge the gap between academic and activist, Langdridge and Barker (2007) provide an edited book comprising a collection of empirical, historical, clinical and theoretical perspectives on kink. In her book review, Fahs (2009, p. 421) describes how kink is framed as a 'hotly contested, chaotic, legally messy conduit of cultural anxieties about sex, power, gender and consent' (ibid), as well as focusing on issues studying kinky sexual subcultures. However, given the nature of an edited volume, it does not delve deep enough into any particular subculture, and it aims to cover a broad ranges of issues and topics, perhaps neglecting the subcultural narrative in order to achieve this plurality of voices.

One of the chapters in the edited text is by Kathy Sisson (2007), a researcher of alternative sexualities and an independent researcher. She conducted a historical analysis of kink subcultures, arguing that they have gone through five stages: sexual contacts (with historical evidence suggesting kink was proliferating in discourses from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century); sexual networks (where individuals began to make sexual friends who they could engage in kink with); sexual communities (established kink communities such as the *Society of Janus*); social movement (the sexual communities

began campaigning for rights and sexual freedoms); and sexual culture (the present kink subculture). Sociologist Ying-Chao (2013, p. 173) summarises Sisson's description of the current kink subculture, outlining six key functions of it:

- (1) Demarcating boundaries: Safe spaces were created inside the BDSM subculture for support groups, play parties, conventions, and S/M-oriented public events, along with available S/M-friendly businesses, therapists, publications, and artwork.
- (2) Providing an origin narrative: Written and oral histories of BDSM subculture construct the origins of BDSM lifestyle.
- (3) Establishing codes of behavior: BDSM practitioners' conduct was regulated by principles (safe, sane, consensual), the use of "safe words" and a mechanism for "aftercare" (the treatment after the scenes).
- (4) Creating a system of shared meanings: Sexual scripts (including identities, symbols, and roles) are "culturally produced, learned and reinforced by participation in the S&M subculture" (Weinberg, 1987; Sisson, 2007, p. 26).
- (5) Providing a means of social reproduction: Beginners were socialized into the subculture through orientation sessions and mentoring programs. Simultaneously, older generations passed down subculture histories, codes of conduct, and structures of meaning to the following generations.
- (6) Generating sexual identity: Based on previous historical production, with the proliferation of narratives, social interactions, educational processes, established boundaries and culturally specific vocabularies, members in BDSM subculture have generated the sexual identities of BDSMers, attaching them with the subculture. However, the practitioners may hold BDSM as "flexible, multiple, discontinued identities" (Chaline, 2010).

I will explore how the accuracy of these six functions later in the thesis.

There have also been a range of texts orientated more towards non-academics. For example, respected psychotherapist Guy Baldwin in his book *Ties That Bind* (1993) highlights from a medical perspective how kink can be a healthy expression of an individual's sexuality. He uses his own experience as a counsellor to kinky clients to discuss how to deal with issues in kink relationships, highlighting that vanilla and kink relationships can fall foul to very similar issues. While he does not give information on how to do certain activities, he instead advises on issues relating to kink such as how

to negotiate consent or how to broach the topic of kink with partners. Baldwin provides intelligent advice for those new to kink. However, the book is now quite outdated and does not deal with current issues, such as the introduction of the internet for kinky individuals.

Another piece which has proven popular is the book *Leather Folk* (1991) edited by Mark Thompson. At the time of its publication, the AIDS epidemic was rampant and greatly affected the queer leather underground scene. Thompson, a writer and activist within queer communities, collected memoirs, social commentaries, personal testimonies and general observations about the quickly developing leather world. Thomson writes:

This is the first co-gender, nonfiction anthology to address the complex and sometimes unspeakable topic of sadomasochism sexuality and the subculture that has formed around it. (ibid, p. xv)

The collection provides insights into varied aspects of the leather subculture from the point of view of the practitioners. These, often very personal, testimonies provide unique understandings into how practitioners understood kink at the time, particularly in peak times of oppression and stigma related to the AIDS epidemic. However, the collection of narratives should be viewed with a historical lens and used to understand how kink as practice, sexual orientation and lifestyle has developed and evolved since the time of writing.

Aiming to provide accurate information and narratives about kink, David Ortmann and Richard Sprott in their book *Sexual Outsiders* (2013) address common misconceptions about kink using case studies and their own experiences with practitioners. Their book is aimed at anybody with an active interest or curiosity in kink, highlighting how it can be understood as an activity which individuals engage in for both simple and complex reasons. On the complexities surrounding the practices of kink, they state:

One thing that is often surprising is that BDSM is not always the bizarre, isolated practice of a lone individual. There is a community that has grown around these practices, a community with a history, a language, literature, art, and a set of traditions and etiquette, all focused on BDSM behaviour and BDSM identity. There is a thriving worldwide subculture. (ibid: 35)

Ying-Chao (2013) provides a literature review of subcultural research which documents the rise of the BDSM (sub)culture from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, highlighting how ‘this subculture is not just another deviant case to study’ (ibid, p. 163), but is instead complex subculture. He argues, as I have done above, that kink (or BDSM in his words) is a socially constructed act and ‘the product of particular socio-historical contexts that are conducive to its emergence, shape its membership, and cause it to variously flourish or founder’ (ibid). Indeed, Ying-Chao only further emphasises the importance of discussing the historical debates when discussing kink (see Chapter 2).

There has been one notable exception of ethnographic research conducted in the UK with gay male kinky subcultures. For his doctoral thesis project, journalist and commercial non-fiction writer Eric Chaline (2008) used mixed methodology to conduct research with members of the gay kinky UK subculture, conducting a survey of 119 individuals and 31 follow-up interviews. He explores how individuals become involved in a gay kinky subculture, what it means for them and tries to provide updated understandings of the sexual scripts for gay SMers.

In his findings and discussion, Chaline acknowledges that his participants are those who are immersed in the gay SM world and actively identified as a gay SMer. Furthermore, Chaline describes his participant mean age of 41, with only a small number of younger participants. He acknowledges that this could drastically influence the narratives of his participants and suggests that a study which explores the experiences of those under 30 who engage in kink could ‘examine the impact of commercialization and the Internet’ (ibid: 243).

Indeed, Chaline recruited participants through gay SM social worlds and online settings, specifically gay SM personals and online chat rooms. While this helped to open up discourses around the role of the online, due to the nature of his thesis, it is relatively absent from discussions, despite the prominent role the online has and still plays for sexual minorities (Preece et al., 2003).

More recently, there have been two in-depth ethnographies that have explored different kink subcultures within Northern America (Newmahr, 2011; Weiss, 2011). The authors describe the participants engage with a kink community as part of a broader kink subculture. Data was collected around the same time with each community having similar characteristics – mainly white, middle class, mixed sexualities and mixed genders. However, each researcher focused in on distinct

aspects of the communities using different theories to conceptualise what they witnessed.

First is the work of Margot Weiss who in her book, *Techniques of Pleasure* (2011), describes research she undertook in the San Francisco Bay area, heralded as the symbolic birthplace of kink and the same location as Rubin's Catacombs. Weiss, as a participant-observer, attended several kink related events such as workshops on how to perform particular kink activities and private kink parties on an invite only basis. She also conducted interviews with more than sixty members of a pansexual kink community, describing the community she researched as 'a formally organised community with very particular social and educational practices' (ibid, p. 5).

Weiss' main conceptualisation of the kink community is to understand it as 'circuit of play' that integrates the kink activities, the practitioners and the broader social constructions in which the former is done. She locates this term within discourses which understand kink as either a transgressive form of play or an excessive form of consumerism. Rather than place kink at either end of the spectrum, Weiss argues to move beyond these debates, situating kink somewhere in the middle, 'creat[ing] a circuit between self-mastery, technical expertise, and community belonging' (ibid, p. 12). Reviewing Weiss' work, Sayre (2013) highlights how 'Weiss is able to highlight the interdependence between BDSM practitioners and the structures of capitalism without essentializing BDSM practice to the toys, clothes, and other accoutrements its practitioners often purchase.'

A key aspect of Weiss' understanding of kink is the relationship it has with capitalism/commodification – she emphasises that to do kink properly, one needs gear; to have gear, one needs money. She argues that investment in kink paraphernalia indicates commitment to the kink subculture, both in terms of financial investment and through the investment required to learn how to be proficient in using the gear – social privilege within the kink scene is bestowed on these individuals. Sexual freedom for her participants means the freedom for consumption.

Weiss also discusses the symbolic meaning behind being a practitioner and explores the physicality and corporeality involved in kink, highlighting how the kink circuit produces 'a body in play' (Weiss, 2011, p. 104). These bodies allow individuals to explore their true selves and are thought of as highly fluid, yet unconsciously structured around gender norms. Alongside this discussion, she brings in the cultural

and political histories of kink and how it has led to the formation of rules and hierarchies, particularly around 'Safe, Sane and Consensual' (Downing, 2007).

While Weiss argues for new understandings of the pansexual kink scene in San Francisco with legitimate citizenship within the kink community, her descriptions of the community still seem to reflect Old Guard ways of doing kink, referenced in Rubin's *Catacombs* (1991). For example, she describes how there is anxiety around newcomers being able simply to buy new gear without needing to *earn* it. Another example is her descriptions of the social hierarchy within the community, such as gatekeepers and dungeon masters, and the focus on heavy investment and social/kink reputation.

Her analysis of this kink community demonstrates that while they ascribe to the kinky subcultural norms, functioning as a circumscribed world with their own set of norms and rules, they also uphold values desired by society more generally, such as supporting local causes and raising money for charity. Importantly, in this way Weiss argues that the kink community is made up of 'normal' (ibid, p. 2) individuals, who happened to have alternative erotic interests.

Weiss provides some interesting discussions on politics and consumerism within kink communities, yet her conceptualisations seem too focused on neoliberal debates and are heavily theoretical for an ethnography (Sayre, 2013). Consequentially, it has been labelled as mostly inaccessible except for anthropologists interested in economics (Packer, 2012). I tend to agree with such critiques, finding her work indicative of a post-structural turn in some sexualities scholarship that does not foreground the narratives of participants, relegating the lived experience of sexuality to privilege a more abstract argument about class and capitalism.

Coming from less of a neo-liberal perspective and instead using a symbolic interactionist perspective, the second recent ethnography is by Staci Newmahr (2011), and her book *Playing on the Edge*. Newmahr explored a mostly heterosexual kink subculture based in North East America, which she labels the Caeden community. Her role began firstly as a researcher-observer, attending events and documenting the interactions. However, this changed and she became a researcher-participant, engaging in a variety of kinky activities which she describes at the beginning of each chapter.

Through an immersion as a researcher-participant, she documented experiences often deemed normal or 'uninteresting for community members' (ibid, p. 15), yet would appear exotic when situated outside of a kinky subculture, such as the social norms involved when engaging interacting with others or the experience of an alternative headspace when engaging in kink. Furthermore, through immersing herself within the Caeden kink community, attending events and investing resources into the community, she negotiated a level of subcultural acceptance that could not otherwise be achieved.

Newmahr describes the Caeden scene as a site of deviance in a non-pathological sense of the term, documenting how members were 'accustomed to defiance [of hegemonic social norms] long before their entrance into the SM scene' (ibid, p. 26) through not fitting in while growing up, and were familiar 'to defining themselves as outsiders' (ibid, p. 38). While her participants are from varied social backgrounds, she discusses the shared histories of marginality and new-found sense of collective belonging for the *geeks and freaks* having joined the community.

From my reading of her work, it seems Newmahr has two foci stemming from her research. Firstly, she challenges notions of intimacy and argues that kink relationships transcend popular categorizations of love, sex and tenderness. Instead, she argues self-disclosure and trust are key to intimacy within these communities describing intimacy as 'access to emotional and physical experiences of others that we consider inaccessible to most people' (ibid, p. 171).

Secondly, she challenges traditional notions of how to frame and understand kink, particularly Edgeplay (activities which play on the boundaries of consent). She argues that Edgeplay can be understood as a feminist activity, despite its research roots within men's perspectives. Instead, she focuses on the 'shared transcendence of existential boundaries' (Newmahr, 2011, p. 160) which are experienced emotionally and physically.

Newmahr focuses on the role of the individual, which is reflexive of more recent understandings of subcultures described in the previous chapter. Newmahr aims to shift 'the focus away from the ultimately unhelpful questions about whether [kink] is or is not deviant sex' (ibid, p. 102), thus avoiding earlier frameworks which rooted subcultures within deviant frameworks. Instead, she employs the leisure perspective to understand kink activities, discussed in Chapter 2.

*Playing on the Edge* has received generally positive feedback from the academic community (Groes-Green, 2012; Williams, 2011), including myself in a review published in the journal *Sexualities* (Wignall, 2016). Even so, and while more accessible than Weiss' work due to a lack of heavy theory throughout the book, there are several things that seem to be left out of her discussions of the kink community she is researching. First, the participants discussed by Newmahr, and indeed Weiss and Chaline, are individuals who engage in kink as a form of serious leisure, mentioned earlier. A significant amount of time and resources are invested into the community and into the kink, such as learning how to tie knots correctly or purchasing expensive tools or gear. Indeed, the participants' social circles in both ethnographies seem to be mostly limited to other individuals with kink interests – there is a strong emphasis on the role of the social within kink and how special bonds can be formed with other practitioners. For these participants, kink is very much a defining feature of their identity.

However, in keeping with a leisure perspective, there is little discussion of those who do not see kink as a serious leisure pursuit, perhaps instead framing it as a form of casual leisure. For these individuals, they may engage in kink activities and invest some resources, but not to the same extent as the 'community members' discussed by Weiss and Newmahr. Furthermore, for the non-community members or *dabblers* (Stebbins, 2014), kink would not be a defining feature of their identity, but rather a part of it. While there are some references to dabblers in discussions, they seem to be almost denied a level of kinky sexual citizenship (Langdrige, 2006), often understood through a lens of anxiety (Weiss, 2011) or annoyance (Newmahr, 2011). While examples of dabblers are discussed in the leisure literature (see Stebbins, 2014), an understanding of kink as a form of casual leisure is absent from within kink discourses.

Such lack of acknowledgement of dabblers of kink is surprising, particularly given recent technological advances. The internet has allowed individuals with alternative sexual interests to explore their desires and communicate with others who have similar interests with less emphasis on serious upfront investment (Mowlabocus, 2010). Indeed, Döring (2009) highlights that the use of the Internet is a key component in the lives of sexual minorities today. He states:

By providing an easily accessible platform for the establishment of contacts between individuals of similar creeds and sexual orientations, the Internet can ameliorate social isolation, facilitate social networking, strengthen self-acceptance and self-identity, help to communicate practical information, and encourage political activism, among other things.

Döring sees these features as highly influential for sexual minorities in developing sexuality-oriented communities. Reflecting this, there are examples of websites that serve a purpose of allowing sexual minorities to communicate (e.g. Gray, 2009). While many of these focus on the social, there are numerous examples which focus on the sexual and specifically hooking up (e.g. Gudelunas, 2012; Blackwell et al., 2014).

Yet the classification of websites into either sexual or social as discrete and exclusive categories is unrepresentative of how users engage with the sites. For example, Mowlabocus (2010) highlights how Gaydar, a profile-based dating website for men seeking men, serves a dual purpose of allowing for social communication and friendship ties as well as allowing for dating and casual sex. Similarly, Blackwell et al. (2014) discuss how Grindr, a location-based real time 'dating' app, was originally a phone application used to seek immediate sex with other men seeking men but has also been used for socializing and making friends. While some individuals manage their profiles online to limit and manage their sexual disclosure (Jaspal, 2016), this is markedly different to the exploration of fantasy in wholly anonymous online spaces (Waskul, 2003). Rather than focusing on categorizing such websites as serving a sexual or social function, I label them socio-sexual networking sites (SSNS) due to the dual nature of allowing for communication alongside the opportunity for sexual encounters. In this way, they can be considered an online gay scene, serving the dual facility that gay bars and clubs have historically done (Ghaziani, 2014).

Online interactions on these SSNS can occur without little investment by its users - one simply needs to create an account in an online space and they can begin, and delete the account if they discover it is not for them. Furthermore, SSNS have been shown to be used in a variety of ways which I explore more in Chapter 8. Despite previous kink narratives emphasizing the importance of in person interactions and forming a kink identity (e.g. Kamel, 1995), there is some research which indicates the online and use of SSNS can be just as legitimate in creating kink identities.

For example, Rambukkana (2007) discusses the role of the internet in creating new discourses across varied platforms of discovering kink and how there is less emphasis on the role of creating a 'leather' identity and more role on the varied kink identities. Despite interesting arguments, there is a lack of participant narrative to understand why and how individuals are moving towards the online, particularly for dabblers. Furthermore, this discussion seems rooted in older versions of technology and does not account for the newer platforms on which kinky individuals are communicating.

### **Chapter Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to build on the research around subcultural theory and explore how sexual subcultures have developed over time, before focusing on contemporary kinky subcultures. Moving beyond the subcultural debates, I discussed examples of sexual subcultures and how they were originally rooted within the *sexual* and medical discourses discussed in Chapter 2. However, particularly with the work of Gagnon and Simon (1973), the *social* was understood to feature heavily in the construction of sexual subcultures and subcultural identity. Sex is not a standalone act but comprised of social, cultural and historical narratives that inform sexual acts themselves.

In keeping with the shift in discourses away from medicalized models described in the previous chapter, research into kinky subcultures employed a qualitative ethnographic framework. Early research was built upon through the work of Gagnon and Simon who emphasised the importance of exploring social aspects of sexual subcultures and argued for sex to move the study of sex from the extraordinary to the ordinary (Plummer, 1981). Thus, a reconceptualization of sexuality was called for which highlighted the importance of individual narratives and a movement away from pathology.

As part of the new strand of research into sexual subcultures, there has been a growing literature around the study of kinky sexual subcultures. Individuals who engaged in a kink as a lifestyle and invested significant resources into the activity were studied and provided alternative and untold narratives to kinky worlds. The complexities of kink subcultures and their relations to the law, the public and other sexual subcultures were discussed from an insider perspective (Rubin, 1991).

More recent kink ethnographies into kinky subcultures provided their own insights into what still remains a relatively unknown world. However, they also focused on individuals who engaged in kink as a lifestyle, indeed as a form of serious leisure. There has been a dearth of literature seeking to understand those who engage in kinky subcultural worlds as a form of casual leisure, in keeping with new understandings of subcultural theory, and a surprising lack of discussion of the role the internet plays in these areas. This chapter demonstrates, while there have been great debates and developments within subcultural research, there are still groups of individuals who fall under the radar and we know little about them, particularly pertaining to kinky subcultures. These are individuals who engage in kink activities, but do not understand it as a lifestyle. In part, this study aims to use the literature described above as basis for understanding these individuals – dabblers or non-community members – and examine the similarities and differences between the community and non-community members.

Building on the first two chapters, this chapter highlights some of the key areas in which there is a dearth of literature related to kinky sexual subcultures. Firstly, there is a severe lack of ethnographic research which explores the experiences and narratives of practitioners who belong to contemporary kink subcultures within the UK, particularly for gay and bisexual men. While there have been two in-depth ethnographies conducted recently in North America, the applicability of the findings from these studies to a UK sample is questionable, given the different cultural formations and expressions between North American and the UK. Furthermore, given technological changes and broader social changes since the research conducted by Chaline, updated understandings are needed. Therefore, the first research question will be:

- What are the narratives and experiences for kinky gay and bisexual men who engage in contemporary kinky subcultures within the UK?

Secondly the research into kink subcultures has focused on individuals who immerse themselves into kink and can be framed as engaging in kink as a form of serious leisure. As highlighted in Chapter 2, the leisure perspective allows for the introduction of individuals who engage in activities more casually, the dabblers. Individuals who potentially engage in kink as a form of casual leisure are absent from the literature and

have even been denied kink citizenship. Therefore, the second research question will be:

- What are the narratives and experiences of gay and bisexual men who engage in kink activities but do not participate in kink communities?

Finally, the role of the internet in the construction of narratives related to kink has been mostly absent from the literature on kink subcultures. This is particularly interesting, given the prominent role the internet has played for other sexual subcultures and related to sexuality more generally. Therefore, the third research question will be:

- What role has the internet played for gay and bisexual men who engage in kink activities?

# Chapter 5: Methods of the Study

## **Introduction**

This chapter will provide an overview of the methods employed in this study, explaining why they were used. The chapter begins with a brief discussion of the qualitative approach and how it can be used within multiple sites, both offline and online. It will then go on to discuss more the concept of narratives in relation to sexuality and highlight the importance of qualitative investigations. The ethical implications associated with conducting this study will also be given attention. Finally, the chapter leads to the approach I undertook in this study and the methods I used to understand the changing narratives of kinky sexual subcultures.

As discussed on pages 10 and 11, the overarching critical framework of this thesis is based on a Foucauldian approach that recognizes that sexuality and kink are *social categories* that have congealed at this moment in time and will be reconfigured in the future (Foucault, 1979). I hold this overarching discursive approach in conjunction with an interdisciplinary engagement with social theories, particularly interactionist approaches within cultural studies (see Denzin, 1992). As such, I use discourse as a guiding frame—considering not just the words that are said by participants, but understanding the context in which they say them and how the discourses of kink and sexuality, among others, impact upon what is ‘sayable’ (Richardson, Smith and Werndly 2013). This involves listening to participants’ narratives analytically, engaging with their representations online, and combining this with a critical engagement with existing literature.

## **The value of qualitative and ethnographic research**

In cultural studies, a valuable thread of research critically interrogates culture and how sexuality is a component of it, represented through the culture (see Richardson, Smith and Werndly, 2013). This recognition that sexuality is always “*cultural and social*” (ibid, 45) means that it is also important to explore how people experience sexuality in the context of their lives.

There is a substantial strand of rich qualitative and ethnographic research into the study of sex and sexuality, and kinky sexual subcultures specifically. Indeed, I argued in Chapter 4 that the importance and value of qualitative research for exploring the narratives of peoples’ lives and understanding subcultures cannot be underestimated (Williams, 2011). This is because it enables a way to investigate the

meanings of people within culture, and how discourses of gender and sexuality are experienced by people.

With a history in the Chicago School (see Chapters 2 and 3) and a Foucauldian approach that sees sexuality and kink as social categories (see pages 10-11) it is this intellectual context where I also draw on an ethnographic method of data collection to understand the contemporary experiences of people engaged in kink and how they interact with both sexual subcultures and the online sphere—using in-depth interviews, participant observation and visual analysis of personal profiles. This is not to understand such narratives as statements of fact, but part of discourse that construct the nature of the social category.

As discussed in Chapter 4, recent research in kink cultures has adopted immersive ethnographic methods where the researcher has focussed on one sexual subculture and become a part of that culture. This notion is complicated however when a subculture operates both in the online and the offline, with consideration warranted for how to bridge the gap between these two spaces. It is no longer sufficient to learn about a subculture through traditional ethnographic field sites (Beaulieu, 2004), with some research acknowledging this (e.g. Dicks et al., 2006; Murthy, 2008). It also means that the findings will be very limited to that specific context, whereas interview data can engage with people from a wider range of subcultures.

This is particularly true of the online, where an increased popularity of the ethnographic approach in online spaces has led to a proliferation of virtual ethnographies (Hine, 2000). However, given the relative novelty with online spaces and how they change and adapt rapidly in the digital age, particularly online spaces related to sexuality (e.g. Mowlabocus, 2010), ethnographic approaches must adjust; consequentially, no two studies utilise the same approach (Pink, 2013), evidenced earlier in this thesis when discussing offline sexual subcultures. Given these additions and complexities, I now discuss researching the online in more detail.

### ***Researching the online***

There is an abundance of interest in the digital world and the online communities/subcultures that inhabit them (e.g. Boyd, 2007; Murthy, 2013). As Murthy (2008) warned just under a decade ago, it is important that qualitative

research does not remain fixed in the physical world but also engages in the online sphere. He argues that a combination of engaging in the physical world and online will likely facilitate the best data. Indeed, interactions do not remain solely online and the importance of researchers communicating offline as well has been stressed. For example, while Newmahr (2010), discussed earlier, engaged in the online spaces, she highlighted how they were primarily used to facilitate the offline interactions and stressed the importance of face to face communication, with Baym (2015) describing a ritualization of users of online platforms who meet offline. However, in her discussions of virtual ethnographies, Hines (2000) notes that many inhabitants of cyberspace never have face-to-face meetings and have no intention of doing so. These conflicting viewpoints, while only 5-15 years apart, emphasise the need for more research into subcultures, particularly kink subcultures, which navigate both online and offline, using varied qualitative methods.

However, as Nightingale (2008) highlights in her discussion of ethnographic research, it is not enough to simply lurk in these spaces and observe the interactions. The researcher gains limited knowledge through this technique, using their own understandings to explain meanings behind interactions rather than rooting meanings in the narratives of those observed. Nor is it enough to embed oneself in the subculture to understand the subcultural phenomena. While this may provide richer understandings of the subculture, indeed providing a “sense of solidarity” with the subculture (Nightingale, 2008, p. 107), this is only “speculation” (ibid) rather than informed understandings. Arguing the importance of interactions, Nightingale (ibid) states, “To produce good quality [ethnographic] research, accurate observations has to be combined with communication and exchange of information and ideas, both between the researcher and participants and among research participants.” As such, I now provide a discussion of the methods of my study, before discussing some of the issues involved in this process.

### **The Methods of the Study**

The aims of this study were to develop understanding of how individuals experienced kink in contemporary British culture to varying degrees of immersion, with a focus on examining the influence of technology on these sexual practices that are rooted in culture and society. I also wanted to address the gap in the literature that was

precisely enabled by new forms of technology: individuals who engage in kinky sexual practices, but are not part of kink communities. While recruiting participants in this manner would be very difficult prior to the internet, the use of socio-sexual networking sites and geolocational 'hook up' applications (apps which use Global Positioning Systems or GPS to locate other users nearby) on mobile phones made it possible to hear the narratives and experiences of these individuals (see Chapter 4). As such, I decided to talk to 15 individuals in kink communities and 15 individuals with kink interests who are not part of such communities.

To address these aims, I decided that I needed to combine a mixture of qualitative approaches. A qualitative approach was adopted because I wanted to understand the meanings and values associated with kink for individuals. Given that I wanted to understand the lived experiences of practicing kinksters, and how individuals experienced and explored kink and made sense of this in their lives, the main form of data collection was in-depth interviews (Kong, Mahoney and Plummer, 2002; Chaline, 2010). Additionally, valuing the recognition of how meaning is made *in context* and the wealth of ethnographic study of kink cultures (Newmahr, 2011; Rubin, 1991), I also sought to collect data with participants, and engaged in ethnographic work through participant observations. Heeding Murthy's (2008) call for a combination of traditional and online methods, I also engaged in virtual and media analysis, looking at participants' social networking sites.

### **Recruitment**

To recruit participants, I joined kink-based SSNS platforms. Given the volume of these type of websites, I only focused on sites which had large membership within the UK and which were orientated towards gay and bisexual men. Using these criteria, two websites particularly matched the criteria: Recon and Slaveboys. I engaged in some preliminary browsing on the sites to get an understanding about what the websites were used for, how many members were on them, and if they could prove beneficial for participant recruitment.

At the time of writing the research proposal and ethics application, these websites were the most popular sites of their kink for the UK demographic. While the popularity of Recon has remained high, the popularity of Slaveboys has decreased since my initial search and while undertaking a review of the academic literature

related to kink. This decrease in popularity was observed through a less active chatroom on the website, a reduction in the number of forum posts on the site, and a reduction in the number of new members. Alongside my own observations of the website, discussions I had with attendees at kink events and conversations with my participants corroborated by perception.

The decrease in popularity of the site influenced me to find an alternative website to recruit participants from. Interviews with participants and discussions with members of kink communities alerted me to another kink based SSNS which was becoming popular among the UK gay kink subculture – ClubCollared. The site’s features were like Slaveboys: member profiles, chat rooms, forum pages, and the ability to interact with other members privately. However, ClubCollared was also a unique kink SSNS for several reasons. Firstly, the site is orientated around kink events which happen in two major metropolitan cities in the UK: pictures taken at the events are uploaded onto the website, there are lists one can join on the site to indicate attendance, and there is information posted by the website about the events. Secondly, the creation of the site is interesting as it was formed after the introduction of its offline partner events. The site was created as a way for event attendees to interact with others before the event to make them feel more comfortable about attending and a means of communicating with others after the event. In doing so, the website carries on the experiences and interactions from the offline to the online and vice versa.

### ***Identifying Potential Participants: Community Members***

As someone who had been part of kink online communities in the past, I already had an account on certain kink websites, including Recon. I decided to keep these profiles as this conferred a level of connection to the kink community and meant that gatekeepers, whom I knew, within the community could vouch for me and my profile. However, I also took steps to preserve my identity and the status of the research. In this regard I took down personal information on my profile that was not relevant to the study and my profile text read as follows:

Researcher conducting interviews on guys who are interested in kink. Feel free to chat and get more information 😊

While already having a profile on Recon, I created a new profile on ClubCollared which was similar in style to the profile on Recon (see Chapter 8 for more information on the kink SSNS used).

I kept a face picture on the site as I was happy to do this and felt that it would enable a level of trust with potential participants. In this context I was present on the site, but I did not maintain an active presence. This has sometimes been called 'lurking' or 'lurkers' and defined as a 'dominant group of users who read and follow online trends but are rarely active in the online community' (Leigh, 2009, p. 132). However, I do not think it is an accurate description, particularly on Recon where there is no real facility for public discussion. Rather, by virtue of my profile text and face picture I was less a lurker and more an active member of the site. However, after completion of the data collection, I deleted my profiles from these sites as a way of ensuring closure on the data collection process.

I messaged members on the sites, Recon and ClubCollared, informing them of my research and asking if they wished to take part. The message was standardised and read as follows:

Hey there, how's it going? I'm conducting academic research for my PhD on guys who engage in kink. It's completely anonymous and confidential! I'm mainly asking questions around how people interact with sites like Recon and what their relationship with the kink community. If you might be interested, I can send you more information. Again, completely anonymous and no pressure to take part (or even reply to this message!) Thanks :D

Those who responded positively were sent a consent form and participant information sheet to make an informed decision about participation. The focus of the study was to explore the narratives and experiences of community and non-community members. While self-identification was used to distinguish between the two groups, I analysed user profiles to preliminarily mark a user as either community or non-community. Rather than deconstructing a profile and looking at its components individually, I holistically analysed a profile to make an informed assumption on their standing within a kink community. There was a high concurrence rate between how a member identified and what I assumed they would identify as.

