

**BDSM as Performance: The Experience of Empowerment in the ‘Submissive’ Role**

Vanessa Cinquino

Department of Sociology, University of Ottawa

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Supervisor: Professor Willow Scobie

Second Reader: Professor Kathleen Rodgers

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## Submissive Performance & Empowerment

**ABSTRACT:** *Performing sexual identities that go beyond westernized heteronormative ideals encourage creative perspectives on how sexuality, pleasure and desire can be achieved. Within the sexual subculture of BDSM, submissive performativity is part of a co-dependent dynamic between the dominant and the submissive. This leads me to question how such submissive performances can elicit feelings of empowerment for the submissive. I argue that submissive performativity feels empowering because it creates contrived power exchanges that are a meaningful part of a submissive's subjective reality. I use Goffman's dramaturgical perspective on social interactions to analyze the importance of performing these sexual roles, along with discussing Foucault's ideas on sadomasochism and manufactured power-dynamics crucial to the dominant/submissive exchange.*

### **Introduction**

Western discourses on sexuality are arguably still influenced by heteronormative ideals and pressures to conform to specific gender relations (Butler, 2005; Hammers, 2014; Miller, 2018; Rubin, 2011b); which may have debilitating effects on our sexual identity and feelings of authenticity. Being able to freely express one's sexual identity has been shown to positively effect and improve mental well-being (Rathus et al., 2016; Turley, 2016), especially for those individuals conveying their sexuality outside of 'normative' sexual boundaries (Hoff & Sprott, 2009). The norms found within a culture dictate what is socially accepted, immoral, and taboo. Through social and cultural expectations, there are added implications that sexual identity should be expressed a certain way.

For the majority of western culture, the expected social norm is for men to initiate romantic and sexual endeavours (Ferguson et al., 1984, p. 111; Gerhard, 1996; MacKinnon, 1986; Scott, 2015) and women to be the recipients of such male advances; thereby making women's social position in constant relation to men's (Atwood, 2007, p. 235). The ongoing discourse of such social practices imply that men take control of what they desire while women assume a passive role in their social exchanges with men. According to Judith Butler (1993a), labelling has the ability to "produce that which it names" (p. 17); therefore, if men are expected to seek out women they desire, then men are perceived as the assertive and 'powerful' sex,

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normalizing heterocentric cultural ideals. As individuals enforce these norms by performing what is expected of them, this limits the sexual freedoms and expressions of those individuals falling outside heteronormative confines; thus, making the predominantly accepted and ‘normalized’ sexual identity heterosexuality (Jones, 2018; Rubin, 2011b). Subversive sexual identities, in comparison to ‘normative’ heterocentric sexual practices, enable other outside voices to be heard. And a sexual subculture that not only disrupts western sexual norms and mores, but empowers its practitioners, is BDSM.

The subculture of BDSM is described as a “group of behaviours and lifestyle practices that include a variety of fetishes, role-playing, and other non-mainstream activities” (Stockwell et al., 2010, p. 309). Kink<sup>1</sup> relates to novel, or non-conventional, ways of exploring one’s sexuality beyond normative practices of sexual expression (“Kinkly,” 2020). As a result, there are empowering and liberating qualities associated with establishing healthy, distinctive sexual relationships (Airaksinen, 2018; Hammers, 2014; Hopkins, 1994; Turley, 2016), even if they fall external to the confines of social expectations and heteronormative behaviours. The intricate relationship between empowerment and performing BDSM is where I situate my research.

BDSM is a subversive sexual lifestyle that often incorporates the coexistence of pleasure and pain in order to create a safe space for partners to explore arousing avenues in seemingly non-conventional ways. The term subversive is used to symbolize BDSM’s position as being external to the common western ideals of sexual expression; more specifically, to heteronormative and hegemonic ideologies of sexual behaviour. BDSM is an acronym with many meanings, but primarily stands for bondage, discipline, domination, submission, and

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<sup>1</sup> Kink is often a synonym used to refer to BDSM; therefore, kink will be used interchangeably with BDSM throughout this paper.

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sadomasochism (Simula, 2015; Tripodi, 2017). I wish to clarify that sadomasochism is part of the umbrella term of BDSM, but delves deeper into the power-exchanges between two or more practitioners and involves physical as well as psychological manipulation of power and control—performed in a consensual manner.