Individuals were identified as possible community members if they had other members linked to their profile. Both sites offer the option to link profiles and these

are normally shown as 'friends'. However, there were slight differences between how profiles were linked on either site.

On Recon, the friendship option is a premium feature. Instead, members can choose to mark other profiles as a 'favourite', which shows when a member is online and provides updates on their activities on a news page feature, like Facebook. However, the favourite feature is not publicly displayed to others. If a user pays for a premium membership as part of a subscription service, the user can send friend requests to others which will link the profiles as friends for other members to see. While a user must pay to send friend requests, it is free to accept friend requests from other users.

On ClubCollared, the friendship function is free and requests can be sent out to all other members. However, the site also offers other ways of linking profiles using labels more reflexive of the complex relationship structures associated with kink communities. Examples of these include: pup, partner, alpha, slave, sub or fuckbuddy. These labels are more commonly understood in kink environments and are employed on other kink SSNS, such as FetLife (McCabe, 2015).

I understood friends on user profiles as reflexive of a level of investment within the kink community. A profile with multiple friends linked indicates a presence within the kink community to some extent. While the types and depths of these online connections can only be speculated at, multiple friends on a profile was a strong indicator that the user was a community member. Indeed, given the strong narrative of social interactions in kink described in Chapter 4, a community member should have multiple kinky friends.

Another way I identified potential community members was through their profile texts. For example, longer profile texts which provided detailed information about the individual and their relationship with kink was a strong indicator of community member. It was also common to see discussions of limits, rules, and the values of the social aspect of kink in these profiles. While I discuss in Chapter 8 the complexities of profile texts and lack of an 'archetype community member profile', profile texts allowed an insight into the user and their role within the kink community.

Pictures on profiles were also used to help identify potential community members. Weiss (2011) in her research in the bay area of San Francisco identifies a strong correlation between purchasing kink gear and an increased reputation or level

of kink citizenship among kink communities. Therefore, a strong indicator of a community member was an individual who displayed multiple pictures of themselves in kink gear. Pictures of the user attending kink events also helped solidify this assumption – kink events are often based around social interactions where the attendees are known by each other and normally require financial investment.

Finally, individuals who posted to online forums or engaged in chat room discussions were also more likely to be community members. This indication was only applicable to ClubCollared as Recon no longer used forums or chat rooms. The forums on ClubCollared are regularly used by members on a variety of different topics. Examples include: posts about kink events; questions posed to other members about specific kinks; or non-kink related posts about general topics, such as TV programmes. Those who interacted with the forums were understood to be investing more into the website and the online kink community.

Using this holistic approach, I selectively messaged members whom I identified as potential community members and informed them briefly about my research. I messaged approximately 80 individuals across both sites. Over half responded positively to my messages, with the remainder not responding. Of the individuals I identified as potential community members who responded, all confirmed they believed they were part of a kink community. Time constraints and general logistics meant that not all members I messaged were able to be interviewed. In total, I recruited 15 community members.

### ***Identifying Potential Participants: Non-Community Members***

While the sites were useful means of recruiting individuals who identified as part of a kink community, they were less useful for recruiting non-community participants. Arguably, the creation of a profile on a kink SSNS acknowledges a level of investment by an individual into their interest in kink. Not all individuals with kink interests will create a profile on a kinky SSNS and I was particularly interested to hear the narratives of these unresearched individuals. I therefore changed my recruitment strategy for non-community members.

Discussions with community members and attendees at kink events led to the topic of an increasing number of individuals on non-kinky hook-up apps, such as Grindr and Scruff, who advertised kinky interests, both publicly and privately. While there was

undoubtedly an overlap of community members having non-kinky profiles on these apps, it was evident that individuals with kink interests who did not engage with kink communities also used these apps. It became apparent that non-community members could be recruited through these apps. I therefore created a profile on Grindr and Scruff which advertised myself as a researcher of sexualities and messaged individuals with kink indicators on their profile to see if they would take part in an interview. Those who responded positively were given more information via email. This profile had the same photo and text as that for the community participants, and I similarly deleted this profile at the end of data collection.

There was a script involved in communicating kink in these online vanilla spaces which could only be learned through being directly informed or through interactions. This was reminiscent of conversational norms in other online sexual spaces (Mowlabocus, 2008). On the apps, individuals would use keywords or emoji on their profile to indicate interests: a pup emoji for pup play; a pig emoji for general kink; 'open-minded' on their profiles; and some just wrote 'kinky' on their profiles. I expand on the use of emoji and keywords in Chapter 8 and provide a glossary of terms in Appendix 2. However, it is important to note that they were not always reflective of kink interests – sometimes a dog emoji on a profile meant that the individuals liked dogs.

There were also users on these apps who had kink interests but did not publicly indicate their interests in kink. It was only through conversations with individuals that their kink interests were made known. Given my profile featured 'sexualities researcher', it prompted conversations from other users about my research. While most of these conversations were personal, if an individual disclosed an interest in kink and identified as not belonging to any kink community, I would give them more information about my research and ask if they would take part in the study. I interviewed those that responded positively, recruiting ten participants through non-kinky applications. Five participants were recruited similarly to community members through kink SSNS.

### **The Interview**

All participants were given a choice of where the interview would take place: a local café (normally a branded café) or a university based setting, such as an interview room

within a university. Only one participant opted for a university setting while the remaining 29 were conducted in cafés. The use of cafes for interviews has been documented as a valuable semi-public area to collect data in other research (McCormack, Adams and Anderson, 2013).

Participants were asked why they preferred to discuss kink in a semi-public environment rather than a private one. University settings and more formalised environments were described by potential interviewees as intimidating, arguing that a café as a familiar environment would make them feel more comfortable talking about sex.

Throughout participant recruitment, I spent a considerable amount of time in cafés interviewing participants, transcribing interviews, waiting in-between interviews and using it as a mobile office to arrange further interviews and deal with the related admin (sending information sheets to participants and collecting consent prior to interviews). As such, the café featured a central role during my research.

There were benefits to conducting interviews in café settings. For example, I was not limited geographically and I travelled across England to ensure a broad geographical spread. This was particularly important when recruiting community members to reach different kink communities, something not previously addressed in research on kink communities. Participants were recruited from London, Newcastle, Manchester, Liverpool, York, Leeds and Birmingham. These are metropolitan cities featuring multiple cafés which the participant could choose from. Offering the choice to the participant gave them some control over the interview, which they commented made them feel more at ease - they could choose a regular or local café, or choose to go to a non-regular one in which there would be less chance they would be recognised or disturbed. Anybody looking over would assume it was two individuals having a chat over a coffee, rather than engaging in research about kinky sex.

Permission was given by all participants for interviews to be recorded and transcribed for future use. Interviews followed a semi-structured approach and were adapted around a set list of questions, however they were also free flowing and covered a wide range of topics related to sex, kink and the internet, lasting approximately one hour. To preserve anonymity, pseudonyms have been given to participants when transcribed and the original interviews have been destroyed.

Interviews began with small talk for familiarity and to reduce any potential anxiety; the conversation moved away from feeling like an interview to more like a general conversation, where I asked all the questions. As such, I believed this helped participants to be honest in their answers. The background noise of the café served as a privacy tool to mask conversations and the high turnover of customers limited individuals listening to our conversation.

However, there were difficulties in transcribing post interview due to the background noises on the interview recordings. I noticed this problem after I conducted the first interview and addressed it by moving the recording equipment closer to the participant. Furthermore, I transcribed interviews on the day they were recorded and took minor notes during the interviews for prompts afterwards.

A difficulty often left out of the interview process is the financial burdens associated with conducting in person interviews. Arranging to meet participants in a café, with them giving up their free time and engaging in personal and sensitive discussions, often places expectations on the interviewer. Given the setting, it felt obligatory to offer to buy the participant a drink of their choice. Given that 29 interviews were conducted in cafés, with the average price drink between £2 and £4, approximately £87 was spent on participants' drinks. Furthermore, I bought myself a drink to follow the café norms of drinking together. These expenses were unexpected and not factored into research proposals - all drinks were self-funded.

Further expenses came in the form of travel costs. I was fortunate enough to have free accommodation from family and friends while travelling. However, travelling to ensure a diverse range of participants incurred high costs. Again, these were not factored into the proposal and tickets were self-funded, spending approximately £250 on travel. These were hidden costs of conducting interviews in person.

Given the recruitment method of using geo-apps which displays users within proximity, travelling to different cities was a necessity. However, the main benefit of face to face interviews was post-interview conversations. I collected rich data post-interview through asking participants what they thought of the interview or if they had anything else to add, gaining additional information which enriched their interview narratives. Furthermore, two non-community participants recommended other non-community participants whom I could try and interview. Afterwards, participants also highlighted how easy it was to discuss kink and sex in public place, praising the café.

## **Participant Observations**

To provide context to the participant narratives and broaden my understanding of the UK kink subculture, I attended several events aimed at kinky gay and bisexual men in the UK. While some were orientated around particular fetishes or kink, others were open to individuals with a variety of kinks. The events provided a space where attendees could engage in a variety of kinks as well as socialise with others who shared their interests.

I attended a mixture of events which advertised themselves as either social, sexual or both. However, there were no clear definitions of boundaries, with lines blurring between the social and the sexual. For example, kink paraphernalia was often worn by attendees and was described as erotic or providing sexual pleasure. Others used insertable objects, such as tails or butt plugs (objects which can be inserted in the anus to provide stimulation or give the appearance of a tail). Some attendees engaged in overtly sexual acts, but this was often dependent on the environment and rules of the event.

Events were normally held in spaces which served other needs (Steinmatz and Maginn, 2014) and became kinky for a set amount of time. Bars and clubs were the primary type of spaces used and would serve alcohol, therefore limiting attendees to those above the legal drinking age of 18. Events normally provided a space where attendees could dance or socialise in larger groups. At events which allowed overt sexual activity, there was no clear distinction between the sexual and social areas. However, there seemed to be a mutual understanding among attendees about what behaviour was acceptable and what was not. For example, I did not witness any fisting occurring on a dancefloor, but I did witness oral sex at the bar.

At these events, I introduced myself as a PhD researcher and, for those interested, explained what my research was and why I was at the event. I engaged with several conversations with numerous event attendees having conversations related to the event, the kink subculture and kink more generally. These were not formalised interviews and no recordings or notes were taken at the events.

My role at these events was somewhat between participant and observer. Newmahr (2011), for example, discusses how she was consensually whipped in kink clubs and a fully engaged participant, which she felt necessary for her immersive

ethnography; I was not a participant to this extent, but I was far more than a distant observer, who sits at the back of a room and passively makes notes (David and Sutton, 2011). My participation was through being among the participants and talking to them. It is also worth highlighting the social nature of these events: while they are sexual to varying degrees (this social and sexual nature is discussed in Chapter 8), the social aspects meant that at many times, talking and speaking with participants was near-full participation. As such, while it is vital to recognize that I was not a fully active participant, it is appropriate to consider this method as participant observation.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Conducting research on the topic of sex and sexuality raises interesting issues in relation to ethics, as a researcher of sexuality and as a gay man. In relation to this, Binik, Mah and Kiesler (1999) discuss ethical issues related to conducting sex research in virtual spaces. While technology has developed dramatically since their essay, potential issues they raise are still relevant today. In exploring a range of issues, they conclude that common sense and normal ethical codes for conducting sex research offline are sufficient on the virtual platform, highlighting ten key points for researchers. To summarise their points, sex researchers on the internet should: conduct pilot research if deemed necessary, be wary of who they communicate with and try to confirm the identity of the other person, provide enough information to potential participants to make them aware of the boundaries confidentiality and anonymity, and store interview data securely (ibid, pp. 88-89).

Reflecting on his experience of conducting research internationally with male sex workers, Walby (2010) highlights the interesting position of a man conducting research with other men about same-sex sex. He highlights, how the interviewer holds a unique position as a sexualized individual whose sexuality is often brought to focus by the interviewee. In my study, this normally occurred prior to interviews when recruiting participants where I was asked 'are you gay' and 'are you kinky?' Recruiting participants in primarily gay spaces provided assurance that disclosing my identity as a gay man would not close any dialogues or lead to any preconceptions by the participants (Morris, 2017). However, I felt less certain about how to answer the question about my kink interests. While I did not wish to close dialogues down by refusing to answer the question, I did not wish to confirm a kink identity or disclose my

interests. In doing so, participants may have provided less explanations in their answers because of presumed shared kink narratives where they could rely on phrases such as 'you know what I mean' (Schwalbe and Wolkomir, 2001). To address this, I followed Walby's approach and used vague replies, disclosing an engagement in queer sexual practices, but ambiguity about specifics, responding to the question of my kink status as 'I am open minded.' I end this point using a quote from Walby, who while referencing a different question, provides important observations related to self-disclosure:

Researchers need to be reflexively aware of how introducing a word into a dialogue can have unanticipated consequences... Whether it is sexual identity or work identity, the researcher needs to exercise care when assigning labels to the responded. Not explicitly addressing the '*are you gay?*' question created a new set of meanings that either opened up the discussion of sexuality or else closed off the possibility of the respondent reading me as a sexuality insider. (Walby, 2010, p. 649).

There are also interesting questions around conducting interviews about sex and kink in semi-public settings. Initially, there was concern with how comfortable participants would be engaging in very private discussions in these settings. However, there are numerous examples of research on sexuality which have been conducted in public settings and have not reported any complications (McCormack, Adams and Anderson, 2013; Smith, 2002). In order to further prepare for conducting these interviews, I participated in a number of other projects, conducting research into sexuality and engaging in discussions in public settings i.e. the café environment (McCormack, Wignall and Anderson, 2015; McCormack and Wignall, 2016; Wignall, 2017). These projects discussed a variety of topics related to sexuality, including porn consumption, engagement in sexual activities and the impact of sexually themed language. The environment has been shown to impact significantly on conducting qualitative research (e.g. Kassavou, French and Chamerlain, 2013; O'Neil, Roberts and Sparkes, 2014).

A final ethical consideration important when conducting sexuality research, particularly when discussing kink due to the perceived stigma associated with the activity, is issues of anonymity and confidentiality. Utilising online surveys and questionnaires allows for individuals to disclose information to an online form with a

degree of distance – they do not have to give real information about themselves and they do not have to meet anybody face to face, assuring anonymity. This is particularly important for subcultures traditionally hard to research (Rhodes, Bowie and Hergenrather, 2003). However, I intended to conduct interviews in person, moving the interactions into an offline environment, raising potential issues around confidentiality. To address potential concerns, participants were encouraged not to use real names and instead all given pseudonyms. Furthermore, I transcribed all interviews, normally on the day they were recorded, and then deleted the raw interview data. Therefore, the data stored consisted of a transcript of the interview with a pseudonym, having no identifiable links to the original participants.

### **Analysis and Reflexivity**

The process of data collection described above yielded a wealth of rich qualitative data: over 30 hours of interview data, notes from participant observations at the kink events I attended, and exploring participant profiles on the kink SSNS. My overarching analytical approach is a discursive analysis that recognizes the contextual and historically situated nature of people's lives and narratives (Cameron and Kulick, 2003; Foucault, 1979). Thus, I view my participants' narratives as text to be analysed critically, not viewing their words as the description of 'truths' or transparent reflections of internal states or beliefs, but as part of a process where participants mediate their identities in a complex social world (Coleman-Fountain 2014; Foucault, 1979).

I viewed the analysis as an ongoing process. As such, I transcribed interviews on the day of the interview, often afterwards or on the train home from the interview. I then read through the transcript and made initial observations from my reading. As the number of interviews increased, I started to compare my notes from each interview to look for themes and trends across the interviews. My second initial mode of analysis was to look for *differences* between community and non-community members. I used the same initial coding to do this process.

This early coding, which has been called cross-comparative coding (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), was also influenced by my early participant observations of kinky subcultures, where I wrote up notes immediately after the event. I was also engaged with reading core research in the area, such as that by Newmahr (2011), Weiss (2011)

and Rubin (2011). As such, this was not a 'pure' form of what is called 'grounded theory', but a modified form that seeks to develop an understanding of the social and cultural aspects of participants' experiences that is engaged with existing research on the subject. It was in this context that the core themes of subculture, sexuality and community emerged as core ways of understanding my data.

It is also vital to think about the ways my own positionality in collecting data may have influenced the research. Cultural studies scholar Norman Denzin (1997, p. 27) highlights this can be a problem because 'our subjectivity becomes entangled in the lives of others'. That is, I had an influence on the stories my participants told me and the dynamics of the events I attended, but also that these experiences influenced my own perspectives and attitudes that will influence the analysis. The qualitative data is influenced by these real issues, meaning that this research, as all qualitative research, is inherently subjective, and the findings are partial, provisional and as situated in the social and cultural as the topic I am studying (Foley, 2002; Mauthner and Doucet, 2003).

To deal with this issue, I adopted a reflexive approach to my study. Reflexivity is the process of critically and intellectually thinking about these issues. This started with having an open and explicit recognition of my own positionality in the research: the fact that as a young, white gay man who is familiar with issues of sex and sexuality, I am not unbiased in these areas but have my own perspectives and views. Part of my initial reading of transcripts, then, was to consider any emotional reaction I had to the stories, or any personal experiences that might influence my perception. I always made time to reflect on this both in the early readings, and throughout my analyses.

The other component of reflexivity was to be aware of the limited nature of my data. Participants will have a range of motivations and perceptions when they answer questions, and part of reflexivity is to recognize that these are unknowable: this does not mean that data is pointless or no longer useful, but a critical reading of data is required. Participants' interview data are not statements of fact, but narratives of lives that are socially and culturally specific—focussing on a discursive approach to narrative analysis (Foucault, 1979; Plummer, 1995). As such, in my results, I have tried to present rich qualitative data that provides socially and culturally contextualized arguments about a phenomenon. The claims made are not to be generalized to all groups, but

recognized that qualitative data adds an important voice to critical and discursive analysis of sex in society.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter has built upon the literature review which emphasised the benefits of conducting qualitative research with subcultures to understand the personal and symbolic meaning an engagement in sex and kink can have for an individual. The section also outlined some of the potential problems one can face when conducting research related to sex and sexuality and provided means of navigating these issues. Using different SSNS and integrating mobile applications into the recruitment strategy, I was able to interview participants from across the UK and who identified as belonging to kink communities and subcultures to varied degrees. However, these techniques also enabled me to communicate with individuals who did not identify as part of a community – an individual previously ignored by research into kink. The groups of community and non-community will be addressed throughout the research when exploring contemporary understandings of kinky gay and bisexual men in the UK. The next chapter will unpack some of the findings of the research.

# Chapter 6: Thinking Kink

## **Introduction**

This chapter builds on the discussions in Chapter 2 which discussed the history of the word kink, its roots in the medical terms of sadism and masochism, and how what we understand kink to be has changed over time through academic and activist influence. Building on the literature review, this chapter explores contemporary understandings of kink and shows how kink is still a very nebulous term and hard to define. The term has fluid boundaries which are greatly influenced by the subjective meanings individuals give to kink. In exploring definitions and understandings of kink, the chapter explores the sexual role of kink for some participants and how most participants understood kink activities as falling on a spectrum from vanilla to kink. There will also be some initial analysis of the differences and similarities between community and non-community members.

The title of this chapter pays homage to Gayle Rubin's (1984) landmark essay 'Thinking Sex.' Rubin highlights the social milieu dictates where activities are placed on the Charmed Circle and the Outer Limits. We still live under the Victorian shadow, where the politics around sex was arguably at its highest and consequentially left the biggest imprint on our current social and judicial stigma toward sexualities (Rubin, 1984). However, societal attitudes are changing concerning sexuality and becoming more accepting of alternative sexualities and sexual lifestyles (e.g. Twenge, Sherman and Wells, 2015; Wignall and McCormack, 2017; Frank, 2013). Moreover, there is a fundamental shift in societal perception and rational for sexual intercourse (Treas, Lui, and Gubernskaya, 2014). While this is the case, there is still limited research which analyses kink from an inductive perspective to discuss the meaning it has for its practitioners. Moreover, no research currently understands how those who aren't involved in kink communities make meaning of their behaviours. The purpose of this chapter is to address this dearth in the literature and, in doing so, provide greater understanding of kink as a cultural and sexual phenomenon and see how it contributes to an overarching theory of sex and sexual injustice.

### **'It might be different for other people, but for me kink is...': Defining Kink**

How participants defined kink is a central issue in understanding the practice and context of kink more broadly. As discussed in Chapter 2, definitions of kink are rooted

within social and political issues, and for these reasons I start by analysing how participants defined kink.

The majority of participants struggled to define kink, including those who actively participated in kink communities. For example, Brian said, 'There isn't a clear definition of what is kinky and what isn't.' Robert said, 'I know and understand I'm kinky, but it's hard to describe.' John expands, saying, 'What's kink? That is a difficult question. I've never thought about what I would define kink as.' Community and non-community members commented that they had not previously put much thought into what kink can be defined as and where the boundaries lay. This was partly down to a lack of a need to provide a definition in the past alongside an understanding that, as Robert put it, '[my kinks] just come naturally to me so I never really thought about it.'

Despite this initial difficulty for most, participants managed to give a definition of kink. In some interviews, as a way of promoting conversation, I introduced the notion of Ann-Summers-like kink (Martin, 2013) and asked several participants who were struggling to define kink how they would view pink-fluffy handcuffs. In their descriptions, most participants recognised kink as having alternative meanings for individuals – nearly all definitions provided by participants began with something akin to Brian's response: 'it might be different for other people, but for me kink is...' For example, Rory said, 'Everyone's kink is different so I guess they would all define it differently. It's a hobby to me.' Similarly, Peter said, 'Some people may think kink is wearing a little bit of rubber or something; other people may not think it is kinky until the whips come out. It depends on the persons' understanding I suppose.' Connor highlighted how individual definitions of kink are different, adding that because of this, 'it is important to have a discussion with somebody you intend to play with beforehand [so there is] a mutual understanding of what kink is understood as.' Cameron summarises the individual understandings of kink:

What can be classed as kinky changes, mainly due to social norms and peoples experience. It really depends on who you are talking to if somebody classes something as kinky or not. What I consider kinky, my mum might find outrageous and what she finds kinky might not even show up on my radar.

Here, Cameron is emphasising that what an individual understands as kinky is influenced by their own experiences and can change (Waskul and Plante, 2010) – as

one engages in more activities and explores more kinks, what they originally perceived as kinky may, as he put it, ‘not show up on the radar anymore.’

The emphasis used by participants to highlight the importance of individual understandings reflects the concept of sexual scripts, discussed in Chapter 4. Participants’ narratives will be remarkably different based on how they were introduced to kink, the role it has played in their lives and on what others tell them about kink (see Jackson and Scott, 2010).

Perhaps because of the individual nature of definitions of kink, a common way for participants to define kink was through describing what kink was not—a form of definition by negation. In opposition to kinky sex, participants discussed what most called ‘vanilla’ sexual activities. Vanilla activities were described as *normal* sexual activities that you would expect *normal* people to do. For example, John described vanilla sex as ‘your standard sex: missionary, doggy, end of; oral, anal, masturbation. Vanilla sex is very prescriptive – it’s start, middle, end, done.’ Similarly, Phil said:

Usual or vanilla, I would consider that more standard sexual practice, what most people are into, involves no other objects, things or people. A small list of activities, which for gay people is oral, anal, kissing, wanking. I’d say rimming too, but some people might not find that vanilla. Nothing extreme really.

Phil’s response indicates that vanilla activities, like kink, can be shaped by individual experiences. There was a dominant schema among participants about what constituted vanilla sex. Vanilla sex seemed to reflect the heteronormative ideals of sex, with a focus on penetration and ejaculation. Dan commented that vanilla sex was ‘something that pretty much everybody does in sex.’ Despite comments that it was the ‘standards’ of sex, vanilla sex was often deemed as banal or not exciting enough by participants. Austin described vanilla sex as ‘quite boring’ with Ant adding, ‘It’s very limiting in what you can and can’t do.’ Grant summed up the overall perception of vanilla sex, calling it, ‘plain, normal, penetrative interaction between two people... I guess vanilla is socially accepted normal sex.’

The norms of sex participants referenced speaks volumes to Rubin’s (1984) idea of a hierarchy of sex, discussed in Chapter 2. Grant’s quote of ‘socially accepted normal sex’ reflects Rubin’s conceptions of ‘good sex’ within the Charmed Circle. While participants may not have realised it, pitting kink within a dichotomy against vanilla also reinforces the ideas of ‘good vs bad’ sex. While participants may not label

themselves as 'abnormal', there is still a recognition that doing kink is engaging in activities that are not seen as the norm by society, even despite social change in attitudes. In addition to this, there also seems to be a claiming of cultural capital in some regards: while recognizing that vanilla sex is more social acceptable, by labelling it as *boring* or *standard* is also a criticism of such behaviours. It be a way of denigrating standard sex as limited and uninspiring; mitigating the stigma that is levelled at kink as being 'extreme' or 'weird' by reframing it is as more interesting than vanilla sex.

There were slight differences in how kink was defined by community and non-community members. A minority of participants who identified as community member provided definitions of kink that would be similar to those seen in the academic literature (Turley et al., 2011), referring to power play, lifestyles or other kink-related terminology. For example, Oliver, a community member, described kink as:

Anything outside of the normal vanilla sex. Handcuffs, fisting, etc. are all under the same label of kink. BDSM, SM, all apply to kink, but they are more subsections. Kink is the overarching term for anything other than normal sex.

When asked what kink was, Gabe, another community member, said:

To the wider world, kink is a fairly nebulous term that ranges from pink fluffy handcuffs, up. To me, kink is more about a headspace and I think you have to explore the emotional aspect of kink... Even if you are not actually physically doing anything sexual, I do not think you can ever remove that element entirely from the equation. Erotic might be a better label.

Cameron provided a more complex answer when asked what kink was, saying it was:

[An] alternative sexual lifestyle. It is not fetishism because it is not orientated around objects. It is more about your sexual practices and interests, rather than objects. Fetishism and kink are two separate things. Kink is about the interests and mental framework... Pink fluffy handcuffs - the attitude around using them would be kinky, the act of using them and those being of sexual interests makes them fetishism. You can have kinky events where people turn up in gear where people are like-minded, say, it's at a bar/pub then that event would be kinky, but it's more about the attitude and less about the objects themselves.

Cameron was clear to distinguish that for him, terminology mattered and there were nuanced differences between terms. For him, kink was about an attitude and lifestyle, while the individual activities could be categorised as something else, such as fetish or

partialism. Cameron is the only participant who has grown up part of a kink community from an early age and is now currently part of a kinky serial monogamous relationship working for kink related charities. He stressed that this has drastically skewed his views on kink, with a recognition that he had different sexual scripts to most in relation to kink. The examples given from Cameron, Gabe and Oliver clearly reflected an understanding of what kink is from a community perspective.

These definitions are closely related to those discussed in Chapter 2. For example, Newmahr (2011, p. 18) defined kink, or SM in her terminology, as ‘the collection of activities that involve the mutually consensual use, among two or more people, of pain, power, perceptions about power, or any combination thereof, for psychological, emotional, or sensory pleasure.’ Yet, throughout her book, she is clear to highlight the investment individuals placed into their kink, to the point that it was a lifestyle – indeed, this is only further emphasised through the anecdotal tales given by Newmahr at the start of her chapters of how much time she invested into the kink community she was researching.

Similarly, Weiss (2011), using the term BDSM in her research, highlighted how it was a lifestyle activity which individuals invested in, citing pain and power exchange as some of the central aspects to BDSM. She even goes on to distinguish between ‘real’ SM practitioners’ and ‘weekend’ dabblers’ (Weiss, 2011, p. 11) to emphasise the importance kink has for the individuals within her ethnography. Interestingly, her label of ‘dabblers’ could be readily used to describe non-community members.

When the same question (*What is kink?*) was asked to ‘dabblers’ in my research, the non-community members, expectedly, a range of answers were given. The majority provided answers that focused on the non-normativity of kink and emphasised playfulness, highlighted in other research on kink (E.g. Turley, Monro and King, 2017). For example, Austin said, ‘What’s kink? I don’t know something not normal. Hard to describe. You enjoy things that aren’t the norm.’ Phil described kink as ‘vanilla with a bit added on.’ Similarly, Matt said, ‘It’s a lot of different things. It’s having a different pleasurable sexual experience - It’s fun.’ When asked what kink was, Aiden responded:

Anything that deviates from the norms of sex... It is about what it is to the individual. For some it is a lifestyle, for others like me, it is more casual. It’s less

about a list of tick boxes; instead it's more of a preference or holistic type approach.

Again, there is repetition of the hierarchy of good and bad sex (Rubin, 1984).

However, three non-community participants provided definitions similar to community members, referencing terminology in the academic literature. For example, Peter said kink was:

Anything more than the act of having sex. Making it more fun I think... To me, it is about domination, submission, degradation, sense of power, and the social situations that occur during the session. That is how I have felt about it. The accompanying stuff helps get you in the headspace.

Garth provided a more detailed answer of what kink was, highlighting the role of investment. He said:

[Kink is] the ability, want or need to explore your own sexual desires which are not the 'norm'. Exploring something that normal people class as odd. What the minority of people are into... There is a line somewhere of what is kinky and what is not. I am into extreme bondage and even vanilla bondage is still kink to me... It is more of a lifestyle, not just a one off thing you do. You could go to Ann Summers and buy things and use them once a year or something that is just exploring something every now and again, which is not kinky. Whereas I would actively go out and seek to do that sort of stuff, continuously.

Finally, Ant said:

I think kink is a more intimate kind of sex, bit more exciting. It requires more trust but at the same time it can make you nervous. If it makes you nervous, there is a bit of a thrill there. It is a bit more meaningful when you do it. There is that trust and somebody is giving up control effectiveness. I find that a thrill... There are also so many different possibilities with kink – you can have different clothing, fetishes, gear, etc... It's easier to keep it exciting.

Despite these three non-community members giving answers similar to community members, the rest of responses from non-community members focus more on the activities rather than community or investment. The general differences in answers given between community and non-community members may be partially explained through engagement with a community and the benefits and consequences this can have for an individual. For example, Oliver and Luis who both work in kink-based

environments (e.g. a gay sex shop) and identify as part of kink communities, have picked up alternative terminology and subjective meanings surrounding kink through their engagement with clients, fellow employees and their work-based friendship networks. Consequentially, they, and other community members, have peers to help guide them around the minefield of definitions and language used within kink communities allowing for more articulated understandings of kink. In opposition to this, non-community members would not have had the same access to resources which may limited broader understandings related to kink.

Despite difficulty in how participants discussed definitions of kink more generally, participants found it easier to discuss what their own kinks were. When asked about their kinks, the panoply of answers mirrored the earlier emphasis on the *individual* element of kink – all participants had varied interests and changed from person to person. For example. Rory said he was into ‘watersports, rubber, bondage, gunge, underwear.’ Luis said his kinks were ‘...varied. I am into pup play, bondage, WAM (wet and messy), watersports, BDSM in general, humiliation, spit, feet, trainers and so on. I think that’s most of them.’ Noah said, ‘I’m into rubber. Full coverage. I am into losing my identity while wearing it. Sensory deprivation. Those are the main things. The rubber stuff I can get excited and nerdy over: the different types, the designs, etc.’ While some participants provided a list, other expanded on their interests describing their individual kinks as complex. For example, Grant said:

I have a range of kinks. I like being in control. Dominant. In a way, not extreme domination though. Just being the person who is in control of the situation and acts. I am really not comfortable with master/sir labels though... I enjoy inflicting pain, but I have not done a lot of it. I am really conscious of the other person involved. I am aware if they are enjoying the pain or not. If they are not, it turns me off. If they are, I can really get into it and push limits, but only so far.

Discussing his kinks similarly in depth, Peter said:

Rubber and leather are the main ones. Bondage too - it is a physical encapsulation of the power. The tying or being tied is exerting control and links to domination. Oh, pup play - this was something I was not interested in and I avoided it because I did not think I would do it properly. Now I have got into it more and bought stuff... generally I am normally submissive, over the past year I have started to become more dom. I don’t know if it is just me getting older.

But you find going onto sites, older guys tend to be more dominant than submissive. It is linked with age. I don't know if it is conscious or not. My kinks are things that extend on my choice or willpower, like I can do chastity on my own, but it helps to have a device - gear puts you in that headspace.

While Grant and Peter described their kinks in more detail, Ant discussed how his kinks change depending on what role he is during a scene (dominant or submissive). He said:

My kinks vary on who I am with and how I am feeling. For me, there is definitely a control aspect to kink for both sides. As a dom, it is nice to take control of the situation and get what you want out of something and that can be a turn on. But it is ever changing. I am currently in a chastity device now and do not mind taking a sub role.

Ant was not the only participant to discuss how his kinks changed depending on what role he took on in a power exchange setting. Dan also said, 'there is some stuff I am into as a dom that I would not have any interest being sub for, like piss play for example.'

The final aspect which influenced definitions of kink was the use of gear by participants. Gear was used as an umbrella term to include paraphernalia related to kink, including wearable gear or sex toys. Examples included: leather, lycra, rubber, neoprene, dildos, whips, hoods, masks, etc. For some participants, geared featured heavily in their definitions of kink. For example, in discussing his kink interests, Garth almost romanticized his attraction to rubber:

Okay. Rubber. It's a material. Why should it make me feel attracted to it, the feel of it, when you put it on, it's unusual to picture really, especially if you're not into kink. They might find it a bit strange to be sexually turned on by rubber, but I can enjoy it without another person being there. It makes me feel more horny when I put it on... If I could, I'd wear it all the time for sex.

Garth expanded on this, saying for him kink was rubber:

Since I was about 18, I've spent between £5000 and £10000 on gear. That's a very rough estimate though. There are times when I think I shouldn't have spent money on that item, other than that I'm not particularly bothered about how much I spend. It's something I enjoy doing so, I'm willing to spend money on it. It's like anything else in life, some people are shopaholics or buy jumpers or jeans and stuff – that's how I see it to a degree.

Garth described the amount of money he spent on gear as significant and was the participant who spent the most on their gear. However, gear was also important for others. Discussing gear, Ant said:

It wasn't too long ago I sat down and worked out how much I've spent on gear. We must be knocking on £8000 to £9000 now... That's over about a five year period now and I want more... There are just more things you can do with kink with gear.

When asked if he was kinky, Noah's response was, 'I'm into rubber. Full coverage.' Noah enjoyed other kinks, but for him, rubber was the main attraction. The use of gear is expanded below in relation to sexual understandings of kink and how participants discussed their kink interests with others.

Interestingly, perhaps more for the community than the non-community participants, there was a complete lack of inclusion of consent in relation to describing what kink is. While there is a very clear focus on consent as discussed in the literature review, both from academic and activist perspectives, it was not at the forefront of the definitional understandings provided by participants. It might be expected that some of the community participants would include terms such as consent, ethics or morality when describing what kink is, due to them potentially having more of an awareness around the kink cultural discourse. Yet this was not the case; instead, there was a focus on activities and the social features of kink and subcultural participation.

From participant responses, it is clear that kink is understood as a personal thing which can be highly complex when external factors such as age, experience or role are taken into account. It raises the question of whether a definition of kink can truly be accurate.

### ***Fluidity and Definitional Boundaries***

In discussing their understandings of kink, participants emphasized the importance of malleable definitions to kink and fluidity in how acts are understood. This emphasis on fluidity was repeated when participants were asked to think about the boundaries of kink and when and how something can be categorised as kinky. As a way of articulating this, participants repeatedly framed kink as being on a continuum or a spectrum. One end of this spectrum featured vanilla acts while on the other end of the spectrum featured kink activities deemed hard or extreme by participants.

The spectrum engages with the notion that the more kinky an activity was, the less vanilla it was. Robert said, 'I guess you could see activities on a scale of non-kinky to kinky.' Connor speaks of activities being on a spectrum of 'vanilla through to the other end of kink or BDSM.' This intersectionality further complicates the notion of what defines something as kinky, discussed in the previous section.

Within this spectrum, most participants understood there to be a line which differentiated between kinky and non-kinky acts. Garth highlighted this point saying, 'kink and vanilla are different... there is a line somewhere of what's kinky and what isn't.' As a way of helping further the discussion around a spectrum of kink, participants were asked how they would rank pink fluffy handcuffs on the spectrum. Ant responded, 'Something like pink fluffy handcuffs aren't kinky for me. If it's kinky, it needs to be black.' Peter said, 'Vanilla sex and kinky sex are different... To me, pink fluffy handcuffs are the popular version kink... a softer version.' Similarly, Aiden said, 'They're kinky, but definitely on the lower spectrum of kink... Everyone starts somewhere; pink fluffy handcuffs are a bit tame for me. If something is kinky, it depends what the other person is up for and into.'

While there was a consensus of pink fluffy handcuffs being on the softer end of the scale, the harder kinks were more difficult to classify – an activity understood as a hard limit or extreme for one participant was not necessarily the same for another. For example, Dan classed activities labelled as edgeplay, such as blood or needle play, at the end of the extreme kink spectrum, but did not see activities like fisting or heavy whipping as *too* extreme comparatively. Similarly, Grant described his interest in fisting in a nonchalant way, and thought other activities could be classed as more extreme. This was in opposition to many of the other participants who, while accepting edgeplay as extreme, also classed fisting within the same category. Brian described fisting as 'hard-core' while Trevor recognised it as being on 'the more extreme end of kink.'

There was a consensus among all participants that there is great difficulty and subjectivity in trying to rate *how kinky* an activity is, particularly without comparisons. While difficulty in rating activities, there was also a consensus with the answer Luis provided, saying, 'There is a spectrum of kink – vanilla to kink. It leads from vanilla, to soft kinks, to the more extreme kinks.' Phil explained the benefit of a spectrum for understanding boundaries of kink, saying:

I think there must be a line somewhere of kinky or not kinky, but it's not very well defined and you have to think about it. I wouldn't say there is a definitive line in the sand... Kink is a spectrum and something like dildos are sort of not passing the kink boundary but still vanilla. It is easier putting things on a spectrum than classing things as kinky or not kinky.

As a researcher, it was clear to me that no two individuals had the same scale of classification and there was a constant blurring of boundaries when trying to classify activities. This was exemplified by two participants who were in a long-term relationship with each other who did not have correlating understandings of what classifies an activity as kinky or how to label to what extent an activity is kinky. Trevor's experiences reflect the opinion felt by most participants:

Years ago, I thought rimming was kinky! Now it is normal. I guess it can be different for people depending on sexuality, age, etc. My friend told me about a fetish night - he invited me over, as he wanted a friend to go with. When I went I thought 'this is what kinky is.'

Trevor, despite having difficulty in providing a definition of kink, was able to 'know it when he saw it.' Perhaps unaware, Trevor's use of this phrase is highly political and has been used in classifications of deviancy and obscenity (e.g. Attwood and Smith, 2010). However, it reiterates the subjectiveness involved in frameworks of kink.

### **'Are You Kinky?': Kink and Social Identity**

As well as a question on defining kink, all interviews included questions around identifying as kinky. When asked, 27 of the 30 participants identified as kinky, with many of them identifying in a positive manner. This was reflected through the enthusiasm of their answers and the words used. For example, when asked if he was kinky, Ant responded, 'Yes, definitely!' Similarly, Phil responded confidently, 'Oh yes. I'd say I'm kinky.' While some of them had not put much thought into what they would call themselves or did not really use labels, they were still content to class themselves as being kinky. For example, Max said, 'Well I see myself as open minded, but I guess I am kinky too.' Aiden said, 'I don't think of myself in terms of a lifestyle as kinky, but I can be during sex. I enjoy kink I suppose... yes I'm kinky.' In a conversation prior to the interview, when I asked Peter if he was kinky, he said:

Well I have not really classed myself as kinky, but I suppose I am given the things I am into and the things I have done in the past... To be honest, kinky might be an easier way of identifying, as it does not sound too dark.

The remaining three participants, all non-community members, did not choose to self-identify with the label kinky. Two of these participants instead preferred to use labels that reflected more specifically their interests. For example, Matt said:

While fetish and kink mean the same thing to me, I just don't like the sound of the word kink. I'd prefer to use the word fetish to describe what I like – it's the word I would use on my online profiles.

Noah reflected this perspective, saying he preferred to just call himself as being 'into rubber rather than kinky.'

Interestingly, only one participant, Josh, refrained from self-identifying as kinky for fear of any negative stigma and stereotyping that could be associated with it. He said:

Somebody calling themselves kinky on a profile makes it sound like they are only into specific activities: 'I have needs and I they need to be filled. I don't want anything else.' I do not want people to think that about me. I also think people would judge me for calling myself kinky and it could be embarrassing. Maybe that I enjoy my interests and such, maybe I do fit into the kinky category... It might just be the impression I have of kinky people.

Josh's fear of social stigma from identifying as kinky and the potential stereotyping can be understood through the framing of kink as a vice (see Chapter 2). However, no other participants mentioned distancing themselves from a kink identity for fear of social stigma. While participants may still experience stigma related to kink, and spoke about this in other contexts, the key point is that stigma or prejudice is not a defining feature or experience of their kinky identities.

For those that identified as kinky, there was a clear difference between community and non-community members in terms of a level of attachment to the label of kink. The community members actively identified as kinky with the majority of them recognising it as a *defining* part of both their sex life and their identity. For example, Eric said, 'Kink is a big part of my identity and it's who I am.' Similarly, Robert said, 'I'd say kink a fair part of me - about 60% of who I am. I could not give it up... I

guess it's bigger than I thought.' Discussing his identity and where kink fits within it, Gabe said:

I have thought about where kink fits as part of my identity, especially as I had to think about identity stuff and role theory for my employment. I identify as kinky, but I actually don't have a kinky identity. I have a role that fits as part of my identity. My kinky role however is very difficult to pin down. Kink is very important to me though. Partly because I know so many people through it and such a large percentage of my friendship network are into it, because its different, it is engaging.

Similarly, other community members recognised kink as one of their numerous defining features, such as Oliver, who said:

There is a lot to life other than kink. I go to the cinema, music events, theatre, dinner with friends; I have a fairly vanilla relationship with my boyfriend. But it is a big part of my life and a big thing for me as well... It's important.

While most non-community members may not have actively sought to label themselves as kinky or felt that kink was a defining feature of their identity, they recognised it as a term which encompassed their interests and were not opposed to it. Only one non-community participant felt kink was a part of their identity as the community members. For Garth, kink was one of the main aspects of his life. In a conversation post-interview, he reiterated how important kink was for him:

Kink is a massive part of my life and identity, even if I don't go to events or tell my *close* friends about it. The majority of my gay friends know that I'm a bit kinky, but generally they have similar interests too... If I could, I would want 95% of my sex to be kinky – even when I'm wanking I enjoy it more if I am in rubber as it is very self-sexual.

Garth was the only non-community member who felt such a strong attachment to having kink as a defining feature of identity.

There are three key reasons why the non-community members did not conceive kink as a defining feature of their identity. Firstly, and for the majority of the non-community participants, there is a recognition that engaging in kink is more about a preference for particular activities rather than seeing kink as a core part of their being. Comparing quotes from a community and non-community member highlights this: Ethan, a non-community member, stated that 'kink isn't a massive part of my life,

it is just something I do occasionally’ and he would be happy in a ‘vanilla monogamous relationship in the future’; whereas Cameron, a community member, said ‘kink is part of who I am, through and through – it’s not really a separate part of me... it is my life.’ There is less identification to a kink identity for non-community participants because it is less important to them

Secondly, some of the participants did not engage in kink often enough for them to consider it part of their identity – as Austin noted, ‘I drink smoothies now and again, but I wouldn’t label myself an avid smoothie drinker.’ Here, kink was positioned as an occasional activity and framed more as one of the vast array of activities they engaged in.

Thirdly, this connects with a broader social trend away from sexual identity labels and toward a motivation to ‘queer’ identity categories and labels. An eschewing of identity categories, such as identifying as kinky, is not a recent phenomenon. For example, Ritch Savin-Williams (1998), a developmental psychologist, has pioneered research into changing experiences of sexual identity, from being defined by difference (Kuper, Nussbaum and Mustanski, 2012; Flowers and Buston, 2001) to a broader range of more positive experiences that include cross-sexuality friendships, a lessening of overt discrimination and more flexibility with identity labels.

As a way of conceptualising the movement away from sexual identity labels, such as gay or kinky, Savin-Williams (2005) argued that sexual minority youth are entering a ‘postidentity’ culture, or as Dean (2014, pp. 5-6) calls it, a ‘post-closet’ culture to give homage to the ‘cultural legitimation of ‘normalized’ gay men and lesbians and their expanded latitude in negotiating desire, gender and identity’. The idea of moving away from labels may explain why some non-community members do not actively identify as kinky – they simply don’t feel the need to label their sexual desires.

As such, while the great majority of participants identified as kinky, there was a real diversity in what this meant. Community members described an importance attached to the label kinky, describing it as a defining feature of their identity, compared with most non-community members who did not attach as much importance to the label. Clearly, the importance of a kink identity is more related to the social aspects of kink rather than the sexual aspects (as highlighted in Chapter 4).

## Communicating Kink

Given the discussions highlighted in Chapter 2 over terminology, I explored how participants spoke about their kink interests more generally. While I used the term kink throughout the interviews, other terms were also mentioned. Participants were asked how they would describe their 'alternative interests' to others in non-kinky environments, such as on Grindr. Three non-community participants refrained from using any specific terminology to describe their activities, instead opting for the term 'dirty' or 'filthy' to describe their alternative interests. For example, Trevor said, 'Well, dirty is a bit more intense than vanilla sex, but not quite kinky.' Similarly, Austin said, 'I know about BDSM and SM etc. I use the word filthy instead, that is a good word. Sometimes just calling it shag.' While not actively against using terminology, they did not feel pressured to and it did not come naturally to them.

During participant recruitment through non-kink based gay SSNS, such as Grindr, and as part of the ethnographic observations of being on a social sexual networking site for recruitment, I observed that the use of dirty or filthy was uncommon when individuals spoke of their interests. Instead, sexual scripts were used which allowed a softer introduction to a discussion of kink (see Chapter 4). For example, in a stereotypical Grindr conversation, an individual would ask 'What are you into?' as a way of finding out an individual's sexual interests. If the answer was an indicator of their anal preference (top, vers, bottom) or 'the usual', these answers were normally indicative of a lack of engagement in kink. However, answers such as 'open minded' or 'I'll try anything once' hinted at some form of kink, which could then lead into more 'testing the water.'

After I learned and started engaging with this script, I began to find more ways of approaching the topic of kinky sex and if individuals would be willing to take part in research. I also started asking participants during interviews about the sexual scripts of how to discuss kink in vanilla spaces – for those who were on non-kinky SSNS, they recognised 'open minded' and 'willing to explore' as a general rule of thumb for an indication of some interest in kink. However, it was not a definite rule.

Three participants, again all non-community members, avoided an overarching term, instead using the activities they were into as a way of communicating a 'sexual openness.' When asked how he communicates his alternative interests to others, Noah said, 'I would probably say I am open minded. I deal with a lot of euphemisms.' When

asked to expand, Noah said he tells people he is 'into rubber.' Matt said, 'I tell people I have certain fetishes – my profile says, 'let's get messy.'" Brian discussed how he refrained from using any terminology, saying:

I do not normally use any terms, I just talk about the specifics. 'Are you into leather, I like speedos, what about a cock pump?' [Kink] does not enter my normal vocabulary. I do not use BDSM, SM, probably because I do not talk about kink in general. If somebody asked what Recon is, I would say it is for guys into leather, or this etc. because I think kink is too broad a definition. Everybody has different definitions of it.

The remaining 24 participants all used the word kinky to describe their interests on SSNS. Oliver, who works in a 'BDSM and Fetish' shop, understood the importance of knowing alternative terminologies. He said, 'I have more of an in-depth knowledge than most on terms and Old Guard/New Guard stuff. But personally, I've used kink for a while to describe my interests.' He never described coming across any problems in using the term 'kink' when engaging in conversations with clients or other staff. Gabe said:

I would use the term kinky to talk about my interests, but I would imagine somebody would tell me there is a more politically correct term! I think kink is perfectly serviceable for what we are on about. There is a degree of compartmentalization for the other terms, leather, rubber, BDSM, etc. While BDSM is broader while being restrictive, kinky is nebulous, more encompassing. I would agree that they all come under the broader definition of kink.

The ease of using kink as an overarching term was felt by several other participants, with Peter saying, 'I would probably just use the term kink, or playing', while Ant said, 'Kink is basically what I tell people.'

For the majority of these 24 participants, there were no differences in how kink was used interchangeably with kinky or its other denominations. For example, Garth used kinky as his primary term, but interchanged it with his specific interests sometimes. He said, 'I would normally just say I'm a bit kinky, or into rubber and bondage.' He added, 'For me though, there isn't a difference between kink, kinky, kinksters, etc.'

However, for a minority, there were idiosyncrasies in how kink was used. Luis highlighted nuanced differences in his understanding, saying:

BDSM is a kink, or several kinks to be more specific. To me, kink is a fetish, alternative sexual interests and BDSM is a group of them... I use all the terminology. I am normally specific about what kinks I am into when speaking to people. I use kinky though on my online profiles.

Similarly, Aiden said, 'I probably say kinky rather than kink, or talk about people's kinks rather than kink on its own.' He was also clear to emphasise that he did not use alternative terminology when talking to other people about his kinks, such as BDSM or S/M, saying, 'I don't tend to use BDSM because people can misunderstand what that means. It is such a broad thing. I know some people use sleaze/filthy, but again it can give the wrong impression of what I am in.' Distancing oneself away from 'Old Guard' terminology of BDSM or SM was something felt by most of the 24 participants. For example, Phil said:

Kink is mainly what I use. Dom/sub comes up a lot. But kink is the bigger term. BDSM is slightly different, an older term, and describes stuff I am not into, like pain. I would say I am kinky, it describes it quite well. BDSM is very specific, leather whips, skins, daddies, it is an aesthetic. I would not say I am into BDSM; the motor-cross I like is kinky. I think of fetish as around an item. Kink is more an experience I think. It is also a more playful term - it can be anywhere from pink frilly handcuffs to really crazy stuff. It is broader and more open.

Similarly, Ethan said:

I guess I use the term kink. But I do not think about it too much. On Recon, you presume everything is kinky and just use terminology for activities instead. I know some people use BDSM as a word, but kink covers a lot more than BDSM - BDSM is a bit weirder and does not really speak to what I am into.

While participants may have been primed to use the term kink due to its appearance on the information sheet and consent forms, it was clear in interviews that priming did not have a significant effect. Kink was used by participants before the interview and it was described as featuring in their everyday life when conversing with others through online platforms or in general conversation. Despite the remaining six participants not using the term generally to describe their interests, there was a recognition by participants of what kink encompassed and how it was beneficial during the interview as a shorthand way of encapsulating the list of activities under discussion.

Discourses in academia emphasise the importance of correct terminology when discussing sexual subcultures, both kinky (e.g. Weiss, 2011) and non-kinky (e.g. Davis, 2015). However, it seems apparent that such discourses are somewhat behind the times. Indeed, as Chapter 2 discusses, while kinky is used as an adjective for activities and in more of a playful sense, academics are still keen to use an alternative overarching label, such as BDSM or SM. This viewpoint seems contrary to those who engage in kinky activities – for both community and non-community members in the present study. Moreover, for a portion of the community members, there was an active distancing oneself away from, as Oliver called it, ‘loaded’ terminology like BDSM.

The use of the word kinky by participants, rather than BDSM or SM, may also be down to the wide diversity of sexual practices participants engaged in. For example, an activity such as pup play, which several participants engaged in, would feel wrong to label as BDSM; given the subjective and flexible nature and of pup play, it may not necessarily include any of the derivatives of BDSM (bondage and discipline, domination and submission, sadism and masochism). Similarly, fetishes or partialisms, such as sexual interest in feet or rubber, are not labelled as part of BDSM or SM play in the literature. Yet, given how intertwined they seem to be with other activities, such as domination and submission, and how participants spoke about them, it seems misleading not to class them all under an overarching term. The playfulness and openness which can be associated with the term ‘kinky’ seems a logical fit.

It is also important to note that given participants were recruited across the country, they did not all represent a specific kinky community. The Catacombs discussed by Rubin (1991), while highly informative, can only speak to one particular community and their set of norms. The participants in the present study do not have shared social norms (see Chapter 3) or a mutual understanding of what their engagement in kinky means, yet there was a majority consensus that kinky was the best terminology to use.

Finally, as discussed with in Chapter 2, kinky and its derivatives were used in a variety of ways. For example, participants spoke of themselves as being ‘into kinky’ or ‘kinksters’, having ‘kinky interests’, and ranked activities as being ‘kinkier’ than others. While the complexities of language are not the topic of this chapter, and beyond the work of this thesis, the manipulation of the word ‘kinky’ is something unique when

compared to how terms such as S/M and BDSM are spoke about – it does not seem appropriate to talk about activities as being BDSM-ey.

### **The Sexual Nature of Kink**

The extent to which kink is sexual is a recurring debate (Newmahr, 2011). In the present study, kink was understood to be an all-encompassing term which included numerous activities. Importantly, there were differences between community and non-community members.

When asked if their kinks were sexual, all 15 non-community members provided the same answer – kink is always sexual. Four participants understood their kinks always to be sexual because they were instantly sexually aroused when partaking in their kinks, especially in relation to the wearing of gear or seeing or feeling others in the gear (leather, rubber, harnesses, etc.). Brian said, 'I just feel more aroused when I wear my chaps. It is incredibly hot seeing other people in them too. It just adds to it all.' Similarly, Garth said:

Rubber is a material. Why should it make me feel attracted to it, the feel of it, when you put it on and that, it is unusual to picture really. It makes me feel hornier when I put it on. I like the way it feels.

Noah echoed Garth's comments, adding:

I can just be doing vanilla sex, but I will be wearing rubber as well... I feel relaxed and comforted when wearing it, well not comforted, calmer. It is great for when I feel stressed. I do not have to think about those worries because this is who I am. It might start out as comforting and then I start to feel horny when wearing it. I find it very sexual - it smells nice.

Justin, while not aroused by gear, was instead sexually aroused by other kinks. When asked if his kinks were sexual, he said:

Oh yes. It turns me on to no end. If somebody farts while we're having sex, that is just me off. It's very sexual... I could be on a night out having a drink and when I smell that somebody has farted, I look at the hottest guy, imagine it was him, and get very sexually aroused.

The remaining 11 non-community members understood kink as sexual for alternative reasons. Josh discussed how his engagement with kink was normally preceded by vanilla sexual activities: 'I normally start with the more tame stuff, then work up to

adding the [kinky] things. It's sex, but more.' In this way, Josh performed kink in a sexual context. Ethan described how he believed kink was sexual:

Kink is restricted to the bedroom for me. It is sexual. It's generally done in the context of sex too. If I was talking about it, it would be sexual. It is not like 'come round for dinner and then I'll tie you up.'

While talking about why he enjoyed kink, Ant highlighted the role of the sexual orgasm in a kink session for him:

Once you're done with vanilla sex, you're done, maybe a cuddle and then done. Just because the kink is done and you've both cum [or orgasmed], or one of you have, doesn't mean the dom/sub relationship necessarily ends. I think that's why I find it more interesting.

Following this up, he added, 'One of us normally [orgasms] when playing – it's normally how you know when to end. It definitely doesn't always have to be the end though.' In a follow up discussion with Peter, he discussed how he fetishes the orgasm:

I'm into edging [aiming to reach sexual orgasm and preventing the climax], so a lot of focus in my kink is around [orgasming]. I might not always [ejaculate] during a session, but I will after the person has left... Unless it's a long weekend or something and then I might save myself to the end. Either way, [ejaculation and orgasm] is a big thing for me.

There was a general consensus among non-community participants that kink mainly occurred alongside or after vanilla sex and that sexual orgasm was central to their kinky fun.

When the same question, *Is kink sexual?*, was asked to community participants, the responses were not as straight forward. As with the non-community members, all 15 participants agreed that there was a sexual element to kink. For two participants, this sexual element was always present. For example, Grant said, 'kink without sex doesn't interest me', while Rory said, 'I can't really think of kink without a sexual element to it'.

However, while the non-community members thought kink was sexual all of the time, the community members explained that the context and setting kinky activities were performed in, as well as who kink was done with, influenced whether the kink was perceived as sexual. Luis discussed how kink could be sexual for him, but 'it depends what kinky website I'm on. I use Recon and Twitter for kinky sex these

days, but I'm on other sites to interact with friends.' Robert pointed out that only particular types of sex featured in his kink play, saying, 'it's mainly just play, there is not any anal or anything. I still orgasm though, so wanking is normally involved.' For most community members, there was a lot more stipulations that effected whether kink was sexual or not, particularly the setting in which kink was performed in and who they interacted with (Newmahr, 2010).

This presents a fascinating conundrum: the people who are most involved in kink and most likely to be deemed sexual (and even sexual predators) in society (Rubin, 1984) are the ones who gain the most *non-sexual* benefit from kink. For example, Robert describes the importance of the kink community for him:

I'd say I feel part of an online community... The kinky people I chat to are mostly my friends. I just made an account online and started speaking to people and you chat, make more friends, and see if anything comes from that... These connections are very important to me and I just chat to people all the time but only meet up a few times a month... For me, kink is very much a social thing.

Similarly, for John, the kink community is something that features heavily in his life. When asked about the importance of the kink community, for him he focused on the non-sexual benefits:

I feel that I'm part of [the kink community] and that I have an active role that I play. The pup side of me is reasonably big and I know loads of people through the pup side... People recognise me and I get welcomed into the community – there are friends there... There are people I speak to regularly, people I meet socially outside of the [websites and apps].

While not completely downplaying the sexual, John added, 'The difference between friends and kinky friends is really based on how the interactions are. If there is sexual interaction, then they're more kinky friends.' These sexual interactions John described were very rarely explicitly sexual, but instead played with John's kinky sexuality. In a follow up conversation, he said 'I flirt with his kinky friends, but only because I can. I don't think of it as sexual, more playful.'

Conversely, those with less emotional engagement with kink are the ones for whom it is most sexual—or at least, where sex is the motivating factor. For example, Austin said, 'I want kinky sex, I don't want kinky friends... Kink ends at the bedroom for

me.’ Similarly, Phil said, ‘I could give up kink. Just... Kink is centred around the bedroom for me and pretty much a separate part of my life.’ Helping to explain the complicated place the sexual has within kink, Newmahr (2011, p. 68) highlights, it might be that ‘another kind of sexual story is proliferating in the late modern discourses of sex, one in which the erotic is desexualized.’ Yet this does not entirely address the issue at hand—rather than the erotic being desexualized, what this research suggests that it is the community involvement that leads to complex and nuanced understandings of the sexual. As the sexual becomes increasingly social, it becomes less sexual.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter has explored how kink is understood by participants, exploring definitions of kink and the boundaries of such definitions. As expected based on prior research around the symbolic nature of kink and sex more generally, there was no overarching definition of kink given by participants and it was described as a very personal thing. As such, definitions were greatly influenced by an individuals’ previous kink experience and how they first explored their kink interests, which I will expand on more in the next chapter.

Despite variance in definitions, there were consistent features for what kink was defined as by participants. Kink was described as non-normative sexual activities and viewed in opposition to vanilla sexual activities (i.e. the script like sexual practices performed by the general population and viewed as ‘regular sex’ such as penile-vaginal intercourse, anal sex, oral sex and masturbation (Nichols, 2006)). While participants described differences between vanilla sex and kinky sex, vanilla sex could be incorporated into a kinky setting and further complicate the boundaries of kinky and non-kinky sex.

For the majority of participants, including community and non-community members, kink was normally framed as a sexual activity. Definitions formed around kink being alternative *sexual* practices, with sexual orgasm being a focus for many participants. There were some differences in the extent to which kink was understood as sexual, and this can be teased out more when comparing community and non-community members. For the non-community members, kink was always a sexual activity. However, for the community members, kink was recognised as a sexual activity but how sexual it was depended upon the setting and the context kink was

performed in. It is too simplistic to state that the sexual aspects of kink were reduced when it became more social, but there is a complicated relationship between the social and sexual aspects of kink.

Finally, the concept of a kink identity was explored in relation to definitions of kink. While most participants defined themselves as kinky, the importance of a kink label varied among participants. Generally, community members actively identified more as possessing a kink identity, however for some non-community members, this identification was just as important.

This chapter demonstrates that there are real differences between community and non-community members, but also recognises the difficulties in separating out these differences. The rest of the thesis will continue to tease out the complex narratives between community and non-community members.

# **Chapter 7: Entering and Traversing the Kink Subculture**

## **Introduction**

The previous chapter discussed participants' definitions and descriptions of kink, highlighting how kink is a nebulous term and activity, due to the personal meaning it has for its practitioners. The chapter added to the body of literature which examines practitioners' understandings of kink and why they engage in it, with the intention of 'normalising' kink and framing it as a form of leisure (Williams and Prior, 2015) or play (Turley, Monro and Kink, 2017). While this is an important research strand, there are numerous aspects of kink which are still under-researched. In addressing this dearth of knowledge, the current chapter explores how participants discovered their kink interests and develops on this by discussing how they then explored these interests.