Within this paper, readers will find that there is a large portion of its initial sections designated to introductions, definitions, and examples explaining BDSM. This is purposefully done as the appropriate description and context are given to the readers with the intention that they may better understand my arguments and ideas for this research project.

### *BDSM: A Brief History*

French philosopher and nobleman, Donatien Alphonse François de Sade— better known as the Marquis de Sade, wrote avant-garde novels on sexual exploration, experimentation and ‘vice’, and is often acknowledged with being one of the earlier contributors to literary depictions of erotica, pornography and sadism (McMorran, 2015). Publishing in 18th century France, de Sade wrote numerous novels around the relationship of sexuality and violence, a lot of which were working elements setting the stage for contemporary sadomasochism (McMorran, 2015).

Throughout the centuries, participants have banded together to formulate their own sense of community where ‘tabooed’ or ‘non-normative’ sexual activities can be practiced without fear of judgement. A feeling of togetherness is significant to the BDSM community because it symbolizes a bond that bridges people’s diverse sexual identities and preferences within a safe, positive space (Moore, 2016; Simula, 2015), free of discrimination or stigmatization (Rubin,

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2011a). Moreover, as kinksters<sup>2</sup> push the boundaries of normative sexual behaviours and arousal, their struggle for inclusivity within mainstream western culture continues to be felt today.

Sadomasochism pushes the physical and psychological limits of its practitioners. And kink is less about what is being done with whom and more about how pleasure can be achieved in different ways. BDSM activity manipulates bodily sensations making for an embodied physical and mental experience that forges strong connections amongst partners (Turley, 2016). BDSM activity helps transcend the belief that pleasure is physical by deriving new ways of arousal through mental states of sexual anticipation and awareness (Airaksinen, 2018). In some instances, BDSM is akin to classical conditioning (Hammers, 2014) whereby sights and smells become associated with pleasurable experiences. For example, if a partner has a whipping crop used on them and it elicits a pleasurable response, with enough time, the mere sight of a whip may just be enough for them to become aroused. The *anticipation* of the object being used heightens the sexual experience. Partners have the ability to control states of arousal for themselves and their partner. These conditioned responses may be used to help develop a partner's sexual awareness and identity (Hammers, 2014; Turley, 2016). As BDSM continues to be a site for controversy, in response to the shared feelings of exclusion kink members have maintained their own lexicon, set of sexual roles, attire, and rules (i.e. pillars) by which to abide.

### *BDSM: Subcultural Guidelines*

Performing BDSM consists of a lot of planning, trusting and communicating with one's partner. As part of the mental preparatory work, there is also the physical work involved in actually engaging with a partner, managing equipment, ensuring safety, and so on. The mental

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<sup>2</sup> A kinkster refers to a BDSM practitioner

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and physical requirements of kink can make it quite taxing on the performers. In order to help practitioners ease into their roles, there is a general consensus in the kink community regarding acceptable BDSM behaviour (Bauer, 2008; Carlström, 2019; Langdridge, et al., 2007). The three rules, or pillars, that guide BDSM practitioners are: safety, 'sanity', and consent (Langdridge, et al., 2007; Moore, 2016; Nielsen, 2010).

Safety refers to keeping you and your partner safe during the kinky encounter. This means allocating safe words/gestures that will alert your partner that they need to stop or modify their actions. Safety is also considered in the aftermath of the sexual experience. In some instances, a certain level of aftercare is required since BDSM can be physically and psychologically draining for all participants involved. Therefore, an appropriate level of attention needs to be focused on each partner before, during and after BDSM activity.

'Sanity', in this context, refers to being of sound mind. Sobriety is one key example of showcasing a 'sane' mind. Kinksters should have the mental awareness to compose themselves in reasonably sound and secure ways, for their own safety and their partner's. These two rules help ensure that consent, the final pillar, is well communicated and received throughout such activity.

Consent can be offered verbally and through body language. *Rolling* consent is an important derivative as it ensures there is an ongoing communicative process throughout the entire sexual experience, thus not limiting consent as a one-time acceptance/rejection of all acts or actions to come. Keepers (1991) argues that consent is of the utmost importance seeing as it is the foundation for any sexual exchange, kinky or vanilla<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Vanilla sex refers to non-BDSM forms of sexual activity

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### Key Terms

BDSM is a sexual subculture because of the constructed guidelines and responsibilities practitioners are expected to abide by when performing any kink activity. I use the term *performative*, and its accompanied derivatives, to mean the act of playing a BDSM role. Here, a set of key roles and terms will be introduced in order for readers to familiarize themselves with basic kink lexicon and the main topics of my research.