Questions relating to where kink interests develop from receive less attention in the research. This may be a consequence of the medical and pathological roots of kink, discussed in Chapter 2, where kink was viewed as a mental disorder and a form of deviance – individuals were asked where their kink interests began as a way of helping to diagnose and cure them (Freud, 1905). However, as kink begins to lose its shackles, these questions can be asked again in non-pathologizing ways to find out how early experiences with kink inform and influence future meanings associated with kink (Plummer, 1995).

Chaline in his doctoral research teased out narratives of discovering kink interests. Perhaps reflecting the age of his participants, the SM subculture was relatively small and underground, with his participants stumbling across kink in local bars, through biker gangs and leather culture, or through exploring the ads section of magazines (Chaline, 2008). Other examples have highlighted the role of online forums in providing places for individuals with kink interests to interact (e.g. McCabe, 2015). However, literature which explores narratives of how individuals become involved in kink is limited. The purpose of this chapter is to address this gap and expand by finding out how participants further explored their kink interests.

## **Routes into Kink**

All participants were asked the question 'Where did your initial interest in kink begin?' with most, if not all, expecting this question to be asked because of the common understanding that sexuality is influenced in childhood (see Chapter 2). Indeed, Plummer states that the initial recognition of difference from a norm is, arguably,

where the story of a *journey* begins (Plummer, 1995, p. 55). This is perhaps particularly resonant for kink practices, as kink is, by definition, about being different from a perceived societal norm of sex and sexuality.

Participants' narratives of how they first discovered kink stemmed from a variety of sources, but their first initial interest in kink could be categorised into one of three ways: through an introduction by somebody else; through a strong psychological arousal to a specific kink; or coming across kink while exploring online pornography. What is clear throughout discussions with participants is that how they were introduced to kink influenced the meaning of kink for them in terms of importance and future investment, which I will explore more throughout this chapter. Whether a participant was a community or non-community member did not seem to influence their route into kink—hence I do not organise the data by community membership in this Chapter.

### ***Introduction through others***

Of the five participants who were introduced to kink by somebody else, four described how it was one of their sexual partners who initiated the introduction. Prior to this, they discussed not having engaged in kink before or have any active interest to pursue it. When asked where his initial interest in kink came from, Josh said:

A lot of [my kinks] have been when other people by chance suggested doing it. I found out I enjoyed it and added it to my sexual interests. Choking, watersports, bondage... I have a set of restraints now. Somebody else planted the idea in my head and it stayed there. I don't think any came from within me.

This initial introduction for Josh sparked his interest to explore it further, highlighted by him purchasing a set of restraints. Austin described a route into kink through a casual sex partner similar to Josh's.

While still being someone known to them, Trevor and Cameron had a sexual *friend* introduce them to kink. Furthermore, these introductions occurred in a public setting rather than the private one of Josh and Austin. Cameron was introduced to kink by others in a sexual context, but he did not know that the activities he was engaging in were kinky – he was simultaneously introduced to vanilla and kink at a young age without differentiation. Thus, Cameron lost his virginity engaging in kinky sex. He only realised the sex he preferred was kinky when he started exploring vanilla SSNS outside

of his 'normal friendship circle... whom [he] had sex with.' He expands, 'Having sex with your friends, I gradually got introduced to a number of things. Some quite early on that you would consider quite out there... I always tried everything once, nice things twice.'

Trevor describes how his friend took him to a kink event and, as he said, 'pushed him in at the deep end.' He recounts the story:

My friend told me about a fetish night in \*names city\* at a bar. He invited me over as he wanted a friend to go with. When I went I thought that 'this is kinky.' Dungeons, chains, guys in latex, a wide array of costumes, guys dressed a pups and pigs, spinning wheels, wax poured all over them. I was more the observer of this all. You could tell because I just wore a pair of boxers as I don't have any kink gear and didn't know what to wear. I sat at the bar and just drank drinks most of the night.

Trevor's account of his route into kink provides several interesting points. Firstly, he is the only participant who immersed himself and went to a kink event without any prior engagement, interest or knowledge in kink. Secondly, alcohol is an important part of his narrative. Alcohol is a well-known social lubricant which lowers inhibitions and boost self-esteem (Monahan and Lannutti, 2000). Arguably, this could be Trevor's way of providing an excuse for his engagement in kink. However, this is vastly different from Old Guard narratives where alcohol could influence consent (Newmahr, 2011). Finally, Trevor's use of the phrase 'this is what kinky is' demonstrates how his interpretation of what it meant to be kinky changed during the night through interactions, altering his sexual scripts related to kink.

It is interesting that these narratives served to relegate the importance of kink. These stories were told *casually*, and their narratives emphasized the *accidental way* they became associated with kink. It may be logical to assume that these narratives of introduction were a way of distancing themselves from kink, and the stigma associated with it - that kink is not an inherent desire of their, but something they were introduced to by a friend or partner. While I believe this to be the case for Josh, who seemed more uneasy in his discussions around kink, the other three participants did now show the same level of discomfort when telling their stories.

### ***Early psychological arousal***

For seven participants, there was little need of an introduction into kink by others. Instead, they described a strong psychological arousal to a particular kink/fetish at an early age, normally prior to puberty. For these participants, a mixture of both community and non-community practitioners, there was a strong emphasis on the importance of particular memories as determining factors for their interest in kink. They attributed these particular memories as reasons for their kink interests. Whether this Freudian concept of an experience in childhood bringing about their interest in kink is true is less important than why participants felt the *need* to rationalise where their desires manifested from and *why* they believed their kinks stemmed from their childhood. Furthermore, the enthusiasm with which they engaged in conversations about their early kink desires is also interesting.

When these participants discussed their desires manifesting at an early age, they were keen to emphasise that they didn't know where they came from. For example, Dan discussed how he was first psychologically aroused by feet:

The majority of my kink interests started probably around 19 or 20, but it was since I was four years old for feet. At four, I was in reception class in school and Cinderella was being performed by the Year 2 class and they were all performing bare foot. I couldn't watch the performance; I was just watching the feet. I was too young to realize what it was, but watching the feet was more interesting for me than watching the show. This interest began to change as I got older and it moved from just wanting to pay them attention, to beginning to find them erotic. I realized that feet were something that aroused me - this was about 10/11 years old. That's when I realized what wanking was.

It's also clear in discussions with him that his initial interest was not explicitly sexual for him, instead it moved from the psychologically arousing to the sexually arousing as he grew older. Aiden wasn't alone in experiencing this shift.

Similarly, Robert highlighted how his interest in Lycra piqued before he recognized his own sexuality:

My kink interests started probably when I was 12. I bought some Lycra shorts for PE to keep warm and I basically just liked wearing them. I got aroused by wearing them. Psychologically at first, then sexually as I got older, about puberty time it got sexual for me.

Garth also experienced his kinks as initially psychologically arousing around a similar age:

I used to be into wetsuits at about 15 or 16 years old. Before that at about 14 years old I was into wearing speedos. It was a kink, but at the time I didn't realize it was. I recognized it was pretty sexual at about 16 or 17.

The previous participants did not explicitly see their interests as sexual, but it raises interesting points of the difference between arousal and erotic. While the previous participants did not experience their kinks as sexual at first, other participants did. However, there was still the same lack of explanation as to why it was arousing (either psychologically or sexually). Justin further complicates this through having his early psychological arousals also being sexually arousing:

I have a memory of being sat on the sofa with some of my friends, quite young, and my best friend at the time farted. There was something about it, I got a boner, I didn't know what was happening. I was about 8 at the time, maybe 7. Another time he tied me up with a towel, I don't know how we got onto that. So it was arousing before I knew what was going on.

The media was also seen as a tool for sparking an innate early desire for kink prior to puberty. Luis discussed having a strong interest in shows that featured gunge and being restrained:

I've been practicing kink, or kinky things, since I was about 14. I got an escapology magic set, handcuffs and such. I didn't know it was kinky at the time, but there was an appeal I couldn't explain. I used to like gunge and WAM, growing up with CBBC shows, get your own back, Noel's house party, Dick and Dom - I used to like those shows and want to get messy. It wasn't a fetish interest at the time. When I was about 14, I used to use the escapology set, hide keys in bowls of gunge and get them out with my teeth. About 18 is when I realized it was sexual pleasure I got from it.

While Luis described not being able to explain or understand where his desires came from or his feelings towards the escapology set, his narrative focuses on trying to provide some explanation for them. Luis is retrospectively telling his story and in doing so, applying his adult understanding to his childhood narratives: at 14 he was more

focused on the playful, whereas when describing his narrative to me there is a focus on trying to understand his behaviours and locate them in his now sexual understandings.

Matt had similar experiences of the television shows:

I remember seeing kids getting gunged on game shows, Get Your Own Back, Dick and Dom in da Bungalow, etc. I liked Get Your Own Back because they were punishing the older guy by gunging him... When you're younger too, you have that celebrity love too – it was always interesting to see which ones would get gunged at the Nickelodeon awards. Tom Daley, David Beckham, the Jonas Brothers, all being done for charity. They were good to watch.

Television was not the only media platform that had links with early kinks for participants. Phil describes playing a video game, with a particular scene standing out in his mind:

My first kink interest was bondage. That was the first unprompted one, before it was even sexual... The exact moment I had these feelings was about 13, my first sexual feelings, that pure kind of excitement. I was playing a video game, Metal Gear Solid, and the main character apprehends somebody, ties them up, and puts a gun to their head and the other person begs not to be shot etc. It was exciting. Before I knew it, I was on YouTube searching kidnapping videos.

While these games and videos were not created with the intention of promoting erotic arousal, the meaning Phil ascribed to them was of a fetishistic nature. In doing so, Phil further complicates the notion of how we define something as erotic or sexual.

While other participants made references to other media, such as Ant who said, 'seeing a hot actor getting tied up [got my attention]' or Aiden who said he was 'a bit of a comic book geek and the hero/villain scene was always appealing', it was not described as a pivotal moment in the same way. Rather than the media providing the initial psycho-sexual arousal, other participants would discuss media as a contributing factor for exploration rather than a road into kink.

However, participants' earliest memories of innate sexual arousal by their kinks occurring in early childhood is unsurprising. Given the location of kink within the realm of the sexual (see Chapter 4), and the strong evidence suggesting sexuality emerges during childhood, it seems logical that kink desires would manifest during childhood. Herdt and McClintock (2000) document how typical development of stable and *memorable* attraction occurs at the magic age of ten cross culturally – this is reflected

by the majority of the participants above whose first memory of kink occurred at or after ten years old. However, Herdt and McClintock go on to state that ‘the accumulating evidence suggests that there is more sexual subjectivity occurring during childhood than previously believed, especially from the age of 6 onward’ (ibid, p. 602). While this would help explain Justin’s kink interests, Dan is left out of such discourses due to his kink interests appearing at four years old. While this chapter does not seek to explain why such manifestations occur at such an early age, it is indeed central to his narrative of kink.

### ***Porn***

The final main route into kink that was discussed by the majority of participants was an introduction through pornography. Pornography played a central role for almost all participants for a variety of reasons, yet it was particularly prominent in providing participants a route into kink. The role of porn however was multifaceted and included: helping serve as a tool for exploring sexual kinks; learning how to perform activities safely; and helping consolidate sexual desires. Porn was discussed in unproblematic ways for participants and even described as beneficial, mirroring some of the more recent research into pornography (e.g. Smith, Barker and Attwood, 2015; Mullohand, 2015).

In focusing on pornography as a route into a kink, there was a strong narrative of participants ‘stumbling’ upon kinky porn. As with the narrative of being introduced to kink by others, there is arguably a level of distancing oneself away from kink in how these participants discovered kink through porn – rather than actively seeking anything out, they accidentally came across it. While watching vanilla porn on tube websites or downloading it on peer-to-peer networks, suggestions of other videos to watch would feature on the screen. For example, when asked where his kink interests began, Oliver said:

Looking at porn 11 or 12, I had too much access to the internet. It was kinky porn I was watching. It tumbled from vanilla porn and then you get to the more interesting porn... I don’t know what I was thinking, maybe that it was more interesting than the other stuff.

Similarly, when the same question was asked to Peter, he said:

I think it helped that when I was coming to age, so was peer to peer networking and you could have easy access to other peoples' porn. I downloaded porn, saw random videos I wouldn't normally come across, and then just liked it... I moved to more restrained and kinky porn. Some people might have thought it too much, but I wanted to see how far I would go getting aroused by it... It was just exploring.

Pornography was described by some participants as a stepping-stone from vanilla to kink. For example, Connor said, 'Most of my exploration of kink online came by accident. You'd start to watch a [kinky] clip, see where it came from, click that site and just go on.' Similarly, Max said, 'I started viewing pornography in general, women and men. I just started exploring unusual things too.... If you're on porn and you get the lists on the side with the categories, you just have a look at them all.'

Contrary to fears of accidentally viewing extreme porn (Wolak, Mitchell and Finkelhor, 2007), participants did not seem surprised or offended with the content of the suggested videos. Furthermore, no participant expressed concerns with the suggested videos. Instead, the videos were normally described as 'interesting' or 'feeding curiosity'. Moreover, some participants actually praised porn for giving them a route into kink and allowing them to explore their sexuality more fully in a safe environment.

### **Exploring Kink**

Once participants had established a route into kink, there was a number of different ways that they continued to explore it to find out what exactly appealed to them, where their 'limits' lay and what they wanted to gain from engaging in kinky activities. Three main methods for exploration of kink were described by participants: the use of pornography; exploring kink with an intimate partner; and using social and socio-sexual networking sites (SSNS). While I go on to discuss these three methods separately for ease of explanation and understanding, it is important to note that participants were not restricted to one of these methods. Indeed, most participants used a combination of the three as a means of exploring, such as watching porn with an intimate partner or finding a sexual partner on a SSNS. This is one reason why I have separated out initial contact from further exploration. While many of the main methods are the same, participants engaged with these at different stages. It is not the

case that all participants who discovered a kink interest in porn continued to explore that through porn; some did but others used different routes. This complexity means that it is necessary to split the results into these different sections.

### ***Exploring through Pornography***

Unsurprisingly, given the central role porn featured in introducing participants into kink, porn also played a role in allowing participants to explore kink. Its prominence in exploration mirrored its central role in the introduction of kink, being described as the main tool for exploration. Participants highlighted the ease with which they could use porn to explore a wide variety of kinks in a safe environment, free from perceived social stigma, and on their own.

After narratives of stumbling across kink porn, participants described a move toward more *focused* searches to things that particularly piqued their interest. For example, Brian said: 'I just watched different things online and then you see how you feel once you have watched it.' Pausing, seemingly to think on how to add detail to this answer, he added:

I intentionally looked for different things. Like, let's look up some guys in leather and download them and see what I think, then seeing which videos sparked an interest or not – I don't know if I am going to like it or not until I view it.

Brian's narrative highlights an innocence surrounding kink – he knew he liked certain kinks to be engaging in more focused searches, however he was still unsure as to what he liked. Furthermore, his narrative highlights a level of playfulness in searching, much in the same way an individual would try different foods to explore their palette. Brian 'praised porn' for allowing a space to explore his desires at his own pace and in private. Ant also discussed how he began to use pornography as a tool for more focused searches:

I think I must have seen something kinky among pictures that would've caught my attention... You get older and watch more porn videos online and refine your searches more and realize that's what you're into. General exploring moved into more focused.

Gabe highlighted that he considered pornography to be a platform to engage in solo exploration, saying 'It was easier to explore my interest through porn and, because I'm

not always the most confident of people, it is easier to explore these things through an impersonal medium.’ Porn provided a platform for Gabe free of perceived social stigma and allowed him to explore his ideas and interests more without the pressure of another person present. The lack of another person present meant Gabe could explore kink at his own pace, with no pressure to engage in any kink acts. He said, ‘That was one of the important things, I could stop when I wanted.’ Arguably, exploring through porn may have delayed the initial onset of Gabe’s first kink experience, preparing him more for when it did occur.

The benefit of exploring kink without the fear of judgement or stigma was echoed by Connor – he expressed concerns about exploring kink as an older gay man. These concerns stemmed from early experiences with sex. For example, he said, ‘before the internet, the other way [of exploring and having sex] was cottaging and saunas – it tended to be quickies with no real chance of developing things.’ For Connor, porn allowed for an easier ‘journey into kink.’ He said, ‘Without it, I wouldn’t be where I am now, members of these clubs and this exploration, etc.’

For Dan and Justin, who described an early psychological arousal in relation to kink, porn gave them an opportunity to explore their interests further. While they already had a strong sexual meaning attached to their kinks, their narratives were rooted in wanting to explore further. Dan describes the relative ease in which he was able to do this, saying ‘It’s not difficult to come across kink, when you go online to look at porn, they will throw suggestions on the side to keep you on the site.’ Similarly, Justin said:

You see one video in the [suggested] links, then another one, and it just snowballs into the kinky porn after a while. I never just actively outright searched it at first, but it developed.

After having a more unusual introduction to kink through attending a kink event, Trevor described going to porn afterwards as a place to further explore his kinks at a pace that suited him. He was able to explore a variety of things and find out what his interests were:

I was watching more porn than I had ever watched in my entire life. More bareback, group and kinky porn really. It looks more naughty and intimate; they look into each other. The kinky porn was just better – I find it hot. My tastes in men changed as well.

Trevor's description of kinky porn as naughty highlights an understanding of the subcultural nature of kink – a feeling that what he is doing is somehow 'wrong' and different from what everybody else does. His narrative supports this – while he acknowledges that he enjoys kink porn more, he rationalises that this is due to higher production value of kink porn instead of the kink porn simply appealing more to his sexual desires. It is impossible to empirically question if kink porn is *better* than vanilla porn – instead, it is more interesting to question why Trevor believes this to be the case.

Josh, who was also introduced to kink through somebody else, similarly used porn afterwards to explore kink more thoroughly. He said, 'I went away looking for porn after having [kinky] introductions to sex... There is a lot of things that feeds my sexual [kinks] through casual watching of porn.' While initially Josh's perception of kink was very Old Guard, described in Chapter 4, and he labelled it as 'dirty and seedy', his understanding of and the meaning he ascribed to kink changed through exploring porn – now, kink for Josh meant 'a selection of sexual extras or additions I am into.' Through using porn, Josh and Trevor both describe having a 'better understanding of what they're into.'

In referencing porn as a tool for exploration, the majority of participants restricted themselves to tube sites. These sites, such as xtube.com or pornhub.com, cater to a wide variety of individuals with varied sexual interests, such as straight women, gay men, bisexuality, fetishes, etc. While tube sites were located within the dominant narrative of casual exploration, other types of mediums for hosting pornography were featured. For example, Ethan discussed exploring his kinks vicariously using a kinky porn blog:

There was a blog site I used to read, a guy's experiences of kink and such. I wasn't wanking to it really, but it was very interesting to read. I used it to learn about kinky sex, find out what existed, etc. The blog gave an indication that there was this subculture, people into it, there were places they went, roles, etc. He talked about all his experiences...I was living vicariously.

Ethan's situation at the time meant he could not engage in physical kinky sex, but as Ethan described, reading the blog meant 'as the writer was discovering kink, so was I but in a less involved way.' He was not simply finding out what activities he found

alluring, but further elements of kink, such as the existence of subcultural communities and some of the ways kink is practiced.

While Luis explored his kinks through pornography, he also narrated his experiences and documented them on a blog through YouTube videos. While YouTube does not host videos which featured sexual content, Luis' videos were not explicitly sexual, again raising questions about the sexual nature of kink. While creating videos which Luis deemed to be pornographic, he was also translating the pornography he was watching into different formats that a wider audience could engage with. He said, 'I created a YouTube account at 18, a fetish based one, and started to get lots of follows, views and comments... I still use YouTube now to post videos and talk to people.'

Oliver was the only participant who actively dismissed the use of porn, regardless of its platform, as a means for exploring kink. He said, 'The nitty gritty kinks you don't need to explore in porn.' By this, Oliver was describing how some kinks did not require an individual to *learn* how to do it. Instead, he focused more on the interactions involved in kink that are more in line with Old Guard traditions – kink was something that had to be *experienced* and that could only be done with an active engagement with others. Oliver works in a kink based sex shop and dealt with a wide range of individuals with kink interests, which may inform his standpoint. However, the difference between the Old Guard community and the participants in my study was that for my participants, this interaction could occur online (see Chapter 8).

### ***Exploration with a partner***

While pornography was useful for allowing exploration in solitude, some participants preferred instead to explore their kinks *offline* with somebody else. The exploration of kinks offline normally occurred with an 'intimate' partner rather than casual hook ups. This partner was normally who the participant was in a relationship with or somebody who the participant knew well and with whom there was a trusted connection.

Trust was considered especially important for participants in exploring their kinks with another person for several reasons. Firstly, exploring with somebody the participant was already familiar with would allow them to guess how the introduction of kink would be perceived – either openly and with a willingness to try or possibly receiving negative stigma. While a fear of stigma pushed some participants to use

pornography to explore kink, the possibility of engaging in kink was deemed a motivator to disclose to trusted partners or regular hook ups. This was exemplified by Ethan, who said:

[My boyfriend and I] had been together for a while and I already knew what he liked sexually. We were able to just have open conversations with each other about what we wanted to try, even though my things were more kinky than his. I knew he would be fine with whatever I suggested though and he knew it was fine to not try something.

Secondly, trust is deemed a vital part of any engagement in kink, specifically in the literature with discourses around safe, sane and consensual (discussed in Chapter 2). As with most activities, there are risks associated with kink. A way of mediating these risks would be to carry the activities out with somebody who you trusted, allowing for a more open discussion of the activities. For example, Ant said, 'you wouldn't just do kink with anyone. You need to have a conversation with somebody first to see what they're into, and also make sure that they're sane.'

Another reason for exploring kink in a relationship was that kink is an activity that can be done as a couple. Exploring sexual kinks and finding different ways to please each other seems to be a common narrative, particularly for the Ann Summers concept of kink to 'spice up your sex life' (Illouz, 2014). Moreover, an individual may attach more meaning to a particular kink if they discover it with their romantic partner. After having been introduced to kink through porn, Peter explored kinks initially with his boyfriend. He said, 'I was seeing a person for a certain amount of time and found out he liked rope, in a more sensual way. Kink play involved more intimate activities, and it was always light kink... It was nice to explore with somebody I was in a relationship with.' Similarly, John explored his kinks more with his partner of the time:

I was dating the guy and we both thought [kink] would be interesting to try, so we tried it one night coming back from a night out... I'd always had the interest, but never explored before it up until that point.

Rory highlighted how conversations about kink interests can be easier to have with a romantic partner, saying 'I'm not very shy in relationships so I just ask if it's something people want to try. When I was 18 I had a boyfriend and we explored things together. I ended up exploring a lot with him.'

Intimate partners did not always come in the form of the other person in a relationship. For Noah, his exploration occurred with somebody who turned into a good friend. He said:

I met somebody who had a load of stuff under their bed basically. I met the guy in a normal gay club... We saw each other a few times, went on some dates. We explored fetish stuff together – I learned and he led. It all went very fine – very positive experiences. I done things that I liked and didn't like, but I thought I would try them all and I found things that worked for me.

Noah felt comfortable enough in this setting to explore kink interests he knew he had, but also explore things he didn't know he was going to like or not. This exploration mirrors how Brian used pornography – exploring a taste palate. Noah's description of the friendship he had with the person he explored kink with highlighted an absence of stigma or the fear of judgement – mainly as Noah was aware his friend was also kinky.

Noah's example is also very similar to Austin's exploration of kink. Austin described earlier how he was introduced to kink by somebody else – when he was asked how he further explored kink, he said:

I explored a lot with [the guy that introduced me to kink]. He really liked being the submissive and would just do what I said. At 15, I thought 'let's see how far I can push this.' There wasn't a lot I didn't do. They were just things I thought might be fun...I was doing anything I could think of with him to see whether I liked it or not. For example, I used to tie him up and I'm not really into that. I just explored the stuff to see if I like them, cum, then thought I liked that or I didn't.

Austin was clear to stress that they were not in a relationship, but felt comfortable enough to explore various kinks and see which appealed and which didn't. However, for Austin, it was still very much a sexual exploration.

### ***Socio-sexual Networking Sites***

An exploration of the online was a common theme in participant narratives. However, rather than using various types of pornography or blogs, some participants described using socio-sexual networking sites to explore their kinks. As mentioned in Chapter 4, these are websites similar to social networking sites but are focused around an aspect of sex or sexuality, such as hooking up or targeted at sexual minorities. With

developments in technology, these sites are not simply limited to web browsers and some took the form of phone applications.

All of the SSNS mentioned by participants were aimed at gay and bisexual men. Some of these sites were vanilla spaces which aimed to allow a safe online space for gay and bisexual men to communicate with each other, such as thegyc.com (gay youth corner). Others were orientated more towards helping these men to engage in more vanilla casual sex, such as Grindr (although there is debate regarding how much Grindr is used for sex, relationships or chat – see Jaspal, 2017). The main sites mentioned by participants however, were targeted at kinky gay and bisexual men, such as recon.com or clubcollared.com. This can be explained through how participants were recruited, but it also begins to showcase the subcultural nature of kink. These kinky sites are multifunctional. They allow for communication to occur in chat rooms or forums with other members, while also allowing a means for individuals to engage in *offline* kinky sexual hook ups, through the means of private messaging, cruising profiles and the option of uploading private photos. A more in-depth discussion of the narratives for SSNS will occur in the next chapter.

There were several motivations given for joining and engaging with the SSNS. While porn was praised for allowing a safe place to explore kinks alone, it was also critiqued as only being to offer so much for the viewers, reflecting Oliver's early point of the importance of *interactions* with kink. For example, when discussing his use of SSNS, John started by commenting that he could only 'get so much from porn.' He said, 'There came a point when I saw it in porn and wanted to do it in person.' While porn was helping John understand and explore his desires, he still felt the need to experience them in person—a key component of extending his exploration of kink. Similarly, when asked why he signed up to a kinky website, Ant said:

That was to find kink. I heard Recon was a kinky app and I knew I had an interest in kink. I knew I wanted to do it, but I wasn't prepared to do it until I had more information. It's all good watching it in pictures, but you don't get a feel for it properly as it's always a bit staged. I wanted to grasp if these people were sane (laughs).

Grant used the kinky websites to find out extra details or ask questions which surfaced through watching porn. Simultaneously, he also used pornography to explore things that were discussed in online forums. He explained, 'It worked both ways round – porn

sparked an interest which was discussed in the chat rooms, and then the forums and chat rooms sparked me to go to porn.’ Aiden also said that porn could only teach so much, and he moved to the SSNS to learn more:

When I was trying to find people that were into this sort of thing and find out more about.... for me, it was the safety aspect. You wouldn't turn up at a persons' house and let them tie you up and do whatever. I wanted to find out how people got into it safely. That's why I joined Recon.

Participants felt that pornography could only give so much information on how to engage in kink. Pornography was, importantly, recognised as a staged example of a kink session which often did not showcase discussions of limits, kink interests, etc. (Mercer, 2017). Both community and non-community members recognised the necessity of also exploring kink in person to gain an understanding of the intimacy and trust associated with it. The easiest way for participants to do this was to find other kinky individuals online.

Participants came across different examples of kinky SSNS with numerous motivations. Dan described signing up to several SSNS after realising he could not get the kinky sex he wanted from his partner anymore:

After 5 years, it's hard to be sexually stimulated by the same person. My husband tried fisting, but it wasn't really for him. We got to a point where we had been together for so long, that we trusted each other. I think I have just joined a load [of SSNS] over the last 4 years or so. I'm on Recon, Clubcollared, Fetlife, Pissbois, Fitlads, Slaveboys, old account on Gaydar, some foot fetish ones. I didn't join them at the same time, but within the last 4 years. It's the easiest way to meet people who are into the same things as you. I want to meet people from the sites with the associated kink.

Dan had explored kink extensively with his husband, but there were still sexual activities that interested him that he had not tried because his partner did not share the interest. As such, Dan joined a wide variety of SSNS dedicated to particular kinks to explore them. Dan said the main motivation to join to many sites was ‘to meet up to do kink with other people.’ Similarly, Ethan describes using the kinky SSNS to look for kinky sex, saying:

I thought I would never use Recon, then a guy started messaging me on it and I met up with him. I thought the kinky sex was fun and that I'd like to do more of

it. Not I just use Recon to meet up for more kinky sex. Recon is my go to route for kinky sex though.

For other participants, engaging in kink activities was a long-term goal to join kink SSNS, and there were other more immediate motivating factors. For example, some participants described joining kink SSNS to explore how common their kinks were; to find out if what they were interested in was *normal*. While there was already a recognition of their kink interests, they had not had the opportunity to discuss their interests with others, possibly for fear of stigma or a lack of opportunity (Flowers and Buston, 2001).

Engaging in online forums allowed participants to engage in conversations with others who were 'like them.' The use of online mediums to find others of similar interests, in this case kinks, is not uncommon – arguably one of the main functions of the internet in recent times has allowing such individuals to connect with one and other (Preece and Maloney-Krichmar, 2005). This has been particularly helpful for sexual minorities (Mowlabocus, 2010).

Demonstrating the desire to find other similar to himself, when asked why he joined the SSNS, Rory said, 'I just started talking to people about stuff and realized I wasn't *weird!*... Just generally messaging people. I wanted to find out what other people were doing, see if it was similar and look for things to try out.' Robert also discussed motivation to find others similar to himself:

I looked online about that time to see if it was a thing and found out it was – luckily I wasn't too weird... I realized it was a global thing and that I wasn't the only one into it. I eventually started speaking to other people, asking questions about it, what stuff they had, where they got it, just general stuff.

The narrative of finding others with similar interests is exemplified by Plummer (1995) as he discusses the traditional coming out story. After having realised a sense of being different to the broader culture (Flowers and Buston, 2001), and having an awareness of the consequences of being different, sexual minorities begin to look for others similar to themselves.

While others didn't feel the same level of *need* to find others similar to themselves, there was still emphasis in wanting to chat to others with similar interests and engage in further exploration through conversations. Through such interactions

and explorations, meanings of kink often changed and moved away from a focus on the individual to more of a collective understanding of kink. For example, Eric said:

I'm not really sure what drew me towards the fetish websites. Morbid curiosity?... I could talk to people, that was part of it. I guess I wanted to ask questions about kink to people. Not necessarily about meeting to have sex. I wanted to see what other people did.

Rather than wanting to meet and engage in kinky sex, for Eric it was more about chatting and finding out more information about kink. He recognised that speaking to other kinky individuals would allow for more broader perspectives on what it meant to be kinky, how to do kink, etc.

Peter described how meeting for sex was not a primary motivation either, saying:

One guy told me about a website called Slaveboys and I ended up joining it. It was the first time I heard of a website for kinky guys. I joined, there was a forum, chat section, so it became very social. Through that, I was able to find more things out, more kind of kinks I didn't know about, I realized there was more I enjoyed that I didn't even consider.

For Peter, communicating with members online uncovered the social aspect of kink. Furthermore, rather than random porn videos suggesting things he could watch as described above, members were able to offer more tailored suggestions of other kinks based on Peter's interests.

For Noah, there was a social motivation to explore kink alongside a sexual one. He said:

Joining Recon was a way of meeting people around the country, going to clubs and then going to clubs on my own. I partly used to meet up with people and explore online the nature of what I was into.... I think I went there to sort of have my desires accepted and work out the nature of what desires really did it for me.

While the examples mentioned so far are all kink-based SSNS, some participants also explored their kinks on vanilla SSNS. While the sites varied in how social and sexual they were, these sites made no reference to kink activities – they focused on stereotypical 'vanilla penetration.' Furthermore, differences existed in how participants approached kink on these sites - some participants hinted at kink on their

profiles through emojis or certain words, while others were explicitly kinky with their profile pictures.

John initially explored kinks on vanilla SSNS, bringing it up in conversations: I found people to do kink with mostly through Gaydar and Craigslist – they were the two sites I ended up using the most. I'd speak to people about kinks on there, but my profile wasn't kink orientated. It was a case that I wanted to meet like-minded gay people, but conversations normally turned round to 'what are you into?' in which case, I told people. You either got yes or no.

Contrary to fears of negative reactions, John described not receiving any negative abuse through disclosing his interest in kink through private messages. Instead he says, 'Some people found it weird, others thought it was okay and were more open minded.' For those who found it 'weird', they simply asked questions about it, possibly as they hadn't previously had a chance to, or discontinued the conversation.

Initially, Justin would do a similar technique of approaching the conversation of kink on another vanilla SSNS, saying, 'I would weave [my kinks] in if somebody seemed mildly interested or asking somebody 'what they're into?' sex wise.' However, he eventually changed his vanilla SSNS profiles to reflect his kinks:

I've been a lot more open on places like Grindr and other sites as well about what I'm into exactly that I wanted to explore it. I used to be more discrete, but I've started being more obvious and open because you get other people messaging saying 'I'm into that too.'

Justin was not the only participant to actively advertise his interests in kink on his vanilla profiles. For example, Dan lists his kink interests on his 'about me' section on vanilla SSNS.

While some participants were open about their kinks on vanilla SSNS, others employed different techniques. For example, Austin describes having two profiles on vanilla SSNS:

I tend to normally have two profiles on websites that aren't filth - one that has my face on it and one that doesn't. The one that doesn't have the face picture tends to have the filthier side of me on it. So I can keep up my public innocent persona. I have two Grindr profiles, two phones. I haven't been on that profile for a while though. Fitlads I have two on, Gaydar, Grindr, Hornet, I don't use the first two websites that much these days though.

When asked about the messages he receives on his 'filthy' profiles in the vanilla spaces, he reported not having had any negative or abusive messages. Instead, he had people message him who had similar interests to the ones listed on his profile – he joked about getting better kink encounters from the vanilla SSNS than the kink SSNS. Aiden described employing a technique similar to the use of dual profiles, saying:

The stepping-stone from Gaydar (a vanilla SSNS) to Recon (a kink SSNS) was probably squirt (a cruising website) I never used to put a face picture on squirt, but I would put naked images of myself on Squirt, and the flip on Gaydar (face pics and no naked ones). I was trying to achieve two different things. Gaydar was achieving friends and chatting with people whereas squirt was about no strings attached kink sex.

Rather than two profiles on the same vanilla SSNS, Aiden used different sites to achieve different things. On sites more orientated towards the social, Aiden didn't list anything about his sexual interests. However, the vanilla SSNS which were more sexual, he was more open about his kinks but less open about himself by not having face pictures. When asked why he did not have pictures on his kink profiles, he said, 'well my job is one reason. Another is people don't need to see my face unless they want to meet up for sex.'

While not using a variation of dual profiles, Grant recognised it as a common thing to happen on kink and vanilla SSNS, saying, 'It's interesting to see a kinky persons' profile and also their vanilla one – they're normally very different.' He went on to say, 'What was more interesting for me was pairing the profiles from [a vanilla SSNS] and [a kink SSNS].' For Grant, it was like a game to be able to match the profiles from different websites. It is also to note that some vanilla SSNS have explicit kink features, but these were not used by most participants. For instance, Grindr has the option of 'tribes' where you indicate sexual preference (normally based around gay culture terms such as 'twink', 'otter', and 'bear'). One option here is 'leather', but this was not used. Highlighting this, Robert said:

Sometimes I put the leather tribe on my filter, and then the nearest person is hundreds of miles away. There are all these kinky people on Grindr, including myself, but none of them are part of the leather tribe.

Josh was the only participant who was on vanilla SSNS, but wasn't on any kink websites. When asked why, he said:

What's preventing me from going to kink websites? Embarrassment. It contradicts itself I suppose thinking people would judge me for being on there when they're on it themselves... I would register on a kink website, but the limitation is that I struggle to define kink... I really want to at some point, I just don't feel kinky enough at the moment.

While he does not feel 'kinky enough' to be able to join kink SSNS, he does engage in discussions about kink on vanilla SSNS but very carefully:

I generally keep things very vague. I don't want to say something I'm into in case they think that I won't meet for sex unless we do a particular activity. I'll say I'm versatile and I like topping - there is room for negotiation there. If they continue and say what activities do I like, or what am I into I'll just say a bit of this, a bit of that. I don't think I ever say things like pissing on people, unless I get the impression that they're getting a bit bored or they're clearly open.

SSNS featured prominently in how participants explored kink, with a mixture of kinky and vanilla sites being used. After using them for a tool of exploration, many participants remained on these sites, with participants' use of the site changing – I will explore this more in the next chapter.

### **Entering a Subculture**

As discussed above, the experiences of how community and non-community members became interested in kink and explored it do not differ significantly. However, a real point of departure is when community members became part of a community. By definition, the non-community members did not reach this stage. They were non-community, or what I initially called dabblers, precisely because they had not become embedded within a sexual subculture that has been the hallmark of research on kink from the beginning of kink research (Weinberg et al., 1984; Rubin, 1991) through to contemporary studies of kink cultures (Newmahr, 2011; Weiss, 2011). As such, this section uses the interview and ethnographic data with the 15 community members to discuss how people became embedded within kink subcultures and how they explored kink in this new context.

As described in Chapter 4, entering and engaging in a subculture is a complex phenomenon and there are no clear rules on how an individual enters the subculture or community—it will vary with each subculture. Instead, membership is afforded

through a variety of methods, such as a shared interest with the main identity of the subculture (Thornton 1995), interacting with other who are already in the subculture (Rubin 1991), or displaying active participation in the subculture through investment of resources (Williams 2011). Some of these methods were described by the community participants, as well as other means.

Absent from the older narratives of how individuals became part of kink subcultures, in the current study, the online played a significant role in how participants became immersed into the kink communities and broader subculture. For most community members, they became involved in the kink community through interacting with others on the kink SSNS. For example, when asked how he became part of the kink subculture, Oliver said:

I became part of the kink community by chatting online in forums, messaging people and attending events. I soon made new friends and it's just snowballed into where it is now – I'm fairly well known in the community now. I know some people struggle to find entry into the community or subculture, but it's normally because they don't take opportunities to meet and talk to new people. As long as you try, show a genuine interest and respect others, then anyone can be part of it.

Oliver emphasised the importance of making an effort to interact with others. Interestingly, Oliver does not describe initial boundaries which limited access to the subculture, reflecting the more fluid understandings of subcultures (Hodkinson 2010). Similar to Oliver, Luis said:

I got involved in the online chatrooms on [a kink SSNS]. So, a few months ago I used the chatrooms all the time, speaking to people there, and I liked the acknowledgement that 'we're all kinky, let's chat about other stuff.' I made friends, really good friends, and began to get a reputation.

Again, Luis began to move to a community member through interacting with others. Interestingly, Luis highlights that while kink may be the common 'taste' which brings the subculture together (Thornton 1995), it is not the only thing that is discussed – having the shared interest is the prerequisite to discuss other things. This was a common narrative, with Rory adding:

We have a level of understanding with each other. I couldn't tell my straight friends I'm into piss because they might just tell me I'm disgusting... the

websites are stigma free... I get to hang out with people who are into the same thing as me but it's not like all we do is kink. It's quite important to me. When we go out in rubber, it's saying to other people 'this is part of our lives, just something we wear'. We're all kinky in rubber, but we're just having a normal night out. It's a community really.

Max also shared this view:

I joined the [kink SSNS] to explore and talk to people. People might think it's all about the hook ups, but even now, it sounds silly, but I still use the sites to find friends and talk to people. I think it's because you can be yourself if you hang around with people who have similar interest as you. You can act more natural and have nothing to hide. I'm not ashamed of being kinky, but I'm just a private person generally.

While engaging online allowed participants to enter into the subculture, there was a strong narrative of the need to attend offline kink events and meet up with others in person. When asked how he began to become more involved in the kink communities, Connor said, 'Going to events seemed like the logical progression to me... being in public with kink and in that kink environment.' Robert said how his interactions online helped him meet with others offline, saying:

I spoke to people online for a while on the sites I was on, a mix of kink chat and just general shit. Then I went to events after I felt more comfortable. I've been to a few kink events now. I went to meet up with the people I was speaking to online, as well as for general kink fun.

When asked how an individual becomes part of a kink subculture or community, John highlighted the importance of attending events, saying, 'You have to be reasonably active, vocally or physically, such as going to events... whether that's just standing on the outskirts or taking a more active role... It's just playing a part of it really.' While individuals who stood on the outskirts were not considered part of the community in other research (e.g. Newmahr 2011), John suggested that simply attending an event was enough to warrant subcultural membership. However, the level of membership deepened with more interactions and engagement.

While cultural stereotypes may view the kink events as underground dungeons or 'seedy', participants were keen to stress how welcoming individuals were to new attendees at these events. For example, Eric said:

I was surprised by how friendly it was. It was just a bunch of people talking to each other, which is the point of the event. I made lots of friends on the first night, so I kept going back to see them. Kink moved towards the social for me then... I felt part of it all.

Commenting on the ease of entering the subculture, Oliver said, 'Ultimately, the kink community can be one of the most welcoming and inclusive communities I have ever been a part of. There's a false appearance that the community is exclusive and shuns newcomers.'

Indeed, the openness to new members at events was highlighted through my own interactions at the events. I was welcomed initially by attendees at these events, despite many not knowing who I was, my obvious awkwardness and through my attire of black jeans and black vest not matching the 'kinky' gear that others were wearing. After engaging in conversations with other attendees about my research, rather than the potential hostility or closedness I expected based on previous research (see Weinberg, 2006), I was welcomed into the community and had numerous attendees asking if they could help with my research. While this does not equate to subcultural membership, I was afforded a position within the subculture. This was evident when I attended more events and was recognised several times and introduced to other members, where I was 'vouched for' by individuals whom I believed held a high position within the subcultural events I was attending.

### **Chapter Summary**

Participants described a variety of ways in which they were introduced to kink, with interests normally stemming from some psychological interest or from an introduction by someone/something else. Once an introduction into kink had occurred, participants engaged in further exploration of kink, normally through online methods but with some exploring kink with intimate partners. While the introduction into kink seemed to follow an individual narrative, participants' exploration of kink was normally explored as a collective activity, with all but one participant reaching an end goal of signing up to a kinky SSNS and engaging with an online community. However, some there were differences in the extent to which participants immersed themselves in these online communities and the effects it had on their kink life and identities. These will be explored in the next chapter.

# **Chapter 8: Kink Subcultures and the Incorporation of SSNS**

## **Introduction**

This chapter examines the role played by SSNS, with a particular focus on kinky SSNS and their integration within kink communities and the world of kink more broadly. As I highlighted in the previous chapter, research into kink communities has not adequately engaged with the online, focusing instead on the makeup of kink communities at events or clubs, often missing out the importance of the role the internet plays for contemporary kinksters.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, there has been extensive research into gay SSNS (e.g. Jaspal, 2017; Mowlabocus, 2010). However, there has been little research that investigates the role of kink SSNS, particularly for those who do not identify as part of a kink community. This chapter will begin by discussing the use of SSNS, including kink SSNS, by participants and unpicking some of the sexual and social norms of the individual sites. It will then discuss how and why participants use these sites and what typical profiles on these sites look like. Throughout the chapter, there will be a focus on differentiating between the 15 community and 15 non-community members. In doing so, this chapter will not only develop an understanding of kink SSNS that has not previously been discussed, it will also incorporate how these are used within kink subcultures today.

## **Introducing Key SSNS**

Perhaps the most famous SSNS available today is Grindr. Commenting on its popularity, Blackwell, Birnholtz and Abbot provide a succinct description of Grindr:

Grindr is a mobile LBRTD [location-based real-time dating] app released in 2009 that has over 3.5 million users in 192 countries... Grindr was initially an application for seeking immediate sex (Mowlabocus, 2010). It is now used for more social purposes partly because certain vendors found sex-seeking apps undesirable (Easton, 2009) and partly because the user base has expanded. (Blackwell, Birnholtz and Abbot, 2014, pp. 2-4)

The popularity of Grindr and its dual use described by Blackwell et al. has also been noted in other research (e.g. Jaspal, 2017; Goedel and Duncan, 2015; Landovitz et al., 2013), with it being one of the most popular gay hook-up applications or apps. The applications popularity can be explained through it receiving attention in popular media, particularly when Stephen Fry announced using it on national TV, and it being

one of the first to appear in mobile app stores (Woo, 2013). Since its initial launch, it has undergone numerous changes, but its main function is to allow individuals to create an online profile to interact with other members who are near to them based on Global Positioning System (GPS). The profiles consist of basic user information (such as height, weight, age, ethnicity), but also allows users to enter their sexual preference for anal sex (e.g. top or bottom), their HIV status and the date they last submitted for a sexual health screening. There is also a function to link the profile to other social networking sites (i.e. Facebook, Twitter and Instagram). Finally, users are encouraged to upload a profile picture and some personal information about themselves which is visible to other users.

Users interact with other members in private, on a one to one basis, with no current function available to send or interact with groups of members. There are a number of other SSNS that are very similar to Grindr in being geolocational mobile phone apps, such as Hornet or Scruff. Each non-kink based application has different characteristics. For example, Hornet was described by Robert as giving ‘more information about a person and you can see more pictures of them’, whereas Scruff was described as catering more to a particular somatotype, such as bears or cubs (Roth, 2014); that is, men with above average body size and hairy bodies.

There were also several kinky SSNS discussed by participants. While the SSNS mentioned above only featured an app on smart devices (phones and tablets), the kinky SSNS mentioned all had a website with some of them having apps on smart devices. The most prevalent site was Recon.com which hosted a website and an app, with the functions mirrored across them both. Members would create a profile on either the app or the website, entering the similar information mentioned above in relation to Grindr. However, there was not a way of linking other profiles to the Recon profiles or providing information about recent sexual health screenings. Instead, users could upload multiple photos (which could be placed in either public or private photo albums), chose five of their primary kink interests which would feature on their profile and be employed in user searches, and could advertise kink events that they were attending from a large list located on the main website. Other main examples include ClubCollared and FetLife, which I describe in more detail throughout the chapter.

All 30 participants had a profile on a gay SSNS. This is partly attributable to the recruitment strategy – most participants were recruited through a SSNS. However,

there were notable differences in which sites were used and how they were used more when participants were split into non/community members. In the following sections, I draw out these differences.

### **The Prevalence of SSNS and Kink SSNS Among Non-Community Members**

All non-community members had a profile on a non-kinky mobile SSNS. The most commonly used SSNS was Grindr (see Image 1), with 14 of the 15 participants on it. When asked why it was his preferred app, Justin said, 'I guess it's because it has the most people on it, and it's not targeted at anyone in particular, so you get a good amount of variety.' Aiden also highlighted the popularity of Grindr and the features it has, saying, 'Lots of people seem to be on it. In the past I had Grindr Xtra [a subscription service which gives more features on the app] which tells you when you have messages, you can block people, etc... It's just easy.' Only Roy did not use the app, saying he 'didn't find Grindr very useful. The guys on it seem very flaky or don't want to hook up.'

Participants also described how they broached the topic of kink on Grindr, despite its ostensibly vanilla focus. For example, Trevor said:

People tend to be more open on Grindr. You normally get a vibe from a person – if they message you at 2am then they aren't looking for friends... People would ask 'what are you into?' then you tell them, or you might say 'any kinks?' After the first question and see what gets said.

Ant also recognised the popularity of kink on Grindr, saying, 'The apps are the best way to find kinky people. There is a growing interest in kink on Grindr. I don't know if that's from the Fifty Shades of Grey, but people are interested in trying it.' I expand on discussing kink in vanilla spaces below.

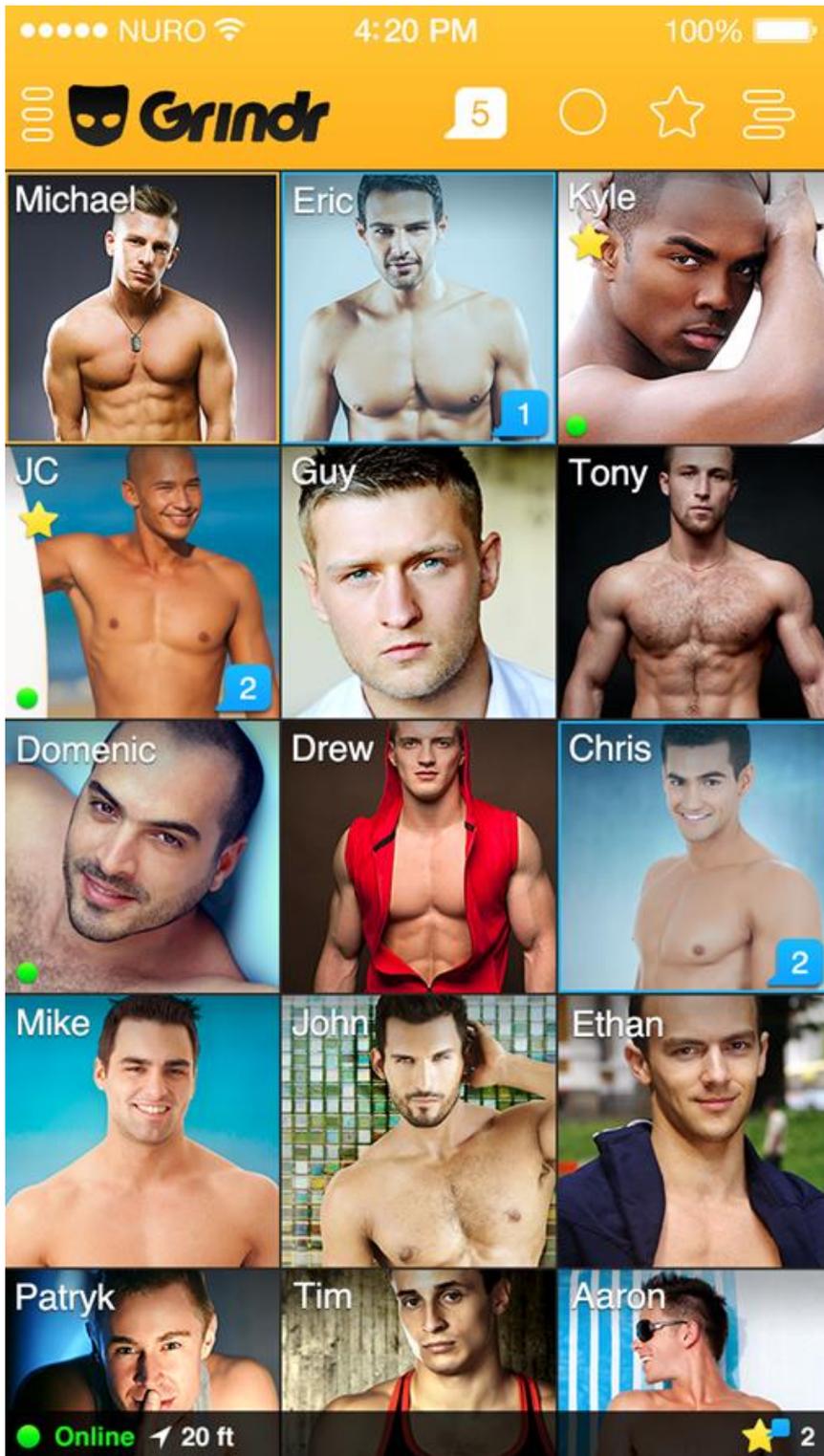


Image 1: Grindr homepage

There were also several kink orientated SSNS that non-community participants used, with 12 of them having an active profile on a kink SSNS. While Grindr was the preferred vanilla SSNS, Recon (see Image 2) was the kink SSNS preference. Aiden described it as the first one he came across when searching online for kink terms, adding, 'I know others are out there, but I'm just on them... Recon does the job.' Similarly, Phil said, 'Recon was the only kink site I joined. I knew about others, maybe had a look, but I never used them.' When asked why he used and preferred Recon, Aiden said:

I think Recon is an interesting one. I've not met huge numbers of people in relation to other apps and websites, but I guess it's more of a shop window that is there for people to communicate with me via another means, such as Grindr. If they have a profile on Recon, they will have probably seen mine... I assume if you're on Recon, then you know what the site is about. You can be more open on there because other people are probably on there for the same reason.



Image 2: Recon.com home screen

Aiden thought that Recon seemed to be the most commonly used kink SSNS and individuals interested in exploring or doing kink would create a profile on the site to have a presence or explore. Creating a profile on Recon would advertise yourself as kinky, while mentioning Recon on vanilla SSNS like Grindr would advertise a level of

mutual understanding that an individual was interested in kink. Brian also shared this view, saying, 'It says a lot about somebody if they have a Recon profile – you can probably work out what they're into.'

Three other kink SSNS were specifically mentioned by non-community participants. Noah stated he had explored FetLife (see Image 3), which caters for kinks and fetishes of all genders and sexual orientations, promoting a community feel on the site with group discussions and 'munches' (a munch is a social meeting for individuals with kink interests and normally occur monthly in major cities, see Weiss, 2011). However, Noah described how he 'didn't like the group stuff on there – I don't connect with how it is arranged.' The structure and layout of FetLife is very much focused around building a kink community, both online and offline. However, FetLife does not appear to offer much flexibility in how the site is used: there are forums that are monitored for content, and particular ways in which discussions can occur. Similarly, the off-site meetings are focussed around organised munches or individual meetings. There is not much flexibility beyond this. Seemingly, the kink community is structured around the site (David, 2010) rather than its users adapting it in novel ways.

# FetLife is the Social Network for the BDSM, Fetish & Kinky Community.

Like Facebook, but run by kinksters like you and me.  
We think it is more fun that way. Don't you?

Login to FetLife

Signup to FetLife

**6,026,611 Members** are sharing **31,072,243 pictures** and **416,439 videos**, participating in **7,223,743 discussions** in **109,639 groups**, going to **570,949 upcoming events**, and reading **2,680,604 blog posts**. *Kinky heaven!*

Image 3: Fetlife.com home screen

Several participants also mentioned a site called Slaveboys (see Image 4 – waiting to receive registration details). Observing the website and through discussions with participants, the site was framed as allowing for more communication between and among members, particularly in forums, but had undergone changes over several years and was now no longer actively used by any participants. When asked about his use of Slaveboys, Peter said:

I don't keep in touch with the people from Slaveboys anymore... I was sort of known in the forums and the chat room at the time, but I wanted to actually meet people... Not many people use Slaveboys anymore – Recon is the only one I use now. It was easier to create a new profile on Recon where people didn't know it was me and I was able to do kink more sexually than socially.



Image 4: Slaveboys.com home screen

Similarly, Garth said, 'I used to be on other kink sites, like Slaveboys, but it's rubbish now. New people don't sign up to it so there is no point me being on it.' No non-community participants had an active account on either FetLife or Slaveboys. This is partly explained by the participants labelling as non-community – given that kink is less important to them and that they do kink instrumentally, there is less motivation to participate in online kink communities, which require a level of investment.

Only Matt actively used an alternative kink site to Recon; when asked which SSNS he was on, Matt said, 'I'm on Grindr, Recon and UMD. It's kind of like a Facebook

for people into messy play (activities which involve the pouring of viscous liquids on the body).’ He added, ‘I wasn’t really finding what I wanted on Recon or Grindr for my kinks, I thought there must be a place more specific for my interests – I found UMD through Google searches and it works better for me.’ Matt explained that his particular kinks, wet and messy play, were not catered for by Recon which led him to joining other websites specific to his interests.

The three remaining non-community participants, while aware that kink SSNS existed, did not have any active profiles. Justin had browsed and created profiles on various sites in the past, but did not feel that they were ‘quite right’ for him. Echoing the thoughts of Matt, he said, ‘I’ve been on Recon, but I’m not big into it to be honest.... It’s rare to find people into my stuff on there. It seems like quite a specific website.’ Justin’s impression of kink SSNS was that there was a level of investment needed into kink to really maximise utilisation of the sites: ‘Some of the stuff on the sites is too extreme for me, like the slave and master stuff... I know what I like and I stick with it.’ Justin did not feel that kink was a big enough part of his life to invest time into the sites, adding, ‘I’m happy with my relationship with kink at the moment – I don’t want it to go too much higher or for it to die off.’ Similarly, rather than highlighting the aversion to investing more time into kink, Josh instead emphasised perceived stigma of joining and appearing on a kink SSNS. When asked why he had not signed up to a kink SSNS, he said, ‘Embarrassment? It contradicts itself I suppose thinking people would judge me for being on a site when they’re all on it as well.’ Josh also expressed a level of internal stigma for not wanting to sign up to a kink SSNS:

Joining it, it would force me to acknowledge that it’s a bigger part of my life that I am prepared to admit. Taking trips away for the weekend and doing kink, finding out more about it, exploring, doing things I’ve wanted to do but not had the chance, I would feel I am going off course. Not in a bad way, but I guess I haven’t felt I’ve needed it strongly enough to legitimize it... It would be too much for me.

Such internal stigma was also present in Chapter 6 when Josh described how he refused to self-identify as kinky, despite a recognition that his ‘alternative sexual interests’ were commonly regarded as kinky. Josh is happy to admit he engages in kinky sexual acts, but refutes the idea that he *is* kinky.

Finally, Roy's reasoning for not joining a kink SSNS was similar to both Justin and Josh, saying, 'I don't want to join a kink site because I get intimidated. I feel like other people are more into it than me... I'm also scared of getting 'sucked in' and it taking over my sexual fantasies.' Roy was also similar to Josh in that he recognised his kinky sexual interests, but has an aversion from using the label kinky to describe himself (see Chapter 6 for a discussion of identifying as kinky). When asked what SSNS he was on, Roy said, 'Fabguys, Gaydar and Plenty of Fish... oh and also Tinder.' These sites are very much orientated around the idea of finding a relationship rather than engaging in casual sex, and only two of them are aimed at sexual minorities

### **Non-Community Members Negotiating Sexual Norms on SSNS**

There are social rules and norms of Grindr, and other SSNS, which one learns through interactions with other members (Mowlabocus, 2010). These norms are similar to those that we witness in daily cultures (Bourdieu, 1979), such as queuing in public or not speaking on the London Underground. These norms for Grindr clearly included how to discuss the non-normative practices of kink. Participants spoke about a range of ways of introducing the topic of kink. Ryan said, 'If messaging people, I might ask them 'What are you into?' or if there is anything they want to try sex wise.' Brian noticed particulars on profiles which indicated an interest in kink; when asked how he approached kink on Grindr and related apps, he said:

You see if they have anything on their profile about it and just ask them. Saying 'I notice you're into leather, what gear have you got?' You just ask them. If they don't have anything, you could share pictures with a bit of leather in and see what their reaction is. That's normally a good way of doing it. Some people will give no response and others will just carry on with the conversation. You can send more tame photos to see the reaction, just edging it out.

The discussion of kink in vanilla spaces has been previously discussed (see Chapter 5) with the narratives above indicating that kink as a conversation topic was regularly introduced into a conversation in subtle ways, rather than discussed explicitly or ostentatiously. When this concept was discussed with Matt, he said:

I partly see that happening. I wouldn't disagree with it. If somebody has the same level of thinking as you, they might respond positively. Yet often when asked what they're into, someone might just say oral or anal, and not

understand you're hinting at kink. But it's about not making the faux pas or not mentioning kink too soon.

As such, Matt indicates that there are social rules in how such discussions occur.

Similarly, Peter indicates that these social rules help to prevent stigma and negative reactions:

I tend to avoid the question of 'What are you into?' because it's a bit classic. It's the modern-day version of ASL [Age; Sex; Location; often used in old internet chat rooms]. When people ask me it, I might say it depends what you're into. There is a shyness about letting people know what you're into. I'd rather them tell me first. If they tell me they're kinky or there is any indication, then that's good enough for me. I want to know the person I am telling is open to the idea of it.

Josh provided a similar narrative:

I generally keep things vague when discussing kinks on Grindr at first. I don't want to say something kink which they then feel I need to do – I'm into lots of things... I'll never say anything out of the blue because it might scare somebody off. I wouldn't come out with a big list of what I'm into. I normally wait for them to play the kink card.

There are several reasons to explain why participants negotiate their discussions of kink on Grindr and instead prefer to slowly or subtly introduce the topic. Given that Grindr is a vanilla space, discussing kink outright with other members would be against the 'norms' of the platform, hence preceding questions being used, such as 'What are you into?'

Online social norms aren't specific to Grindr. For example, Mowlabocus (2008) discusses the rules in a cyber-cottage, a discreet website where men-seeking-men (MSM) can arrange offline meets in 'local' public spaces, highlighting how the word 'gay' isn't mentioned, face pictures and real names are rarely used, and the site is used for no strings attached (NSA) fun. These aren't explicitly rules of the site, but are instead learned through interactions with other members and having conversations with them. It is only through breaking the online norms do we learn about them.

This leads to the second reason for discussing kink carefully in these spaces – the fear of breaking the rules and dealing with the consequences, which include being ignored or stigmatized (Yee et al., 2007; Rubin, 1991). Indeed, research has

documented how individuals using SSNS employ several strategic techniques when managing their online presentations of self for fear of rejection or other negative outcomes (Whitty, 2008). The ramifications of discussing kink with somebody who isn't interested in it could simply be 'No thanks' as a response, a less polite declining to chat, or one being blocked by the other person.