With regards to BDSM *roles*, a dominant individual (or *dom*) is a person that actively takes control in a sexual relationship, kink scene or activity (Kinktionary, n.d.). By comparison, the submissive (or *sub*) is someone who consensually relinquishes the power and control over to their dominant partner in a sexual relationship, kink scene or experience (Kinktionary, n.d.). The shortened terms, dom and sub, will be used interchangeably with their formal titles— dominant and submissive— throughout this paper. The term *D/s* is also used to mean domination and submission and is a literal way to showcase the dominant’s position over their submissive by the use of upper- and lower-case letters. The *D/s* dynamic often exemplifies elements which are classified as sadomasochism. Although there are more synonyms identifying dominants and submissives, few instil as much controversy as the labels: *master* and *slave*.

The use of the term *slave* describes a specific type of sub by which demonstrations of sexual obedience to one’s *master* are made. The master/slave dichotomy is used when *D/s* relationships are based on performing tasks, or acts of servitude, while the master exerts their power by hindering the agency and free will of their slave (“Kinkly,” 2020.; Kinktionary, n.d.). As western history is entrenched in colonialism, the terminology used in BDSM functions as a distortion of past historical and racial systems of oppression. Essentially, these racialized power

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exchanges are about “finding innovative new modes of accessing pleasure” (Cruz, 2016, p. 72), while still acknowledging that racial identity does not merely go away when engaging in master/slave performativity (Rubin, 2011a, p. 133-4). However, there is need for extra care and sensitivity when engaging with interracial D/s. The essence of kink is to satisfy sexual desire by pushing the boundaries of normative sexual expectations in non-conventional ways while maintaining the knowledge that social identifiers, such as race and gender, do not cease to exist when performing domination and submission (Rubin, 2011a, p. 133-4).

Interracial kink can easily become a complex system of negotiations for practitioners, especially individuals of colour, as there are multiple issues to address in addition to the exchanges of power that take place. Future studies of BDSM that focus on interracial dynamics would add important insights to the literature. Although the BDSM community does make use of controversial labels, it still suffers from social misconceptions and misrepresentations in mainstream culture which hinder people’s ability to understand kink on a deeper, meaningful level.

### *Misrepresentations of BDSM in Porn*

Technology has enabled the widespread knowledge of BDSM practices and has furthered its visibility in everyday society (Tomazos et al., 2017, p. 32). With popular kink sites, such as Fetlife and Fetopia<sup>4</sup> boasting worldwide member numbers in the millions, kinky social media sites have facilitated the spread of BDSM knowledge into everyday conversations on sexuality, consent, and empowerment (Airaksinen, 2018; Carlström, 2019; Hammers, 2014; Langdridge & Butt, 2005; Langdridge et al., 2007; Tomazos et al., 2017; Turley, 2016). Although the

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<sup>4</sup> Fetlife and Fetopia are social media sites, similar to Facebook, but focus on those in the BDSM community.

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popularity of BDSM has definitely increased within the last decade, this does not mean that there has been a shift in ideas on its acceptability in our society (Scott, 2015). There are still misconceptions put forth by influential industries, such as the porn industry, that give misinformed depictions and spread fallacies on the nature of domination and submission. Mainstream heterosexual pornography is a multibillion-dollar industry reinforcing problematic notions that BDSM is all about pain, power, and domination.

The porn industry is notorious for portraying women as objects, and mistreating its fellow performers (Farr, 2018; Weisman, 2016; Woods, 2012). Much of heterosexual pornography (i.e. mainstream porn) depicts violence against women and is marketed to a predominantly male audience (Dworkin, 1993; Farr, 2018; MacKinnon, 1982; MacKinnon, 1986; Rich, 1980; Tuohy, 2015). And pornography that includes BDSM depictions, rarely makes use of pre-screening disclaimers notifying its audience that such actions are being consented to and are thereby performed fantasies (Farr, 2018; Tuohy, 2015). In a highly competitive market, porn producers find new ways to attract paying users to their websites; and one way of doing so is by increasing the intensity and frequency of violent depictions (Farr, 2018; Tuohy, 2015; Woods, 2012) and categorizing it as BDSM or hardcore porn. By increasing the volume and intensity of violence in mainstream porn, the lines between responsible BDSM and violent porn become blurred. Furthermore, this creates an even more skewed and misrepresented view of BDSM subculture.