Participants backed this up, with Matt saying, 'I don't like to mention anything about kink first, just in case they're not into it... It's not really that important in the conversation so why say something that they may just block me for?' Similarly, Josh said, 'Mentioning kink straight away just means people are more likely not to speak to you.' It is interesting that participants do not wish to be blocked and are against offending people in these online spaces, especially as research has shown how individuals tend to be more open and carefree in online spaces (e.g. Ben-Ze'ev, 2003). When asked why he cared about being blocked, Josh said, 'It's still fun just to talk to people, about kink, sex or whatever.' Clearly, the management of online identity is important for participants.

For some participants, discussions of kink were not central motivations for engaging in chats in these spaces. Sumter, Vandenbosch and Ligtenberg (2017) note how there are complexities in how mobile dating apps/SSNS are used. They discuss Tinder – a worldwide popular mobile dating app which allows individuals to view pictures of other users and 'swipe left' if they do not find the person attractive and 'swipe right' if they do. If both users swipe right for each other, they will be notified and a text box appears allowing them to engage in a conversation. They argue that Tinder should not be viewed only as a 'hook up app without any strings attached' (ibid, p. 75), but highlight how the gamification style of the app, concepts of romance and excitement, and opportunities for communication are all contributing factors to its trendiness. Clearly for Josh and others, Grindr allowed opportunities for further interactions beyond discussions of kink.

Relatedly, and highlighted also in Chapter 2, many of the non-community participants still understood kink to be taboo and something that shouldn't be openly discussed, remaining subcultural. Phrases such as 'what are you into' and 'open minded' in vanilla spaces are used to gauge how much the other person is open to discussing kink. Noah emphasised this, saying, 'There is a mutual understanding of terms used by people into kink – you get an idea of if it's okay to talk about it.' As well

as avoiding stigma, this could also be interpreted as a code that individuals use to signify in-group membership—in a manner similar to that used by men seeking sex in public toilets (Humphreys, 1970). This is discussed in detail with community members, where the process is more explicit, but may also be relevant for non-community members.

Justin noticed the social etiquette of discussing kink on Grindr, but also contested this saying, 'It used to be that I would weave kink gently into the conversation if somebody seemed interested.' However, Justin decided to change his profile and instead be more open about his interests:

I've started being more obvious and open about what I'm into because you get people who message you saying 'I'm into that too.' A lot of talk had been through sharing fantasies and such. I've also met a few guys and really enjoyed it.

He wasn't alone in deciding to be more open about his kink interests. Aiden also said he is more 'blunt' in his approach:

I think after having been in an unfulfilled relationship for so long, my approach now is quite blunt. I have messaged people saying 'I'm into this.... Are you game?' That's the approach I use on Recon and Grindr.

Finally, Austin also used the more forward approach. However, he only did so because he had multiple profiles on these sites:

I tend to normally have two profiles on websites that aren't kink based – one that has my face on it and one that doesn't. The one that doesn't have the face picture tends to have the filthier side of me on it. So I can keep up my public innocent persona. I have two phones, two Grindr profiles.

I asked Austin to expand on each of his profiles:

The vanilla one just says 'Hi, I'm a nice person, say Hi, I don't bite.' I have face pictures and real information. The kink one doesn't have a picture and if they do, the pictures haven't been taken in my house... there is no real information on the profiles either.

When asked why Austin had two profiles, he said:

I don't want the public to know, or get onto the fact that I am disgusting behind closed doors [laughs. My mum might find out! I don't want to sound snobby, but I have a public perception of me and I don't want that to be tarnished... It's

really to do with work. I don't want people to be put off. I don't want people to think 'He looks nice' and then find out I'm kinky and be put off. I can turn the kink on and off, so I don't *need* people to know about it.

Austin's understanding of kink as 'disgusting' or 'dirty' in his earlier descriptions highlights his perceptions of stigma around kink. More specifically, the stigma others would potentially feel towards him if they found out he was kinky. Having two profiles was a way in which Austin negotiated the risks of discussing kink in vanilla spaces.

### **The Prevalence of SSNS and Kink SSNS Among Community Members**

While most of the non-community members were on a kink SSNS, *all* community members had a profile on a kink SSNS, with several participants having profiles on multiple kink SSNS. 11 of the community members were also on gay vanilla SSNS, such as Grindr and Hornet. However, there was a clear difference between the profiles on the vanilla hook up apps for the community members compared with the non-community members. The profiles on these apps for the community members were more kink orientated through using particularly terms written on profiles or through the display pictures used. For example, Cameron's Grindr profile features him in a pup mask and kink gear, with his profile description reading: 'Wruff!! Super kinky, but vanilla is still sweet' with the emoji of a pup (indicating pup play) and an emoji of a pig (indicating more kink play). All 11 of the community members who had a Grindr profile were open about kink on it.

Rory's profile feature is overtly kinky and features him wearing rubber with a mask on. He also uses emoji on his profile to indicate his interests, specifically the 'pig' and the 'pup' emoji. The use of emoji to facilitate online conversation has already been well documented, with Kelly and Watts (2015) discussing how emoji have been appropriated beyond their original intended use in mediated conversations; rather than adding to conversations or helping to communicate tone or intent, they have instead been used to start conversations and indeed replace text. While the strengths (Stark and Crawford, 2015) and weaknesses (Miller et al., 2016) of emoji have been discussed more generally, there is relatively little research around their use within sexual contexts.

A recent report by McCormack (2015) documented the saturation of emoji in conversations relating to sex. He states 'emojis [are] a popular way to refer to sex'

(McCormack, 2015, p. 6), emphasising the playfulness of emoji when engaging in discussions of sex and how they can be used to flirt around the topic of sex, rather than being blasé. Examples of emoji used to discuss sex included ‘the aubergine’, ‘the monkey’, ‘the peach’ and ‘the chicken’.

Rather than using emoji in conversations, Rory used them on his profile as a representation of his kink interests. He described that having a pig emoji on his profile would signal to other people that he was kinky. He said, ‘People who know about this stuff, like are kinky, would be able to know I’m kinky by seeing [pig emoji] on my profile.’

Rory wasn’t alone in using emoji on his profile to indicate kink to others. Similarly, Dan said, ‘Putting the feet emoji on your profile... You don’t know who is looking at your profile and it helps you to get interest from people who are interested in it. I’ve had a few messages from people asking if I’m into feet.’ Similarly, Lee said:

I only tended to discuss kink on Grindr because that’s all I was looking for. I would respond if people asked about the things on my profile – I might have the pup or feet emoji, or the tagline ‘far from normal’. I always gave a slight indication to what I like on my profile, but not overtly.

Discreet means of communication among sexual subcultures is not a new phenomenon. For example, Polari was a popular slang language used by gay and lesbian communities across the UK during homophobic times (Baker, 2002). It was similar to cockney rhyming slang and was a discreet way of indicating to others that you were part of the ‘gay subculture’. Related to kink communities, the handkerchief code was another form of communication. Primarily used by gay and bisexual men in metropolitan cities, hankies are worn in back pockets, with the colour representing a sexual activity and the side worn, either left or right, indicated the preference of giving or receiving. The hanky code appears to have fallen into disuse, based on discussions with my conversations with participants and other research which frames it as a ‘quaint relic from a dark and closeted gay past’ (Kates, 2002, p. 388). However, the use of emoji may be an updated version of the hanky code – indicators of kink preferences in public/gay spaces. Those who are aware of the subcultural forms of kink communication will be able to recognise the indicators.

While the use of emoji on profiles was one indicator of kink, Rory described other ways that people would recognise him as kinky from his Grindr profile:

I just use the apps to chat really. I've spoken about kink on Grindr before – I don't know if it's my look that makes people assume I'm kinky, I've got tattoos and my septum pierced so I guess that's why people speak to me about it... After the initial chat it goes onto 'What you into?' When they ask, I just tell them. I have a saved note of the list of things I am into and I just send it to them. 10/10 people are fine with it, apart from one thing on the list, sounding (inserting metal tubes into the male urethra). It's not a long list, but I've never had any negative reactions.

Rory highlights that there seems to be a stereotype of what it means to look kinky – tattoos and piercings, particularly the septum piercing. Arguably this stereotype stems from older subcultures, particularly punk, where tattoos and piercings were symbols of status within a subculture (Thornton, 1995). Rory also highlights that the same narrative described by non-community members tends to be followed – an initial conversation, with the introduction of the phrase 'What are you into?' However, the difference between Rory and the non-community members is that Rory openly says what kinks he enjoys.

Rory wasn't alone in how he approaches kink in vanilla online spaces, with Grant providing a similar narrative:

I've discussed kink on Grindr. When talking about kink, the standard question is 'what are you into?' I just have a pre-set phrase on Grindr of my list of things I'm into. I just send the full list when people ask me what I'm into. Reactions vary. There is usually 'big list, that's full on, a lot there.' Then you gauge the reaction and go from there. They're my likes, not musts. You don't have to do all the things with a person in one session.

The use of pre-set lists by Grant and Rory indicates that kink is a common discussion point on the vanilla hook up apps. While this may be due to the openness or explicitness of some profiles, Grant did not have any indication that he was into kink on his Grindr profile; instead it came up in conversation.

Only Robert and John followed a similar conversation style to the non-community members in how they discussed kink. Robert said:

Unless the person I was chatting to had something kinky on their profile, I wouldn't bring it up until they did. There would be an approaching though of

finding out what people are into— a draft conversation like really of what would be said.

John added, 'Grindr is pretty personal for me, I use it mainly for talking and the occasional hook up. I have had kinky hook ups through Grindr, but generally it's normal sex. I don't really discuss kink unless they do.'

When asked why they did not have profiles on vanilla SSNS or apps, Connor said, 'I'm still hopeless with technology and not very technical. I don't use Twitter or Grindr.' Luis said, 'I thought Grindr was a bit too casual. I like some strings attached and I can't do sex where I don't know the person's name etc. It is kink after all.' Gabe didn't have much use for hook up apps, preferring other SSNS. Finally, Eric said he 'couldn't be bothered with it.'

As with the non-community members, the most common kink site used was Recon, with 13 participants having a profile. Describing Recon, Oliver said:

Recon is the most attractive of the kink sites. I'm on a fair few of them though – the more sites you're on, the more people you can talk to. Not everybody is a member of every site so you get a larger pool of people being on several. But I'm on Recon every day, particularly because of the phone app.

Echoing the views of the non-community participants, Rory said, 'Recon seems to be the most popular one for people to use.' Robert said, 'It's easier to just have the one profile and keep on top of it.'

However, there were differing perspectives on Recon, with some participants disliking it. For the two community participants not on Recon, Eric said, 'Recon is dead to me. People don't talk on it; the associated events are overpriced and not very good. There also isn't a forum so group discussions can't occur. I'm just on ClubCollared.' ClubCollared is another kinky SSNS platform which is based around a bi-monthly event in London for kinky men seeking men, Collared. Given the popularity of Collared London and the website, a monthly event has also been set up in the north of England, Collared Manchester. Clearly, the commodification of kink that Weiss (2011) argues is occurring in the U.S is beginning to make its way to the UK.

At the time of the interview, Gabe didn't have a Recon profile, saying, 'It didn't offer something I wanted. I wanted to keep my public and private lives separate more effectively – it's one less strand to connect them together, and one less way to be 'found out.'" However, since the interview, Gabe has joined the site. When asked why,

he said, 'I was curious! I wanted to see what the fuss was about with the site. Not much though, I reckon.'

Alternative kink SSNS were more common for community members with examples including: FetLife, ClubCollared, Puppypride, UMD, and other more specific kink sites like Pissbois. Comparatively to Recon, these sites had smaller member pools, but were described as offering alternative things to its members.

For example, FetLife describes itself as 'a free social network for the BDSM & Fetish community. Similar to Facebook and Myspace but run by kinksters.' (FetLife, 2017). As indicated by its self-description, FetLife is more community orientated, offering users a variety of message threads to post on to encourage communication among members. Furthermore, the site offers numerous ways to connect profiles, such as through the friendship tool or through indicating relationship roles between profiles, such as master/slave/mistress/carer/etc. Given the community focused approach of the website, a level of investment is preferred for this site, reflexive of offline kink communities (Newmahr 2011).

However, Pissbois is a less community-orientated site and instead focuses around the fetish of watersports or urine play. While there are forums, they are mostly used to ask questions, share pornography links, or arrange casual kinky sex all related to watersports. Emphasising the non-community aspect, while you are required to fill in profiles to post in forums or message members, most profiles are left blank and face pictures are not common. Given the smaller membership pool, Rory commented that it wasn't uncommon to recognise members by their usernames and get an idea of what they liked. Arguably, a site like Pissbois has more in common with a cottaging site rather than a kink community site (Mowlabocus, 2008). Both Pissbois and the cottaging sites are used for predominantly sexual reasons, from how participants spoke of Pissbois, there is not much general communication between members and there is a focus on meeting up for sexual activity. Finally, there is not a community feel on either of the two websites. This non-community component is signified by the name, which is explicit in its focus: 'piss' (the interest) and 'bois' (the type of person interested, where boi can signify a young, slim, working class gay male). This is particularly evident when compared with FetLife, where the interest (fetish) is broad and the focus is on 'life' rather than sex.

The alternative sites described above were used instrumentally by participants to get what they couldn't from Recon – the sites were sought out by participants for a particular purpose, such as access to more specific pornography, more investment in kink communities or arranging to hook up with members who only wanted to engage in a specific kink. It was not uncommon for participants to create a profile on these alternative sites, use the site for a particular purpose, and then to delete their profile on the site. Sometimes they would deactivate their profile instead, until they wanted to use the site again. However, there were interesting observations from the profiles across different kink sites, discussed below.

### **What does a kink profile look like?**

Research into kink communities developed rich descriptions of practitioners' social lives, kinky practices and what they mean, and the importance of kink identities. Such in-depth research allows for a more detailed understanding of offline kink communities, providing a holistic insight into kink communities (Plummer, 1995; Newmahr, 2011). I intend to use a similar approach in discussions around online kink communities, particularly given the absence in recognising the importance of the internet for contemporary kink communities.

Profiles for SSNS have been researched in detail from different angles. For example, Mowlabocus (2010) analysed the profiles on Gaydar, a popular site for men seeking men, and other online platforms in which men seeking men operate. He highlighted the complex ways in which gay profiles are used on these different sites. He argues the importance of the SSNS for gay men, writing:

Gay male identities and lives have been 'virtual' to the extent that they have had to be constructed, maintained and mapped *alongside* the world of 'normal' life. Gay life has not had the opportunity to exist 'here' and has, for too long, been something located 'out there,' elsewhere, somewhere (over the rainbow). This situation is changing, and this is undoubtedly a positive step for many, but there remains a lot of work to be done. Faced with living a 'virtual' life then, it is perhaps unsurprising that that gay men have so eagerly gravitated towards the digital and embraced the possibilities for interaction and connection that contemporary media technologies offer. (ibid, p. 213).

While Mowlabocus is discussing how gay men used the gay SSNS profiles across the different platforms he discusses, the above quote is also applicable to gay men who engage in kinky sexual practices. Yet, despite the obvious application of Mowlabocus' argument for kink SSNS, there has been little research which explores kink SSNS. As such, I will address this gap and will begin by discussing what a kinky profile looks like.

After analysing the participants' online kink profiles and discussing them, clear similarities and differences existed between community and non-community members in the presentation of the profiles, both in terms of text and images. In this analysis, I will be using profiles from Recon and Clubcollared. While an overall profile template of a community or non-community participant is not possible, there were certain features on profiles which could be used to make assumptions about the user.

All participants filled out the basic information on their profiles, also known as 'stats.' This information included: age, height, weight, body type, ethnicity and sexual role (active, passive or versatile). The stats are not unique to gay kink profiles – they appear on most, if not all, dating sites, hook up apps, and other sites which require a user to create an online profile. Filling out such information is often a compulsory part of signing up to a SSNS and are normally chosen from dropdown boxes making it easier to do. While stats are used to provide the basic information about a person, they are also used in searches performed on sites. For example, on Recon, basic members (those who do not pay a subscription) can search for other members using some of the demographic information. Similarly, ClubCollared allows members to search demographic information.

Image 5 shows the profile of one of the community members – permission has been granted from the participant to use his profile in this research. To preserve some anonymity, the username has been blanked out. The basic information on the profile has been filled in; the personal section describes what the member is looking for sexually; there is a link to other profiles; there are pictures of the participant in kink related gear; there are links to friends associated with the member and information about kink events they are attending; face pictures are available in private photo albums. While there is great diversity in the profiles, this profile is an accurate representation of what an average community profile looks like.

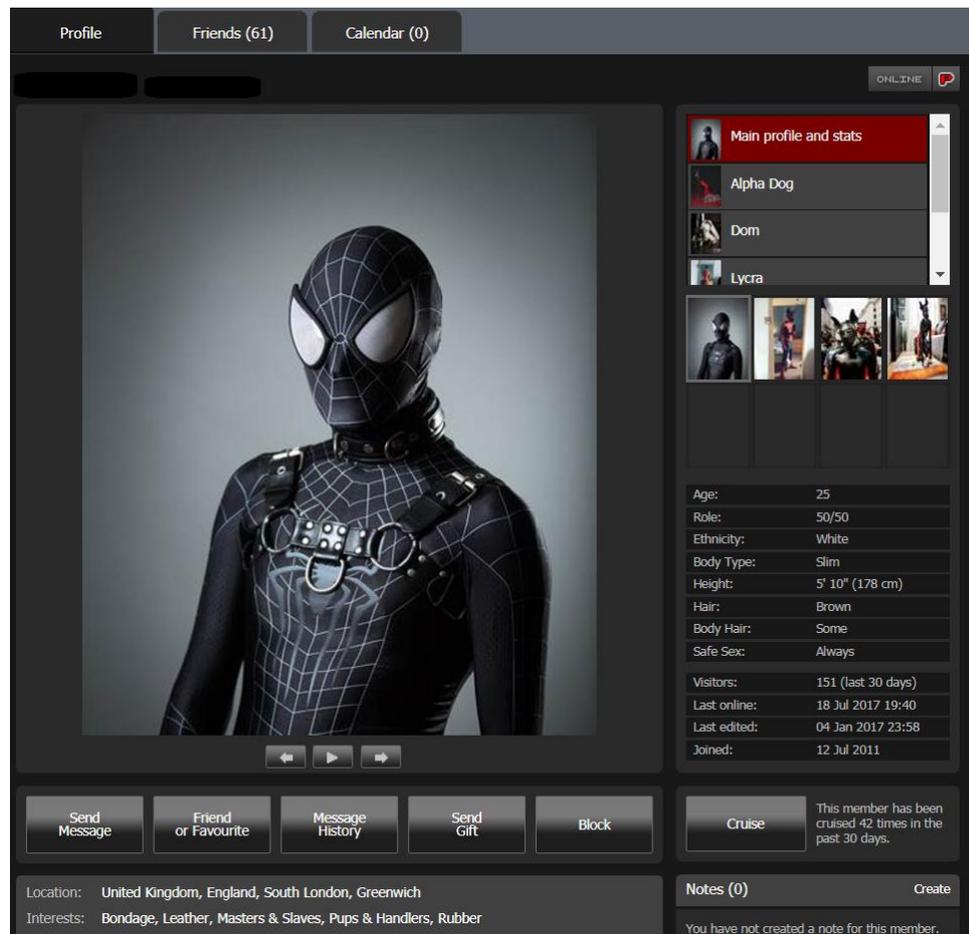


Image 5: Example of a user profile from Recon.com

While all members filled out the basic information on their profiles, there was variation among members on what else appeared on their profile. The use of pictures was an important topic of discussion for all participants, with some members having a range of pictures on their profile, some having pictures which didn't reveal their face, and some having none at all. There were also several factors which influenced the pictures which appeared on profiles.

Non-community members were more likely not to have a face picture on their profile – nine non-community members did not have a face picture on their profile and were somewhat cautious about uploading them to websites in hidden folders or sending them through private messages. For example, Matt said:

On Recon I don't have a face pictures. I will send a picture to people after chatting with them. The job I do means I'm not meant to sleep with certain types of people, you could say they're my clients. I need to keep a certain level of discretion. My profile just says 'let's have some fun.'

Similarly, Garth said:

I try to keep things slightly separate with the kink stuff. I use separate email addresses to sign up to sites, alternative names or usernames to create another degree of separation. I don't have a photo currently, but if I did, it wouldn't show my face that's for sure. With my job, I need a certain level of anonymity.

I've got the basic stats info and then one or two lines of text on my profile.

For both Matt and Garth, the fear of being discovered on a kink SSNS by their employers was the main reason for not uploading face pictures to the profile. This narrative was also present for the 5 community members who did not have face pictures on their kink SSNS. For example, Grant said, 'I don't have face pictures on kink profiles because I'm employed. I accept there's a risk to having face pictures in private galleries... I know people who don't give a crap but I have a career not a job.' Robert, another community member, also had concerns to uploading face pictures to his profile, saying, 'My main profile picture changes, but it is never a clear face picture... I send pictures when asked in private messages, but I take some caution in who I speak to online.'

Rather than show face pictures, some participants instead uploaded pictures related to their kink interests or showcased parts of their bodies, particularly torso pictures (Mowlabocus, 2010). For example, Noah had pictures of himself in the kink gear he owned so people could see what he was into and what he owned. Pictures which showcase kink gear or sex toys an individual owns highlighted a level of investment into their kink (Weiss, 2011).

Austin discussed the thought he put into the pictures on his profiles, saying, 'Most of my profiles don't have pictures on them. If they do, the pictures haven't been taken in my house so people can't recognise the background. No face pictures. Parts of body pictures is what I normally use.' When asked to expand on why he did not use face pictures, he said:

Somebody might go on there just for a nose. It's different from paying to go to a sauna or something. Somebody might look on a website, realize it's not for them, and leave. But they'll have seen my profile. I have face pictures hidden on there – people who pay for membership can see them. You're not going to pay for it if you're not really into it.

Justin was similar to Austin, saying he tends to send pictures to people once they have shown an interest into his particular kinks, saying 'I may be a bit too quick to send face

pictures, but I will once they have said they're interested in what I want to do.' The individuals who sign up to a site 'for a nose' described by Austin, and indeed highlighted by other participants, have been described as a problem in other kink settings. Newmahr (2011) describes the 'wankers' who attended kink events during her ethnographic research. These wankers would turn up to events and watch others while masturbating, engage in kink in ways that were un-approving of regular members, or not take the event *seriously* enough. While there are different problems attached to the online/offline wankers, they still pose problems within these circles.

The remaining participants, six non-community members and 10 community members, all had at least one face picture on their profiles. These participants offered similar narratives as to their thoughts about face pictures on their profiles. Most participants seemed to be nonchalant in their use of face pictures – they expected to see the other profiles and recognised that conversations with other members were more productive if they knew what each other looked like. Furthermore, websites informed its members that profiles with face pictures tend to get more messages.

For example, Trevor said, 'I have a face picture, but I am a well-known person so I guess I need to be careful... I don't mind people knowing I'm on there though.' Similarly, Aiden said, 'I have face pics on my profile – people will only be on there if they're looking for the same things as you.' Ryan highlighted that you could 'get to the point quicker' having pictures on a profile, adding, 'I'm not really shy about people knowing or seeing my face with that sort of info on it. I send pictures quite freely anyway, it skips any loss of interest from people.'

While Ant emphasised how kink was a very private part of his life, he felt comfortable with face pictures on kink SSNS, saying, 'Having face pictures is a bit different to having anything risqué. It's just a face picture. Same for topless ones – if it was on a beach nobody would care, why should they care online.' Ant was clear to manage his pictures – while he was content with face and body pictures on his profile, he made sure pictures of him engaging in kink were only sent via private message, giving him more control over them.

While the above quotes are from non-community members, similar reasoning was presented by community members. For example, Rory said, 'I don't really mind face pictures on the profiles. I send people more pictures when I've spoken to them.... I don't mind my face in body pictures – I've got tattoos so they're quite recognisable.'

Similarly, Oliver said, 'I think I've become more comfortable with using sites over time, but I've always tended to have face pictures on there.' As with non-community members, there were ways in which community members maintained a level of management over their photos. For example, John said:

I do have pictures on my profiles. My face picture and a picture of me with a pup hood... The stuff with me in kinky positions doesn't have my face picture in it. While they're on the same profile, the kink photos don't have my face in. I'm okay having my face picture on the profile though.

Similarly, Dan said, 'I put face pictures and real pictures of me on my profile. But I don't have naked pictures on my profile or online. I send them in private instead.'

While Max has face pictures on his online profiles, he raised some concerns:

Sometimes I have a face picture as my main photo and sometimes I don't. I think if you have certain pictures on your profile, like a picture of me in a pup hood, then it might put people off with them thinking that that's all you're into... It's worse when you have a face picture of yourself floating around the internet though.

Of those who had face pictures on their kink SSNS profiles, either publicly or privately, Brian was the only participant who discussed negative consequences. Discussing the issue of face pictures on kink profiles, he said:

In the past, for a short while I worked in a high security area so I had to cut back on all my online profiles and got told off officially for my profiles. I was working on sensitive stuff, so I shouldn't leave myself susceptible to blackmail and there was concern that those photos on kink sites could lead to blackmail. I said to my superiors I'm not fussed about my profiles and who comes across them so I don't think they could be used in that way - if somebody at work came across my profile, I just thought meh, lots of people have them. I was told to take all my naked pictures down though. Now I work at somewhere else - there comes a point where the state can only control so much of your life for so long. Once I left the job it was reactivate profiles, add more spicy pictures.

This incident, while affecting Brian, did not have a lasting effect and he now has face pictures on his profiles.

Another main feature to most SSNS profiles is the 'personal' section where members can write something personal and individual to their profile. This section is

often labelled 'About me' or something similar, and is a place where one can write a summary of themselves, what they are looking for, what they are hoping to achieve from the SSNS, links to their other SSNS profiles, and related content.

There are different ways of filling this section in, particularly on kink orientated SSNS. A common way to fill in this section is to write a list of the sexual kinks an individual is interested in. For example, Dan only 'puts the important details people need to know for a kink meet.' Oliver and Rory also had lists of sexual or kink interests on their profile, with Rory saying it 'makes it easier to see if you're into the same things.' Similarly, Austin, a non-community member, had a list of sexual interests on his profile, saying, 'On my profile, I have a list of things I am into. Kinky sexual activities... You can cut to the chase then if you like the same things.' Garth, also a non-community member, said, 'I've wrote (sic) what I am into on my profile and what I was looking for. I also request people to have face pictures – clear ones though, not ones that look like they were taken in the 1960's.' Non-community participants overwhelmingly had information in their profiles that was instrumental to them securing a kink meet or other communication they desired.

However, not all participants agreed with the use of lists on a profile. John was against listing things, arguing instead 'If people are interested in me, they'll message me, and they can ask me what I'm into. But they see a mixture of different sides to my profile from the different pictures: pup play, bondage, chastity, sports gear, etc.' Similarly, Josh said, 'I prefer to find out what people are into through conversations – then you don't put people off if you don't have their kink on your profile.' Lee also preferred to chat to people to find out what mutual interests he had with others, saying, 'There is so much I am into with kink – a list would be too long and it's easier just chatting about it all.' However, Lee's online profile name was indicative of his kink interests, complicating this notion.

Rather than lists, some participants instead preferred to write more detailed narratives on their profiles. While Cameron had a list of his primary kink interests, he also wrote a paragraph about himself and what he was looking to achieve from his online kink profile. This personal information included some of his likes outside of the kink, such as anime or hiking, and some features of his personality, such as outgoing and friendly. Similarly, Grant had a long list of kink interests, the type of guy he was interested in, what he was looking for from the sites and an expansion of his sexual

kinks. Max emphasised how 'It's nice to read a long profile and get to know the person a bit more.'

Filling out personal section on profiles is interesting for several reasons. Firstly, adding information such as hobbies or personality characteristics, is reminiscent of descriptions of profiles on vanilla dating sites more generally. It could be that some community members are also using the kink sites to find potential romantic partners and therefore disclosing personality characteristics seems logical. Secondly, there is a level of investment required in filling out a personal section on a profile. As Max states above, a personal section on a profile allows others to 'get to know the person'. Presumably, individuals will want to represent themselves in a particular way and will tailor a profile to reflect this – the online profile is arguably what Goffman (1963) calls the front stage which is the first impression people get of an individual behind the profile. To present a sense of self which is coherent with what the individual wants, this will take a level of investment into the profile. However, it is unclear who they are investing for – potential kinky hook ups, other community members, potential partners are some of the possibilities. Some participants highlight all of these as reasons, while others one or none. What is clear is that community members are not using their profiles as simply as the non-community members – instrumentally for NSA kink. Instead, they have a number of investments in these sites that include community and romantic.

While these three examples are community members, two non-community members also took the time to personalise their profile more. Peter said, 'My profile's filled in with exactly what I want, what I'm looking for, what I've done kink wise.' He added, 'It's a daunting effort to describe yourself anyway, never mind reveal your deepest darkest fantasies on a profile!' Ryan described why he filled his about me section in, saying, 'If I put everything in my profile, people won't have to ask me as many questions. They can get what they want from my profile. It means the conversation can progress a little bit quicker.'

Peter's description of the 'personal' section as a daunting task may help to explain why more of the non-community members decided to simply leave this section of their profile blank – two non-community members left the personal section on their profiles blank, with five members having one or two sentences. Aiden, who created the kink SSNS to message people and learn more about kink, said, 'I only had one or

two pictures on my profile and just the basic information... I didn't bother to fill anything else in. I had conversations with people instead.' Similarly, Phil said, 'My profile has where I am from, the basic stats thing. I may have listed my interest as bondage as well, but it didn't have anything else on it.' Ethan also had limited information on his profile with only the basic stats filled in. Ethan's lack of investment in his profile seemed to reflect how he used kink sites:

I only log onto them now and again, normally when I get a notification through the app or something. Maybe a few times a week. I'm not checking it like I do my Facebook... I'm not a very kinky person.

The final aspect to most online kink SSNS, and indeed a common feature of SSNS more broadly, is the use of the 'friend' feature. Much in the same way as something like Facebook, the friend feature allows an individual to become online friends with somebody, appearing on each other's friend list for other members to see. The two profiles then become linked to the extent that an independent person can browse the friend list of one profile and then follow links to see the profiles of their friends. For some SSNS, becoming friends with somebody will also mean that their activities and interactions will appear on news feeds on home pages. If your friends upload new images, become friends with other people, advertise that they are attending kink events or post new content, then the information will be displayed on the home page. The friendship function is free on some kink SSNS, such as ClubCollared or FetLife, but is a premium feature on others, such as Recon (while one can accept friend requests, a premium membership is required to send the requests.)

Friendships and newsfeeds are the cornerstone of SNS like Facebook and Twitter, promoting the idea of online connectedness and online communities. Unsurprisingly, the ability to befriend other members was used more by the community members than the non-community members. Of the 15 community members, 12 of them had friends linked to their profiles. When asked why, Oliver said, 'Well, on Recon I have them because you see their updates on the homepage. It's also a nice way of staying connected with people.' Similarly, Rory said, 'It helps me stay connected to kink mates. Not to mention they're potentially playmates too and can connect me with other people into the same kink things as myself.' Rather than actively seeking to become friends with people online, Lee said:

People have just tended to ask me instead to be friends. When I chat with them or I have met them in person, I might get an invite. I suppose if I could afford membership fees then I would ask people... I use [kink] sites more socially, so it makes sense.

While some non-community participants discussed making friends on kink SSNS, the use of the friend tool was absent from participants' narratives. It seems to be evident that the use of the friendship tool on kink SSNS for community members is reflexive of their broader use of the kink SSNS, discussed in the next section.

### **The Functions of kink SSNS**

The main difference between community and non-community members becomes apparent when participants discussed their uses of kink SSNS. For non-community members, there was one primary motivation – to engage in kinky sex with others offline. While some non-community members discussed chatting about kink online with others, the majority of conversations were still rooted in the sexual—including erotic fantasy and sexual exploration. Community members also used kink SSNS for sexual purposes, finding individuals to meet offline, however there was also a strong narrative of using the sites for social reasons. While there were nuances among all participants in the function the kink SSNS served for them, non-community members used the sites for mostly sexual reasons, whereas community members used them for sexual *and* social reasons.

### ***Non-Community Members***

Non-community members on kink SSNS used them to find others to engage in kink with. For most, this meant speaking to other members online with the purpose of arranging offline kinky hook ups. However, some members were also content in with engaging in discussions around kink online, through role-playing or discussing kink fantasies. There were differences in how participants initiated interactions online, how they hooked up offline and the extent to which they kept in as 'no strings'. While the majority of the interactions were focused on the sexual, a minority highlighted how a social aspect to the sites could occasionally appear.

At the sexual end of the scale, Austin only used kink SSNS to engage in sexual hook ups. He said:

You can cut to the chase on [kink SSNS]. People are to the point and you can sift through the profiles to find somebody you like... I use the sites for kinky sex. I quite like having conversations with people on there, but I normally only speak to people if there will be a chance that I'll meet up with them – it's not an adult friend finder... I don't let people move from Recon to the more social side of my life as I don't want them to know about my life.

Austin's use of kink SSNS was instrumental and singular – he logged onto the sites to look for individuals to engage in kinky sex with. Furthermore, he did not want anything else from his sexual encounters and was happy to leave them as NSA. His description of what he used the sites for also echoed what appeared on his online profiles – a lack of face pictures or personal information. He added, 'I mainly just go on the sites when I'm bored or when I'm horny – I'm too busy for anything more.' For Austin, kink SSNS were not an important part of his daily routine.

Austin wasn't the only non-community participant who used kink SSNS sites for solely sexual reasons. Ethan said:

I signed up to Recon thinking I wouldn't use it, but then a guy started messaging me and we hooked up. Now I just use Recon to meet up for more kinky sex... Every now and again I'll log onto Recon to see if people in the local area want to hook up and do something... Recon is my go to route for kinky sex though.

While Ethan signed up to kink SSNS as a way of exploring his kink interests, it quickly became a tool he used to find kinky sex when he wanted it, despite not being very often. When asked to expand on his interactions on kink SSNS, Ethan said:

I only log on now and again and talk to people I intend to meet for kinky sex. I'm not after internet chat. The conversation is 'What are you into, same as me, let's meet up.' It's very functional really. I don't make friends with people online and I don't want long chats with them either.

Details about the individuals he wants to meet up with, such as their hobbies or personality, are unimportant for Ethan – he only wants casual kinky sex.

Other non-community participants described how they were using kink SSNS for sexual reasons, but were happy to have a level of 'strings attached'. By this, participants would speak to potential offline hook ups for a while, before meeting up

with them. Conversations were still based around the sexual, discussing kinks further or planning potential scenes. For example, Aiden said:

I try to go with the flow... Sometimes it'll be literally to have a wank over the pictures. You can use Recon a lot without having to pay for it. That will be browsing profiles. Sometimes, I'll use it to arrange a hook up, usually somebody I have been talking to for a while.

While Austin and Ethan were happier with quicker time frames, Aiden liked to have more conversation before meeting. However, he added, 'I have had people just come round to mine on the same day for quick fun, but nothing too kinky, normally the lighter kinks which are less risky.' Aiden was still engaging in the NSA meetings, normally from visitors to the local area or when circumstances which normally restricted potential hook ups were absent, such as being able to accommodate. Changing the rules and engaging in NSA kink was a common narrative for non-community participants when they were visiting another geographical area, or when speaking to somebody else who was visiting the area – the fleetingness of the visits being described as the main reason for changing the rules.

Other non-community members described narratives similar to Aiden's – primarily wanting to meet with other members for kinky sex, but being prepared to engage in some sexual conversations beforehand. For example, Ant said:

I normally use them to chat to people and arrange hook ups. I do use them these days to speak to... I do want people to talk about new gear and bounce ideas off from each other, but mostly I want to actually *do* the kink.

When asked why he used kink SSNS, Brian said:

I wanted to see if there were other guys into the kinky stuff I wanted to do in my local area. I've been on for at least 10 years now. When I first joined it in the early days, it was purely to hook up. I've met a few guys from the sites – I still use it to hook up with new people and occasionally chat with older hook ups about new leather gear and stuff.

When asked if he framed the individuals he spoke with online as friends, Brian said:

I wouldn't say they're my friends on the sites. I've made fuck buddies who I occasionally talk to. They're not involved in my life – they're kink friends. I'd message them about interesting porn clips I've seen, but I wouldn't message

them about having a bad day. But normally I tend to think 'I want to meet that person for sex', I do kink with them, then I move on.

The concept of 'kink friends' was described by several other non-community participants, and indeed some community members. These friends held an interesting place within the lives of the participants. For non-community members, these friends normally remained online, and the topic of conversations revolved around kink – kink fantasies, discussions of new gear or kink toys or interesting kink meets were all examples of conversation topics with kink friends. For example, Noah described the conversations he had with kink friends, saying, 'I certainly use Recon to talk to others about 'this would be hot' or discuss images you have seen, and explaining what you found hot about it to each other.' While Noah acknowledged that the majority of conversations he had with kink friends online were orientated around kink, general conversations also occurred:

I'm on [kink SSNS] every day. I had a conversation about bathroom tiles this morning. It's about staying in touch with kinky people, keeping the kink part of me alive when I don't have the time to do it in real life. The majority of conversations are around rubber stuff, gear or if either of us have hooked up, but we will just chat general shit as well... I wouldn't message them if something happened in my life or I needed somebody to depend on, but I'd have boring chats with them.

Noah explained how kink was something that could be discussed in a social setting, without the need or pressure to actually engage in kink. Here, kink is a shared interest which serves as the basis of these interactions. To use an alternative analogy, individuals with a mutual interest in football may discuss the game, the current league tables and different teams, but may never attend the same football match together or play against each other. Furthermore, they may have conversations with each other about things other than football. However, unlike football, because of the stigmatisation of kink, participants' conversations may be forced into online communications as there may be no readily available people in real life.

In discussing his kink friends, Noah still emphasised a level of distance, saying, 'They're very much separate, the fetish people... My fetish friends know some of the stuff in my daily life, but not the reverse. I wouldn't have it the other way around.'

While he tried to maintain a level of distance between his kink friends and his non-kink friends, Noah described a time when there was a significant overlap:

There have been a few moments of cross over between the fetish or kink people and my normal friends. I had a surprise party - my idea of hell is everybody I know in the same place together. I would have them very much separate friendship circles, but there has been cross overs. Post degree, I had a party and there were some people from the kink world there because they had come into contact with my housemates. I assume they didn't know the nature of how I knew those people. At that crossover party, everything was treated very separate and they didn't bring up the kink stuff. It's mutual respect. The part was fine. They were similarly discreet people. I know another friend had an event and her family and the Manchester Rubber Men were also there - that's out there to me.

Noah described his kink friends as coming from the kink world – to Noah, it was a separate part of his life and identity (as discussed in Chapter 6).

Brian and Noah were not the only non-community members to discuss kink friends; Peter described how his interactions with members online were different to his interactions with non-kinky friends, saying 'I mainly use the sites not to keep in touch with previous play partners and arrange more things. Not social, but to keep in touch.' Phil also described similar relationships with kink friends online, saying:

I know of a few kinky guys who I haven't met up with, but it's nice to keep in touch with them. We can be candid and talk about stuff, mainly kink stuff. I normally met them from Recon. I may have intended to meet up with them and spoke to them initially with that intention, but it gets more friendly. We chat about kink, but it's one of the numerous things we discuss.

The main purpose of kink friends for Phil was that he could engage with discussions about kink, but also recognised that general conversations occurred as well. He repeated, 'It's nice to be candid about this stuff.' While kink was not an integral part of Phil's life, he expressed a level of comfort in having a place to talk about kink with others should he want to.

Garth used the kink SSNS initially to engage in conversations with members about common sexual interests, saying:

I use Recon primarily now to chat with people and explore kink more still. I like to chat with guys who are into the same stuff as me and also look at photos of things I'm interested in. It's sort of like a secondary porn sort – online role play with guys about what you would want to do to each other. Porn gets a bit boring or similar – I use the sites to wank off to.

However, he also went on to discuss kink friends, saying, 'Two people have moved into my normal friendship networks though where you can have normal conversations with them... There is still a degree of separation to them though – they're still kink friends.'

The overall use of the kink SSNS for non-community members was to engage in kinky sex offline, with some members engaging in online role play or discussions of their kinks with other members which served as tools for masturbation. Several members discussed making friends through kink sites, but these were positioned as 'kink friends' to which the conversations would mostly be related to kink. Furthermore, relationships with kink friends still maintained a level of distance from non-kink lives for these members.

### ***Community Members***

While the focus for non-community members was rooted within the sexual, the community members described a dual functionality for kink SSNS. All community members recognised a sexual reasoning behind why they used kink SSNS and used the sites in similar ways to non-community participants. For example, Luis said, 'I use different websites for different things. I mainly use [kink SSNS] to find sex and kink.' He added, 'I was initially using sites for social purposes, to explore and talk more about kink, but it has become a lot more sexual these days.' As Luis' knowledge about his kink interests increased, he changed what he used kink SSNS for. Similarly, Grant described a sexual motivation for using kink SSNS: when asked why he used the sites, he said, 'Primarily for kinky sex meets. You do strike up some friendships and chat to people. I'm on them every day. I hook up from [kink SSNS] maybe 2 or 3 times a month.' Oliver also expressed a sexual interest in using kink SSNS:

I mostly have Recon to see who's out there in a sex compatibility sense. If there's someone I really want to meet up with, I would talk with them and see where it goes. I arrange kinky hook ups on the sites. I also use them to talk to

people, existing in a sense that people can see you and message you. I'm on Recon every day.

Other participants expressed using kink SSNS for similar purposes: communicating with others about kinky sex either in a role play sense or with the intention of meeting up with the person.

However, for the community participants there was also another purpose to using kink SSNS which mirrored the community aspect of subcultural participation. As mentioned above, some non-community members began to form kink friends online through the kink SSNS – these friendships were more common among community members. For example, when asked about his friendship networks, Luis said, 'I have school friends, university friends and kink friends... I can see them all starting to mix more in the future, it's only a matter of time before I become more open about kink.' Similarly, Oliver said:

In my gay circles, there is always going to be kinky and non-kinky friends. Well, I say that, but I do have a couple of straight friends who are kinky. You might have lots of kinky friends, but only talk about kink about 20% of the time, and you just talk about normal stuff, work, things you're interested in, it's not necessarily always kink. It's more things you have in common.

While conversations with kink friends for non-community members were primarily orientated around kink, for Oliver it was only a part of the common interests he had with these people. John also recognised that he separated his friends into kinky and non-kinky, saying:

I have friends on the apps and websites. People I speak to regularly, people I meet socially outside of the apps. I wouldn't say they were hook up friends, maybe something else, as we have had social interactions in more public settings. Their friendships were forged through the kinky sites though... The difference between friends and kinky friends is based on the interactions: if there is sexual interaction, then they're more kinky friends.

Community members explained that they had kink friends similar to non-community members, but the conversations and interactions seemed to be more social based.

For some community members, while there was a still a focus on the sites serving social and sexual needs, the social function of kink SSNS were more strongly emphasised. When asked what he uses the sites for, Rory said:

I guess a presence in the kink community. I don't use it for hook ups as I'm not that kind of person. I've got kink friends. If I am getting to know somebody or they're kinky, it's easier for them to read what I'm into on my profile. I use it more for social reasons... I may go on the kink websites and chat to people I already know, instead of chatting to them on Facebook or whatever.

While Rory says he does not use kink SSNS for 'hook ups', further discussion post interview revealed that he had arranged kink meets through Recon and engaged in online 'role-play like' discussions - Rory could not engage in the NSA sex described above. However, Rory believed that the social played a bigger role than the sexual in how he used the online. When asked about the social features of the kink sites, Robert said:

The sites are very important to me, particularly when it's half term and I'm not in uni. There's a mixture of social *and* sexual, but I chat to people every day on them and only meet up a few times a month. There are good friends I've made online. There is now a circle of people I speak to and know online.

Robert acknowledged that the sites served a social and a sexual purpose, yet his narrative framed the social side of the sites as more important to him. Max had a similar perspective of the sites, saying, 'I think it's both social and sexual for me. It's nice to make friends, I know not everybody on the website sees it that way.' He jokingly adds, 'The only thing I don't want from the kink sites yet is a relationship!'

For Lee, the social was the main foundation to explore the sexual; he said, 'I use sites like Recon to talk to people, it's social. Maybe meet up with them to explore kinks that aren't already in my vast back catalogue. But it's normally social meets with the potential to maybe play.' Post interview, I explained the concept of community and non-community members to Lee – he commented that it 'made sense', clearly being able to see the difference between the two groups. He added, 'Community members seem to want to chat more and make friends on the sites, but the ones who aren't part of a community or that will mainly just use the sites for sex.'

Eric used the kink SSNS in similar ways to how SNS sites like Facebook or Twitter are used. He said, 'My work colleagues and my friends are all kinky and I met them either through work, the scene or the websites. I use ClubCollared to talk to people, mostly to see what people are up to.'

Some community members noticed a difference over time in how they used the sites. For example, John started off on the sites to explore his sexual kinks. However, as he immersed himself in the SSNS more and began talking to other members more, his use of the sites changed:

Initially I used the sites to arrange meets, talk to people, get ideas.... Now I tend mostly to chat to people. I have a boyfriend as well so that changed things a bit. But I still check it once a day to chat to people... There are people I speak to regularly; people I meet socially outside of the sites.

He went onto discuss the social role of the kink SSNS further:

I go to a lot of different kink events. When I meet up with somebody, I'd be more likely to ask them for their online profile, maybe a kinky Twitter, to chat with them. If you go to an event, you would probably turn Recon on and you can chat to them via that platform after the event.

For John, the kink sites offer a visible presence within the kink online communities and allow him to keep in contact with kink friends. However, he still uses them in a sexual context as well, meeting up for kink under specific circumstances and engaging in online sexual discussions.

Lee was similar to John in how his use of the kink SSNS changed over time. While initially, Lee used the sites to explore his kinks and engage in online fantasy role-play, locating his use of the sites in the sexual, his use of the kink sites now has changed:

I guess at the start and earlier on it was more about exploring kinky sex and fetishes more. Arranging kink and talking with other guys online about my fetishes. Over time though it's changed – now I use it for all of the above. I still use it for sexual stuff still, because sex is really really nice, but I also talk to people more on it. The social stuff is becoming more emphasised now.

For Cameron, the kink SSNS also changed over time, however it had the opposite effect to John and Lee. Cameron initially joined kink SSNS for social reasons, however, a sexual motivation started to become apparent over time:

I went online first to look for friends and also have a place to showcase my artistic drawings. I joined as somebody who wasn't even sexual at that point... I made friends online and then then we started having sex after a space of time – having sex with my friends became okay mentally for me... Since moving

abroad, I use the sites to keep in touch with friends back home, but I also use them to look for kinky sex too now I have more of an understanding of what I like and what I am after. I'm still looking to just meet new people for new experiences too, sexual or non-sexual.

The non-community members used SSNS for primarily sexual reasons, while the community members used the SSNS for both sexual and social reasons. This is one of the main differences between the two groups of participants.

### **Negotiating Risk in Contemporary Kink Subcultures**

Given the emphasis on the role of SSC for kink subcultures as means of negotiating risk discussed in chapter two, it is important to understand how it is understood by participants who are contemporary kink practitioners; asking participants how they engage with SSC and navigate risk may provide such an insight. As highlighted earlier, kink can be framed as being on a spectrum of lighter forms of kink to extreme kink activities (e.g. Downing 2007). Indeed, given the risk involved in some kink activities, it is important that practitioners have discussions prior to playing about which activities are allowed, how they can be done safely, and where limits rest (see chapter three). As Richardson et al. (2013: 147) highlight, 'It is perhaps this highly conscious mode of sexual engagement that truly sets BDSMers apart from 'ordinary' sexual actors. In its focus on agreement and contractual play, BDSM offers new ways of understanding the body and its pleasures.' Agreement of activities prior to playing navigates these extremes of kink and issues of consent and safety. However, concerningly, there is no research which investigates the role of SSC for non-community members; given the risks which can be associated with kink activities, it is important to understand how non-community members engage in kink in relation to safety and consent.

All participants were asked if they had heard of SSC, and if so, to expand on what knowledge they had of it. Of the 30 participants, seven knew of SSC or of the terms 'safe, sane and consensual' grouped together. Interestingly, despite the apparent prominence of SSC within kink subcultures discussed in chapter two, of these seven, two were community members and five were non-community members. No participants described the political history associated with SSC, with only one participant acknowledging alternatives to SSC, such as RACK, but could not expand on what the term meant.

Of those who described some knowledge of SSC, when asked to expand, most participants struggled. For example, Connor, a community member, said, 'I've heard of SSC, but I don't know what it means.' Garth, a non-community member, echoed this saying, 'I haven't heard of SSC... I've heard of safe, sane and consensual, but I don't really know what it is.' Others were able to work out what SSC referred to from the terms used to create the acronym. For example, Ethan said, 'I haven't heard of SSC, but I know what the terms mean individually.' Similarly, Steven said, 'I've heard of it, but I'm not sure where. It's pretty self-explanatory though about what it means.'

A lack of understanding and knowledge around SSC and its political history could be framed as problematic and potentially dangerous given the risks associated with some kink activities. However, through further discussions, it became apparent that while not following the mantra of SSC explicitly, participants were following their own set of rules which related to SSC; they discussed concerns about safety when meeting people; safety in relation to activities; how they negotiate consent; and the importance of discussions of limits before engaging in kink. To find out more about how participants negotiated risk, I reframed questions and, instead of focusing on SSC, focused on the rules they implemented when arranging meeting with others for kink.

When asked about the rules implemented when meeting with others for kink, a variety of responses were given. Rather than being solely concerned with the dangers inherent in certain kinky acts, the issues of privacy and safety online were raised. Both community and non-community members were keen to highlight an awareness of the potential dangers of speaking with others online on kink SSNS, and indeed SSNS in general (Mowlabocus 2010). For example, participants would ask to see a face picture, often at the start of the conversation. Justin, a non-community member, said, 'I always ask to see a face picture to see if I am [attracted to] the guy.' Similarly, Ethan said, 'I always want to see a face picture when meeting people.' Often face pictures were requested prior to a conversation, with more pictures requested further into the conversation or prior to meeting up. John, a community member, said, 'It's nice to see the face of the person you're speaking too.' Ant added some more stipulations to his requests of face pictures from others, saying:

I check they're real by asking them to write the date on a piece of paper and take a picture, or draw a picture on a piece of paper with the date, to work out they are the person who they say they are.

Concerns around confirming an online identity are important to participants, but are reflexive of engagement with SSNS rather than related to kink—perhaps as a result of the preponderance of media discussion about revenge pornography, privacy and sexual cultures (Hasinoff, 2012). Situating kink within online spaces invites multiple other risks, some of which are related to meeting up with ‘strangers’ online, while others are related to the potential stigma of creating an online profile (discussed XXXX).

Despite other risks associated with online platforms, participants recognised the potential for the online platform to act as a space to address and negotiate other risks. Once a confirmation of online identity had been established, participants explicitly discussed safety and consent, focusing on rules and limits. For some participants, these conversations occurred over a short space of time and were very schematic and well-rehearsed. For example, Steven, a non-community member, said, ‘I normally have an idea of what I say to people, to help speed up the idea of if we’d meet or not.’ Similarly, Austin said, ‘If I am going to meet up with somebody, I would rather it be quicker than later. I get to the point and normally find out quickly if they’re into the same stuff as me.’ However, while Austin preferred to keep the conversations short, he had rules of what he would or would not do:

I wouldn't let somebody tie me up, but that's a sexual preference. You'd also have to be insane to let somebody tie you up in your own house - but that's common sense. I don't do drunk sex either, I definitely don't do drunk kink. I avoid drugs as well. I don't hook up with people from a night out either.

In a follow up discussion about how he negotiated conversations online, Austin described how he tended to engage in some of the lighter forms of kink when meeting somebody for the first time, and so felt comfortable with shorter conversations. The application of ‘common sense’ was echoed by other participants who were happy to meet up with others without much prior conversation. As Phil said, ‘You get a feel about a guy... I don’t have rules, but I would like to feel safe, so I don’t meet somewhere too dark or lonely... It’s so easy to be sensible, why wouldn’t you be?’

For others the conversations occurred over a longer period of time. For example, Matt said, ‘Before meeting up with others for kink, I normally have a lot of chat beforehand.’ Similarly, Rory, a community member, said, ‘I don’t play with anyone until I’ve spoken to them for a while online, to make sure they’re not crazy, going to

abuse me, rob me, or harm me in any way.’ Some participants went into detail about what they discussed in these conversations online prior to meeting. Ethan said, ‘Generally speaking, before meeting you discuss interest and limits. I discuss safe words of increasing seriousness – green, yellow and red. It helps you go into the role more.’ Echoing this, Grant said, ‘I talk about using safe words, discussing limits, asking how far the other person can be pushed, etc.’ He added:

Kink meets can be safer than random hook ups – the conversations are longer, you tend to know more about a person because you chat to them for longer periods of time. It seems the conversations online are more in depth about understanding you. You get to chat about ‘What are you into?’ and ‘Why are you into it?’

Most participants discussed beforehand their kink interests and how far they would go with these activities (i.e. their limits). This was not meant to be a script of what would occur, but a discussion of what could occur or what they would like to do. As Brian said:

I would much rather people openly communicate [beforehand]. I may have said some of the things I would like to do. Like, it would be hot if you wore this or done this, so I may set out some expectations of what they could or should do, but I don’t really do planning scenes – it feels too contrived for me.

Ant emphasised the importance of having in-depth discussions beforehand: People who do kink and understand it properly know it's the case because they know the levels of trust involved, people have limits and there are some things you don't do. You never break limits. I think people who are in it understand it don't see it in the same way as those outside of it. It isn't sinister. That's why you always have something like a safe word. You don't want it all planned or a full discussion because that will take away the thrill of it. Actually, sometimes you have to do things you don't want to do. What I say to people is this is the safe word - if it's used, that's the end of the session so that people are a bit more serious. That's with me as either the dominant or submissive.

Chatting before playing was also of vital importance to Phil who said:

Safe sex is really important to me. I always discuss limits with people beforehand. Limits are really important in terms of keeping safe, and I think

there are people who aren't aware of the risks involved in kink, so limits help to keep it safe and fun. It's important for me to leave with a smile on my face. Discussions of safety and consent play a vital role for kink; it is these discussions which separate kink from abuse (Downing 2007). These discussions are of paramount importance for activities which can be described as more extreme kink activities, such as those which play on the borders of consciousness, involve blood, encroach into everyday life or which play with the boundaries consent (Newmahr 2011). The dangerousness of some of these activities cannot be underestimated. As such, it is important to understand how individuals engaged in these activities negotiate the physical and ethical risk of these activities. However, the participants in this study did not indicate an interest in these activities. A lack of interest in extreme kinks may explain why some participants were content with shorter discussions beforehand around consent. I come back to this point later on in the thesis.

While not using the phrase, consent clearly plays a vital role for participants. There were no differences in how community and non-community members negotiated risk, with participants engaging in discussions on kink SSNS before meeting up with others for kink. They navigate consent and the risks associated with kink activities by having in-depth discussions in online spaces. This is contrary to how ethical concerns related to kink were navigated by Old Guard communities – clearly the online is playing a pivotal role for allowing a negotiation of risk.

### **Chapter Summary**

There has been a significant lack of research that has explored the role of socio-sexual networking sites for individuals who identify as kinky. Indeed, important contributions to understanding of kinky subcultures do not examine the role of SSNS or the significant role of the internet more broadly (Newmahr, 2011; Weiss, 2012). How these sites are used are particularly important given how they help individuals to explore their kink desires and identities, and facilitate meetings and events in 'offline' subcultures. This chapter has examined how SSNS are used by participants, why they are on them and what a typical kink SSNS profile looks like—distinguishing between community and non-community members to examine how SSNS intersect with sexual subculture participation.

This Chapter expands on the discussions made in Chapter 6 and 7, demonstrating the central importance of SSNS to young kinky gay and bisexual men's lives. All participants interviewed had a profile on a gay-orientated SSNS, such as Grindr or Hornet. While this can be explained in how participants were recruited, these sites were discussed by participants as being popular among gay and kinky subcultures more generally—and the importance of SSNS among the community members, who do not need them to make connections, supports this point. Given the changing nature of gay spaces (Ghaziani, 2014) and the increasing role the online plays for sexual communities (Döring, 2009), it is logical to see why there has been significant uptake of gay SSNS. Sexual minorities are using technology to transverse geographical boundaries and communicate in different ways; there is less need on a physical space where sexual minorities can interact due to the ease of online interactions and the ability to target search for others (e.g. kinky and gay).

Grindr was the most common gay SSNS used by participants due to its initial popularity as one of the first hook up apps. While the application operates within non-kink spaces, participants highlighted that it was not unusual to see kink overtly displayed on profiles or subtly discussed in conversations. While participants would use these sites for social and sexual reasons, there were also key differences in use: primarily, non-community members did not disclose their kinky interests on vanilla SSNS while community members did, either subtly or explicitly.

For non-community participants, there was less emphasis on using gay SSNS for kinky purposes. While kink was a recurring topic of conversation on gay SSNS, for most, kink was not described as the forefront of motivations to be on these sites. However, a minority of non-community participants were more forward in discussing kink on the vanilla SSNS and it was a primary reason for using the site. While being more forward, techniques for reputational management were normally employed, such as having two profiles on these sites or not having a visible face picture on a profile.

Community members use of gay SSNS was more kink orientated. Given the guidelines which appear on many of these sites, there were limitations of how kinky/sexually explicit one can be in these vanilla spaces. For example, some participants would use profile pictures of themselves in kink-related gear, but sometimes these would be removed for violating the guidelines of the site. Signposting their interest in kink in other ways, the community participants would use keywords on

their profile (e.g. rough; feet; pup), use particular emojis, or select from a list a particular interest they had (on Grindr, the list is known as 'tribe' and 'leather' is the one understood as relating to kink). These techniques are reminiscent of older gay subcultures, such as through the use of the hanky code or Polari. As such, we see that various of the techniques used in real life are used in the virtual sphere as ways to communicate kinky sexual desires in subcultural ways.

Participants had developed several strategies to open discussion about kink on gay SSNS. A common strategy to engage in conversations about kink on gay SSNS in more subtle ways for community and non-community participants was to ask questions similar to 'What are you into?' This question was described as a signal to those with knowledge of the kink subculture. Another way in which kink was brought up was through announcing oneself as 'open minded.' Again, this was implying a level of non-vanilla interest. The norms of discussing kink in vanilla spaces were learned through interactions with others, or through explicitly breaking the norms. Importantly, this highlights awareness that kink is a minority interest and that it may open the kinky person to a level of stigma—it supports the notion that kink is still, to an extent, stigmatized in broader society.

Kinky SSNS were used by the majority of participants, with Recon being the most popular for both community and non-community members. There was recognition of Recon as a kinky space with membership on the site being enough evidence to signify oneself as kinky. While all community members had a kinky SSNS profile, a minority of non-community members did not join kinky SSNS as their desire for kink was not strong enough, they found kink from other places or they believed that the kinky SSNS were too kinky for them.

While the kinky sites were described as serving both social and sexual needs, there was difference in the emphasis placed on each of these aspects by participants. Interestingly, non-community members emphasised the sexual aspects of the kinky SSNS and normally had a profile on the sites to find others to engage in kink with mirroring how non-kinky SSNS have been used (Mowlabocus, 2010). A minority of them only engaged in conversations with others if there was a potential outcome for meeting offline for kink. However, most non-community members who had a profile engaged in some discussions, normally orientated around kink.

There was an introduction of the concept of 'kink friends' for a minority of non-community members. These were friendships which were normally forged on kink SSNS and were orientated around kink. While they were labelled as friends, there was a degree of separation between kink friends and non-kink friends. For example, not all kink friends were added on participants' general social networking sites, participants may never have met up with their kink friends or only see them at events, and communications normally remain in the online. Some described these kink friends as very surface level – they would engage in general conversations with them or about their shared interest of kink, but not much else.

These types of friendships were more common among community members and were described as typical types of friendships within the kink community. However, the friendships also traversed from the online to the offline at kink events. Furthermore, the friendships were described as more meaningful for the community participants. While a degree of separation between kink and non-kink friends was present for some community members, the boundaries were less rigid and for others were non-existent.

This chapter has also developed understanding of what kinky profiles look like. While there has been some research which has highlighted what gay SSNS profiles look like (Mowlabocus, 2010), there is little research which explores what a kinky SSSN profile looks like, for either community or non-community profiles. An archetype of a kinky profile was absent, with differences within and between participants. However, the basic information was displayed on all profiles (such as age, height, weight, ethnicity) as it was normally a pre-requisite to creating a profile on a kink SSNS.