Andrea Dworkin (1993) states that “[porn] happens to women, it happens in real life” (p. 18). Dworkin (1993) further argues that the dehumanizing effect in porn works to desensitize consumers when witnessing these types of violent acts (p. 18). Others argue that porn is merely fantasy and should not be taken seriously. However, there is cause for concern when this fantasy is met with a growing demand for violent, home-made and amateur pornography (Farr, 2018).

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Consequently, demands are marketed towards producing more violent and sadistic porn made by amateur ‘porn actors’ (Farr, 2018). And there is a notable problem when these amateur actors do not have significant experience in responsible D/s exchanges. Amateur BDSM porn emits the dangerous and irresponsible message that domination and submission can be attempted by anyone at any given moment. Millions of porn consumers absorbing videos mislabelled as ‘kink’ are, at worst, trying it in their own lives after conditioned to believe it is just about inflicting pain and physical domination or, at best, confused as to what D/s relations are truly about.

Responsible and clear examples of BDSM in porn are rarely exposed to viewers on mainstream sites, like Pornhub (Fight the New Drug, 2019b), furthering the misinformation about domination and submission.

### Misconceptions from the ‘Fifty Shades’ Franchise

In more recent examples of BDSM entering mainstream culture, the *Fifty Shades of Grey* novel “has become the bestselling book in British history,” outselling the Highway Code and *The DaVinci Code* (Topping, 2012, para. 1), and holds the record for being the fastest selling paperback (Tomazos et al., 2017, p. 31). The popularity of the *Fifty Shades* franchise is viewed as problematic from within the kink community, as its depictions of dominant and submissive relations have been criticized for being misinformed, in addition to poorly representing its practitioners (Scott, 2015; Stevens, 2014; Tripodi, 2017).

The character of Christian Grey is treated as a deviant for being the sadistic dominant trying to entice a naïve woman into trying something new and exciting. And Anastasia is depicted as the soft-spoken and likeable protagonist, trying to mend Christian’s sexual dysfunction. In the end, the two characters simply fall in love and marry, further perpetuating a

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romanticized and misguided representation of dominant and submissive relationships (Jones, 2018, p. 14-5).

The *Fifty Shades* franchise maintains reader and viewer interest in presenting the ‘edgier world’ of BDSM (Jones, 2018). Although it titillates consumers by introducing risqué topics and behaviours uncommonly depicted in popular film and literature (Jones, 2018), the franchise still maintains a romanticized and idealized version of D/s relationships produced to uphold the social status quo (Jones, 2018, p. 14; Weiss, 2006). As Weiss (2006) argues, BDSM representations in film and literature often reproduce the same westernized ideologies around sexuality (p. 105). At first, such BDSM representations are framed to look risky and exciting (Weiss, 2006, p. 105) because they fall outside conventional social expectations. But, upon closer review into the content of *Fifty Shades*, it becomes clear that it still upholds mainstream sexual perspectives of what is normalized and what remains othered (Rubin, 2011b; Weiss, 2006). As Rubin (2011b) and Weiss (2006) point out, common western understandings of sexuality are framed by a dichotomy that places heterosexuality at the ‘normalized’ end of the spectrum, while homosexuality is *othered*. The label of normal sexuality “is seen as heterosexual, monogamous, romantic, private, [and] married...” (Weiss, 2006, p. 105) while non-normative labels and behaviours lie external to such beliefs. Jones (2018) points out that this is exactly how the characters in *Fifty Shades* are portrayed as their lives mimic the expected life trajectory of western cultural norms (Jones, 2018).

Many individuals believe that BDSM can be violent, misogynistic and oppressive because of what they see and read. These depictions of D/s relations are not all examples of what responsible and healthy BDSM behaviour entails. Furthermore, with ill-informed D/s examples from porn and literature, individuals also fail to see the performative and simulated aspects that

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create the illusion of violence and oppression (Hopkins, 1994). I suggest there is a large gap in understanding when it comes to the (a) displays of power in D/s portrayals and (b) how responsible D/s performances elicit feelings of empowerment and liberation for its practitioners.