The use of profile pictures was a contentious issue for all participants. Some community and non-community participants did not have any face pictures on their profile which could make them identifiable. Reasons given for this were primarily about employment, but fear of being discovered as kinky or wanting to control the disclosure of their identity were also used as explanations. Face pictures were normally sent privately if a conversation occurred or if there was an intention to meet somebody. Alternatives to face pictures were often used, with examples including a torso picture or a picture of kinky gear to signal some of the individuals' kink interests.

Participants who had a face picture on their profile discussed why they had them. Face pictures were described as promoting conversations between members

and allowed members to see if they were attracted to each other. Face pictures were shown on the presumption that individuals who signed up to the sites would have an interest in kink themselves and there was less need for identity management. However, management techniques were also employed by those who had face pictures – face pictures were not normally included alongside nudity or while the participant was wearing kink gear.

Finally, the ‘about me’ sections on the profiles where participants added personal information to their profile differed between all members. While some invested time into their profile and wrote long paragraphs about themselves and what they were using the site for, others left this part of their profile blank and instead divulged this information through private messages. A common use of this space was to advertise an individual’s kink interests, normally in a list form.

In summary, this chapter has advanced understandings of the role of SSNS and kinky SSNS in the lives of my participants. Addressing a neglected issue in research on kink, I have demonstrated the importance of both types of SSNS to participants’ social and sexual lives. Importantly, both gay SSNS and kinky gay SSNS had social and sexual components, and the balance of these factors were different for community and non-community members. The use of SSNS by community members also suggests that the sexual subcultures they are a part of have incorporated these SSNS in ways similar in broader youth culture. By providing a discussion of what kinky SSNS look like, I have also drawn out some of the ways participants negotiate their kink identities online and deal with issues of stigma and privacy.

# Chapter 9: Conclusion

## Introduction

The way kinky subcultures operate in society has dramatically changed over the past 30 years. The introduction of the internet, more accepting attitudes in society related to sexuality, and changes in how subcultures form and grow have all influenced how individuals with kink interests form communities. Veteran members of kink subcultures are adapting and using new technologies to interact with others. Novice members and those curious about kink are using the same technologies to create new narratives of exploration which are markedly different to those who grew up in the Old Guard – there are new routes into kink subcultures that do not rely on knowing an already existing member who can vouch for you (c.f. Rubin, 1984). As such, new kink subcultures are proliferating, both online and offline.

There were three primary foci at the start of this research. The first aim was to provide an updated narrative of the experiences of kinky gay and bisexual men who engage in kinky subcultures within the UK. The last in-depth study of kink communities in the UK was published by Chaline in 2010, with more recent publications being smaller scale in focus or number of participants (e.g. Barker and Langdrige, 2007). This aim was addressed in Chapter 6.

Second, this study sought to examine the influence of the internet on participants' kinky practices. There is recognition that the internet has transformed many aspects of sexual life, and the increasing popularity of what I have called socio-sexual networking sites has not been addressed in kink research. This aim was addressed in Chapter 8.

Finally, there has been a significant lack of recognition for individuals who engage in kink interests but do not interact with the broader kink subculture or kink communities; research has focused instead on the spectacular subcultures and the members who immerse themselves within them. Therefore, the final focus was to explore the narratives and experiences of gay and bisexual men who engage in kink activities but do not participate in kink communities. This aim was addressed across the three results chapters.

While these three aims are broad in scope, I do not attempt to provide a complete analysis of the kink subcultures across the UK. Recognizing the limits of qualitative data, I seek instead to untangle some of the complexities involved and provide an updated insight on these issues.

To address my three aims, I employed qualitative research methods and conducted interviews with 15 community members and 15 non-community members. Focussing on the role of interactions in shaping the meanings we ascribe to things, I also conducted participant observations at various kink events. This allows a contextualisation of the participants' narratives about their engagement with kink subculture. This chapter begins by summarising the main findings of this study, highlighting the key original contributions to knowledge. It then explores further avenues of fruitful research.

## **Main findings**

### ***A recognition of non-community kink practitioners***

Academic research on kink subcultures has tended to focus on individuals who identify as kinky and are part of a kink communities (e.g. Rubin, 1984, Weinberg, 2006). For these individuals, kink is a defining feature of their identity and they engage in kink as a lifestyle or as a form of serious leisure (Williams, 2009). As such, they invest significant social and financial resources into kink. Furthermore, an individual part of a kink community will often revolve their social life around kink – their friendship networks will consist of other kink practitioners and leisure time will be orientated around kink based events. For community members, kink plays an integral role in their life narratives, particularly their social lives. A major gap in existing literature was that it only focussed on community members. This study addresses the previous call to expand the research on gay kink practitioners (Chaline, 2008) and explore those who do not strongly identify as kinky or are part of kink communities.

A substantive contribution from this thesis is to identify and engage with a new type of kink practitioner whom I have labelled a non-community member. As described in Chapter 6, these individuals engage in kinky activities but may not necessarily strongly identify as kinky or interact with kink social worlds. While an individual who engages in non-vanilla sexual practices and who is distinctly separate from communities has been highlighted and alluded to (e.g. Rye and Meaney, 2007), there is an absence of narratives for, using my terminology, non-community members.

Such a lack of recognition or research on non-community members in the literature is surprising given the call for kink to be understood as a form of leisure (e.g. Williams and Prior, 2015). The leisure literature acknowledges dabblers who engage in

particular leisure pursuits *casually* without significant investment (Stebbins, 1997). Yet, this leisure framing has not been successfully applied to kink, possibly because of the focus on individuals who immerse themselves in the kink subculture.

Understanding individuals who dabble in kink practices rather than view it as a lifestyle is particularly important given recent popular discourses around kink (Illouz, 2014; Martin, 2013), where kink has become more visible in ostensibly vanilla settings, such as the cinema or LGBT+ Pride events. Indeed, as Steinmetz and Maginn (2015, p. 120) highlight, kink has ‘been brought ‘out of the dungeons’ and into the flare of the ‘vanilla landscape.’ There are risks associated with kink, related to the activities and issues of consent; therefore, it is necessary to acknowledge these non-community members to begin to understand how they engage in kink practices.

Addressing missing voices from research is always important, and significantly, research in sexuality studies has highlighted real problems in skewed samples that rely on *community members* (McCormack, 2014; Savin-Williams, 2005). Discussing research on Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual people, McCormack (2014) argues that if they are recruited from LGB groups or counselling services, narratives of harm and distress will likely be privileged over more positive stories. For my topic of kink cultures, relying on participants from within the community will likely privilege narratives where kink is a central part of a person’s identity. My research suggests that hearing the narratives of non-community members will similarly result in more diversity in the ways kink is experienced in people’s lives as I address now.

### ***Describing Non-Community Members***

When comparing community and non-community members, there are two key differences which help distinguish between the two groups. While these are broken down and discussed across the three results chapters, I will identify and summarise them here as: 1) levels of identification with kink; and 2) conceptions of kink.

Firstly, and as briefly outlined above, community and non-community members have different levels of identification with kink or as kinky, and kink holds different levels of importance in their lives. While kink featured as a primary part of community members’ identities, it was not central for almost all non-community members. Indeed, a minority of non-community members did not identify as kinky, publicly or privately, and instead preferred other terms to describe their sexual interests, such as

dirty or filthy – the word kink was understood to be loaded and bring connotations which did not reflect their broader interests.

For the non-community members who did identify as kinky, this identification was not framed as a master narrative (Plummer, 1995). Instead, these participants described kink as an activity they engaged in occasionally and deemed unimportant for most non-community members. Indeed, a weak kink identity reflected the frequency with which most non-community participants participated in kink practices. Only one non-community member strongly self-identified as kinky – this identification was also reflexive of his financial investment in kink and through his dismissiveness of vanilla sex as boring.

Secondly, conceptualisations of kink were framed differently between community and non-community members. Most non-community members understood kink as a solely *sexual* activity with orgasm as the primary motivation for engagement. In this way, kink was viewed as an extension of vanilla sex – kink may occur in sexual encounters, but was not *needed* and was not the *purpose* of the encounter. This is markedly different when compared with the literature on kink practitioners (Newamhr, 2011; Weiss, 2011) and the community members in this study. Only one non-community participant countered this narrative and wanted his sexual encounters to always feature kink.

All community members recognised the sexual aspects of kink, but provided more complex notions of the relationship between kink and sex. A minority were similar to the non-community members and viewed kink as an extension to vanilla sex with a focus on orgasm. However, the majority argued that the context and setting stipulated whether kink was sexual or not. For example, if kink was performed in a bedroom then it was often framed as sexual. Yet, if it was performed in a kink club, it was understood as more erotic than overtly sexual and would even be described as playful.

Interestingly, the community participants did not argue that kink was non-sexual; instead they downplayed the importance of kink in their lives, highlighting the importance of the social instead. The community members were emphasizing the social components perhaps in the face of societal expectations of the sexual; the non-community members did not do this because their kink activities were less integrated in their social lives, and so they did not face this potential stigma in the same way. This

highlights the interactional and contextual nature of how kink should be understood—its meanings are social and cultural, and are dependent upon the ways in which people’s experiences are understood (Richardson et al., 2013). This highlights the value of speaking to participants—their understandings of kink were not just from consumption of popular culture or dominant discourses, but of the way they had experienced kink in their lives.

As expected based on previous literature, the community members also framed kink as a social activity and highlighted how kink featured heavily in their friendship networks and was a key influence in their consumptions. To expand, it was not uncommon for leisure time to revolve around kink based activities or events and community members invested more financial resources into their kink interests.

Discussions of the social aspects of kink were mostly absent from non-community members’ interviews. A minority did not see any social aspect to kink and actively sought to keep kink a separate part of their lives. Some participants introduced the notion of kink friends - friendships which orientated around kink interests and were seen as not as legitimate as their ‘normal’ friendships. As such, these friendships normally remained in the online and a level of distance was maintained between the participants and their kink friends.

### **Providing contemporary research into UK kink subcultures**

There has been a dearth of qualitative academic literature on the narratives and experiences of gay and bisexual men in the UK who engage in kink activities. There have been attempts to address this gap, with the notable examples being Chaline (2008) and Langdrige and Barker (2007). However, Charline’s research is now quite dated, given the increased uptake of the internet for sexual subcultures (Döring, 2013) and focuses on a specific type of kink practitioner – the community member discussed above. The edited work of Langdrige and Barker (2007) addresses multiple aspects of kink, such as socio-legal perspectives, psychiatric benefits and theoretical positioning, but it does not contain rich narratives of kink communities in the UK. Furthermore, the empirical research cited in the edited text from the UK consists solely of Chaline. Thus, in contrast to recent research from North America on kink communities (Newmahr, 2011; Weiss, 2011), there is still a severe lack of qualitative perspectives of gay and bisexual kink practitioners in the UK.

This study has addressed this gap through conducting interviews with gay and bisexual kink practitioners across the UK. Those researched immersed themselves within the kink subculture to varying degrees and described belonging to multiple kink communities, such as a kink community orientated around a city or a specific kink activity (e.g. pup play). As stated above, this research does not attempt to provide a comprehensive analysis of the kink subculture in the UK – indeed, such an analysis would be incredibly complex given the recognition of the non-community member and the increasing popularity of kink.

While over 10 years old, a comment by Weiss (2006. p. 111) is still particularly salient to kink subcultures today: '[kink has] begun to saturate popular culture, appearing more often and in more contexts, it has also come to signify some more mainstream and more conventional, some less exceptional extreme, or unusual.' Kink subcultures are moving from the niche and the underground to become more accessible than ever, particularly with the role of the internet. Therefore, it is important to address the question of whether kink can still be understood as a subculture. From my analysis, I believe that subculture is still a useful concept to understand kink as a phenomenon in the UK. They also mirror other contemporary subcultures which feature fluid boundaries, are less demarcated by social characteristics such as class and instead by shared interests and allow members to feel a sense of belonging (Thornton, 1996; Williams, 2011).

I expand on this point by using the work of Sisson (2007) who argues that society has a fully formed kink sexual (sub)culture. She outlines six functions of BDSM subcultures which I will briefly describe and apply to the current study.

First, she highlights that kink subcultures have demarcated boundaries and safe spaces. In my research, this is clear through discussions with participants about the role of kink online spaces, discussed further below, and through attending offline kink events. Indeed, the kink event spaces in the events I attended often occurred in venues that were normally standard venues—pubs and clubs. As such, they were not fully subcultural—yet on the nights they occurred, they were for participants only—so they were not fully part of the broader culture.

Secondly, the subcultural nature of kink for participants is evident in their narratives of how their kink stories began and the importance of these stories for participants. This applies more accurately to community members who immerse

themselves into kink subcultures. Some community members had vast understandings around the history of kink, including discussions of terminologies, how kink is framed from a legal perspective, and the importance of rules within the kink subculture.

Thirdly, expanding on the notion of rules in these subcultures, Sisson identifies how kinks subcultures establish codes of behaviour. Previous research has stressed the importance of rules within kink subcultures, particularly related to the use of safe, sane and consensual. Participants in this study were also concerned with rules, however there was less focus on the use of safe, sane and consensual, despite it being the cornerstone of the kink community (discussed in the literature review). Instead, participants described learning the rules of kink through interactions with others when engaging in kink or at events, or through online interactions. Interestingly, the introduction of the online brings a new set of codes of behaviour regarding privacy – again, one learns these through interactions.

Fourth and fifth is the creation of a system of shared meanings and the availability of a means of social reproduction. Kink practitioners learn from others how to 'do kink' with a focus on kink identities, symbols and roles (Weinberg, 1987) – this is normally taught from older generations or those who are already immersed in kink through workshops, mentoring or kink literature (Newmahr, 2011; Thompson, 1991). These points are equally complicated and reinforced through the current study. Most, if not all, participants in my study did not attend workshops or classes on how to do kink. While some were aware they were available to them and even knew people who ran them, they did not feel them necessary in order to practice kink. Instead, as I discussed in Chapter 6, kink was framed as an activity learned through interactions with a friend or a partner, or through engaging with the online, through pornography or SSNS. Indeed, online spaces allowed opportunities for questions to be asked and answered. Therefore, while participants were learning how to do kink, both sexually and socially, previously unacknowledged methods were being used.

The final point is the function of a kink subculture to generate a kink sexual identity (Sisson, 2007). Mentioned above and discussed in Chapter 6, the concept of a kink identity is highly complex. While community members acknowledged a kink identity, non-community members did not in the same way. Rather than this observation discrediting kink as a subculture, I believe it reinforces the notion. More recent understandings of subcultures allow for subcultural membership to be fluid and

have alternative meanings (Williams, 2011) – the same structural changes are also occurring in kink communities.

### **Online kink spaces**

In exploring gay kinky subcultures in the UK, the significance of the internet was highlighted by all participants. While participants were recruited using online platforms, there were still strong narratives regarding the role of the internet at different stages of a kinky practitioner's life. In Chapter 7, the internet was shown as a principle route into kink for community and non-community participants. It also served as a tool for exploration, allowing the participants to explore kink through pornography, to navigate the wide variety of information about kink written by practitioners, and explore kink through interacting with others on kink SSNS.

This study updates understandings of how individuals discover kink and navigate their routes into the kink subculture. Furthermore, it adds to the discourse around the vital impact of the internet for sexual minorities (Döring, 2013) allowing for a safe exploration of their sexual identities and desires. Indeed, negative impacts of the internet were absent from participant narratives, instead being praised for helping participants with their explorations.

Exploring participants' responses showed that online spaces were particularly significant for facilitating meetings offline socially and sexually, interacting with others online for a variety of reasons, and (for community members) maintaining a presence within the broader kink community. Thus, for kinky individuals, these SSNS become important resources, often incorporated into daily routines through the use of mobile apps and a constant connectedness to the internet. In conceptualising these sites, I label them as kink socio-sexual networking sites or kink SSNS. Research has analysed the use of vanilla SSNS for the gay and bisexual community (e.g. Mowlabocus, 2010), but until now there has been a lack of research which explores kink SSNS and how they are used by the members.

Research into kink SSNS is in its infancy, and rich qualitative understandings of user experiences is currently limited to the website FetLife (Fay et al., 2015; McCabe, 2015) and while that research offers important and interesting insights, studies so far have failed to engage with site members' own explanations of their interests in online communities, particularly when incorporating community and non-community

members. As long as research does not engage with participants' experiences, the narrative of kink SSNS remains far from complete.

The internet has enabled individuals with kink interests to access related spaces to which they would not normally have access. Indeed, there are less boundaries when trying to access online kink spaces compared with offline spaces. As Wilkinson (2011, p. 499) writes "there are clubs where you have to pay, need the right dress code, must be above a certain age and need transport to get to cities where they are often located". The discussion of Rubin (1984) in the literature review adds that you need to possess a certain type of kink identity to access kink spaces.

I argue that online kink spaces, particularly kink SSNS, allow for a transgression of these boundaries and opens up kink spaces to almost any interested individual. One simply needs access to the internet and a search engine, using keywords to come across these sites. As Steinmetz and Maginn (2015) highlight, this is especially beneficial for allowing the introduction of *newbies* into these spaces. While this is arguably beneficial in allowing individuals with kink interests to explore their desires, it raises interesting questions about the subcultural nature of these online spaces (King 2007), if an influx of new members on kink SSNS has an effect on existing members and how a user can differentiate themselves from the newbies. While this was explored in Chapter 8 in user profiles, I feel there is more to be learned.

### **Theorizing kink as a form of leisure sex**

Leisure frameworks have been successfully applied to kink activities (Newmahr, 2010; Williams, 2009; Williams et al., 2016). The major benefit of a leisure framework is its utility in moving discourses away from ones of pathology to ones where risk and pleasure are discussed in balance (Attwood and Smith, 2013). It also allows for recognition of kink as either sexually or non-sexually motivated. In the recent ethnographies of kink communities in the US (Newmahr, 2011; Weiss, 2011), there was a particular emphasis on understanding kink as a form of serious leisure. However, the introduction of non-community members, or dabblers, complicates the notion of understanding kink as a form of serious leisure. As such, this study adds to the research which understands kink as a form of leisure.

Rather than the personal identification, perseverance, investment and the career benefits associated with serious leisure pursuits (Newmahr, 2010), the majority

of the non-community members in my study identified more with the casual leisure characteristics of an “immediately, intrinsically rewarding, relatively short-lived pleasurable activity requiring little or no special training to enjoy it” (Stebbins, 1997, p. 18). Kink as a form of casual leisure has been suggested by Prior and Williams (2015) who described how words such as *play* and *fun* were used frequently by the participants in their research. The same terms were also used by participants in this study in their descriptions of kink, by both community and non-community members. My research helps explain why kink can be seen as both casual and serious leisure: it depends on the level of involvement of the individual, and one component of this will be how engaged an individual is in kink subcultures.

However, the notion of kink as a form of casual or serious leisure is further complicated with individuals who see themselves as on the boundary of community or non-community – their relationship and understandings of kink changes over time, adapts with new interactions and is influenced with the introduction of new kink activities. While there is a clear consistency that kink should be understood as a leisure pursuit, there are difficulties in placing kink on a dichotomy of either casual or serious leisure. Instead, this study supports the argument for moving beyond such debates and to view kink as a form of *leisure sex* (Attwood and Smith, 2013). Such a framing allows for alternative discourses related to kink which eschew notions of pathology and stigma and favours discourses around pleasure.

### **Areas for Future Research**

In addition to discussing the original contribution to knowledge of my doctoral thesis, I also want to highlight areas for future study that can be identified from the arguments I have developed.

### ***Understanding Non-Community Members***

One of the main aims of this research was to enhance our knowledge about the non-community member, or dabbler, in relation to kink. While this individual is well established in leisure studies more generally (e.g. Stebbins, 1997), their voice is absent from kink discourses. Providing narratives for individuals who engage in kink practices but do not belong to kink communities opens up the research that can be done with

these individuals, rather than unfairly dismissing them as not ‘real SMers’ (cf. Weiss 2011) and withholding kinky sexual citizenship.

My research has shown that kink dabblers are an important group to study further, and that research into kink subcultures should also include those at the edge of these networks. Given that I have also found real differences between the community and non-community members, future research into kink would benefit from hearing the narratives from *all* of these kink practitioners. Indeed, this raises interesting questions around the research previously conducted into the kink subculture – how representative was such research if it only focused on individuals who engage in kink as a lifestyle? While not dismissing previous research, recognizing the value it has in understanding particular kink subcultural contexts, it is important to acknowledge that non-community members were left out of the discourses.

Yet there are only 15 non-community members in this study. Rather than providing a substantial analysis into non-community members, I intended to address Chaline’s (2008) call for research to reach more men who engage in kink activities that have been absent from academic discourses. A broader picture has been painted on how gay and bisexual men are engaging in kink in the UK, however there is much more still left to paint. This can be done by conducting more research on non-community members. This will include sociological research that builds on the themes identified in this study, as well as cultural studies investigations into the extent non-community perspectives are present in cultural discourses and representations of kink more broadly (see Illouz, 2014).

### ***Utilising SSNS as Method and Topic***

This study has displayed the utility of SSNS when conducting future research for several reasons. The SSNS played a significant role in being able to easily recruit participants who engage with kink. The majority of the research into kink subcultures discussed in the literature review highlighted the difficulty of recruiting participants, with the need for gatekeepers to allow access to offline kink communities or private messaging lists. However, this was not the case for my research – to gain access to the online kink subculture, one needs to create an online account and interact with members.

While this method is indeed easier, it also carries with it ethical concerns. Primarily, how does a researcher negotiate these online spaces which the members deem to be their *personal* kinky spaces? Given my established role on the SSNS prior to the research and my position within the kink community with other members able to vouch for me and my research, I was able to negotiate these issues, maintaining the position of a researcher and an active member (as discussed in the methods). While future research should maximise the opportunity of participant recruitment on SSNS, both kinky and non-kinky, there needs to be an awareness of the ethics involved.

Yet future research should not just use SSNS as a *method*, it should also engage with SSNS as a *subject* for kink and sexualities studies more generally. The SSNS, particularly the kink sites, warrant their own research to explore the complex social compositions which occur in these online spaces. This research touched on some of the interesting phenomena but was unable to fully explore the observations made. For example, there are complex notions of how the online interactions relate to the offline practices. Clearly there is sophisticated work on cultural studies on these issues already (e.g. Baym, 2015; Mowlabocus, 2010; Waskul, 2003), yet future work could examine more closely the concept of online versus offline identities particularly for kink practitioners and the extent to which individuals are able to manage these. Similarly, given that many kink dabblers were using 'vanilla' SSNS, research on Grindr and similar apps could more openly engage with the diversity of sexual desires that are present, if not always visible, therein.

### ***The Role of the Online***

A common theme throughout the results, but particularly in Chapter 7 and 8, is the importance of the online, particularly pornography, for kink practitioners and its varied functionality. While narratives around pornography are changing and moving toward a paradigm that seeks to understand pornography in terms of the context of its actors, its user groups and the associated social hierarchies (Attwood, 2011; Mulholland, 2015; McKee 2012), there is a dearth of research in understanding the multifaceted role pornography plays for kink practitioners. Alternative discourses could be explored in relation to understanding pornography and how it is used by kink practitioners (Smith, 2017).

Another observation made by this study in relation to the online and offline was how several participants delayed their offline kinky sexual encounters through engaging with and exploring online materials. Further research would be needed to explore how common this technique is, both for kinky and non-kinky sexual practices. It may be that new sexual scripts are being created for early sexual experiences which promote the idea of exploring sexuality online first, before exploring it in person. The emerging discipline of porn studies could investigate these issues further.

### ***Negotiating Consent on SSNS***

Research on kink emphasises the importance of consent within kink subcultures, with it normally being understood as part of a broader framework which makes the distinction between consensual kink and non-consensual abuse, such as through SSC or RACK (e.g. Williams et al. 2014; Downing, 2007). However, it is interesting that the language of safe, sane and consensual and the norms and processes developed by communities in earlier research were not present in the same way here. Most participants did not know about SSC and the related political discussions occurring in relation to framing kink activities; participants that had heard of SSC or alternatives were unable to accurately articulate what it was about.

Despite this, participants negotiated consent and safety in their own ways. When asked about how they thought about safety, consent or limits in relation to kink (rather than asking them about SSC), participants described rules they had created when interacting with people and how they would organise a kink scene. Contrary to earlier research, participants are finding new ways of exploring consent, particularly through using SSNS. Individuals can have in-depth discussions before meeting up with somebody about 'what they are into', but also what they are not into and where the boundaries of their interests are. These conversations mirror similar conversations where individuals interact in online spaces for offline sexual encounters, discussing what they want to do sexually (Mowlabocus 2010).

Yet, discussions of consent and safety were not central to participants' narratives around kink and were only uncovered through asking specific questions. This is in sharp contrast to the narratives of the research described in the literature review. This may partly be related to the characteristics of the participants and their kink interests; no participant indicated an interest in some of the more extreme or

risky kink activities, such as edge play. It may be that people who engage in those activities have a more explicit engagement with issues of consent.

Further research could investigate how consent is negotiated in online spaces, particularly on SSNS. While I can assert from conversations with my participants that online discussions beforehand will play a role, I can only hypothesise the significance of these conversations and how they translate to offline behaviours. Furthermore, little is known about how the level of investment in an online profile and the reputations of members on SSNS interact with conversations of consent. Clearly, consent is being negotiated in online spaces, but more insights are needed into how.

Similarly, given the breadth of my study, and that the focus was not on negotiating consent specifically, it is possible that more sustained questioning would have revealed more concerns about risk and consent, or deeper strategies about how these are negotiated. Given my interest in this study about identities, the online and subcultural communities, it is appropriate that I did not cover this in greater detail, but future research that is more focussed on risk and consent could be a worth endeavour.

### ***Subcultural Ethnographic Research***

This study has expanded on the limited research which has explored how gay and bisexual male kink subcultures are comprised in UK settings. However, an in-depth ethnography which explores the British kink subculture is still needed, particular in understanding heterosexual, pansexual and queer kink subcultures. While such research has been conducted in US settings (Newmahr 2011; Weiss 2011), similar studies which see the researcher becoming part of the kink community and conducting a lived ethnography in UK settings are still missing. In doing so, international comparisons could begin to be researched, looking for similarities and differences within Western cultures. While also including ethnographic and visual data, my research has focussed on the narratives of participants: future research could use a range of concepts and tools from cultural studies and beyond to understand the complexity of kinky subcultures (Maginn and Steinmetz, 2014).

### **Summary**

This thesis has drawn upon a blend of subcultural theories, leisure concepts and sexualities studies to develop an understanding of how young gay and bisexual men

with interests in kink understand their identities and discuss their experiences of kink. By examining how participants think about kink in their lives, discussing their routes into kink and exploring the role of SSNS in these activities, I have made an original contribution to knowledge about kink and sexuality. By examining the similarities and differences between community and non-community members, I have highlighted both the value of sexual subculture research in understanding kink sexuality while simultaneously documenting a limited focus on community members. While there will always have been non-community kink practitioners in one form or other, the internet and SSNS have meant that it has never been easier to facilitate kink interactions without being part of a kink community. Kink research in the future, both within cultural studies and beyond, needs to recognize that both forms of engagement in kink exist, and that their experiences of kink are fundamentally different.

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## Appendix 1: Table of Participants

Participant	Age	Sexuality	Location	Class	Ethnicity
Brian	35	Gay	North-West	Middle	Asian
John	22	Gay	Midlands	Middle	White
Phil	21	Gay	Midlands	Middle	White
Lee	25	Gay	North-East	Working	White
Rory	25	Gay	North-West	Working	White
Matt	23	Gay	North-East	Undefined	White
Luis	26	Gay	North-East	Working	Asian
Trevor	31	Gay	North-West	Working	White
Steven	31	Gay	North-West	Lower-Middle	White
Ant	24	Gay	South-East	Middle	White
Robert	21	Gay	North-East	Working	Black
Roy	29	Gay	North-East	Middle	White
Justin	21	Gay	Midlands	Middle	White
Eric	25	Bisexual	North-West	Working	White
Grant	32	Gay	North-West	Middle	White
Max	24	Bisexual	North-East	Working	White
Garth	27	Gay	North West	Working	White
Ryan	26	Gay	North-West	Working	White
Josh	23	Gay	North-West	Working	White
Peter	29	Gay	Midlands	Middle	White
Noah	35	Gay	North-West	Middle	White
Ethan	23	Gay	Midlands	Lower-Middle	White
Oliver	25	Gay	North-West	Middle	White
Aiden	29	Gay	Midlands	Working	White
Dan	29	Gay	South-East	Middle	White
Gabe	29	Mostly Gay	North-East	Middle	White
Austin	28	Gay	North-West	Working	White
Connor	62	Gay	South-east	Working	White
Cameron	24	Gay	South-East	Middle	White
Scott	25	Gay	North-West	Middle	White

## Appendix 2: Glossary of Terms

This list of terms is adapted from Chaline (2008).

**BDSM:** 'bondage, discipline, sadism and masochism' is one among several possible readings of this abbreviation; another mentioned by respondents was 'bondage domination, slave and master'.

**CBT:** 'cock and ball torture', the erotic stimulation of penis and testicles through a variety of means, some of which include the use of equipment. While the term 'torture' suggests that pain is at the centre of these practices, this is not necessarily the case.

**Dog training/ Pup Play:** erotic role-play in which the bottom or sub takes the role of a dog. The role-play can be supported by the use of equipment such as collar and lead, hand mitts, dog head masks and dog bowls.

**Dungeon:** area or room set aside and equipped for kink interactions.

**Gag:** item of equipment made of leather, cloth or rubber used in kink interactions.

**Harness:** item made up of leather or rubber straps (sometimes with metal studs and chains) worn over the torso.

**Hood:** item made of leather, rubber or cloth used to obscure the face of participants in an interaction.

**Jockstrap:** item of sporting equipment used in gay SM interactions and worn at gay SM venues. It can be made of cloth, leather or rubber.

**Master/slave role-play:** role-play in which the partners take the roles of master and slave.

**Safe word:** A mutually agreed word that the bottom can use to stop the interaction. In a role-play interaction, the bottom might be using words such as 'no' and 'stop', hence safe words are usually terms that would not occur in the chosen scenario. A common safe word is 'red'.

**Scene:** In common usage, this has three meanings. (a) the totality of a given social world, e. g., the 'gay scene', the 'SM scene', (b) a gay SM interaction involving two or more persons and (c) a single practice within an interaction (e. g., CP or bondage).

**SM:** (also S/M, S&M) Although commonly read as sadism and masochism or sadomasochism, the compound can have alternative readings, including slave and master, sensuous magic and sex magic.

**WS:** 'water sports', the erotic use of urine.