The intricate relationship of feeling empowered while performing seemingly non-conventional sexual scenes is where I situate my research. These discussions have led me to my research question: given the premise that BDSM roles are performative, what makes the submissive role feel empowering for BDSM participants? For my research, I argue that submissive performativity feels empowering because it creates contrived power exchanges that are a meaningful part of a submissive's *subjective* reality.

In order to explore this research question, I intend to perform a content analysis of online blogs which explore and critique the elements of performing submission to feel a heightened sense of empowerment and liberation. As part of my research, I rely on Goffman's dramaturgical theory as well as use ideas surrounding Foucault's discussions on power dynamics and sadomasochism.

### **Literature Review**

Researchers suggest that contemporary definitions of sexuality should include experiences of sexual arousal that go beyond physiological needs (Airaksinen, 2018; Miller, 2018; Rathus et al., 2016). Individual desire and sexual proclivities encompass a wide array of subject matter, and there have been important cultural and ideological shifts since the visibility of more sexually 'deviant' material (Tomazos et al., 2017; Tripodi, 2017) leading to increased discussions on BDSM. However, as a consequence of greater BDSM exposure within popular culture, there are more criticisms that come with the exposure (Scott, 2015; Tomazos et al.,

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2017; Tripodi, 2017). Consequently, kinksters may be negatively affected by these representations as harmful labels further stigmatize subversive sexual identities (Tomazos et al., 2017, p. 33).

### *The Stigmatization of BDSM*

According to Goffman (1963), something is categorized as a stigma if it exhibits “undesired differentness from what [society dictates]” is acceptable and ‘normal’ (p. 5). And this othering, or singling out, is a result of labelling and stereotyping (Goffman, 1959; 1963). When enough traits or characteristics are labelled unfavourably by the majority, then any one group or collective labelled as having that undesirable quality risks becoming ostracized (Goffman, 1963; Hoff & Sprott, 2009) through the process of stigmatization. Stigmatization functions on all levels as it is not limited to people, but actions, behaviours (Goffman, 1963), and especially sexually subversive identities.

Richard von Krafft-Ebing reportedly coined the terms *sadism* and *masochism*— medically pathologizing the patients displaying these sexual proclivities and for those who actively engaged with sadomasochism (Langdrige & Butt, 2005, p. 65). As a result of von Krafft-Ebing’s work, BDSM sexuality has fallen within the cultural discourse of sickness and pathology, or the moral discourse of bad and immoral (Holland & Quinn, 1987). The social costs of such stereotyping and labelling inhibits one’s comfort levels in expressing themselves as well as maintains the beliefs in place that perpetuate misgivings about sadomasochism and BDSM subculture.

Kink sexuality is a sensitive topic for individuals because stigmatization of “various forms of sexuality can cause difficulties” with mental health, sexual fulfillment, and one’s

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overall sense of belonging (Hoff & Sprott, 2009, p. 1). Consequently, the fear of being stigmatized may hinder one's willingness to disclose their BDSM identity, which may help others understand it rather than ostracize it. The fear of being labelled 'deviant' or 'other' is readily seen in the medical health profession, with patients hesitating to disclose their involvement with BDSM practice to their therapist.

### *Mental Health & BDSM Sexuality*

In the fields of psychiatry and psychology, dealing with mental health problems involving sexual identities often prove difficult to adequately treat, as Hoff and Sprott (2009) observe. Professionally addressing patients with sexual identity concerns has not reached the same level of clinical assessment and effective care as someone living with bipolar disorder, for example (Hoff & Sprott, 2009). Therefore, the mental health field needs to draw upon the academic scholarship on how to assess patients with diverse sexual identities. This schism in knowledge makes it increasingly difficult for therapy patients to divulge their BDSM sexuality to their therapist (Hoff & Sprott, 2009; Kolmes et al., 2006) and further address their sexual identity concerns. In Kolmes, Stock and Moser's (2006) study, 175 participants self-identified as kinksters. From that group, nearly one-third opted not to disclose such information in therapy. The reasons for non-disclosure were either fear of receiving judgment from their therapist or that their BDSM identity was simply unrelated to their therapy sessions (Kolmes et al., 2006). Fear of being judged for one's sexual proclivities remains a driving force to conceal such an identity.

In Hoff and Sprott's (2009) content analysis, they interviewed heterosexual individuals experimenting with and living the kink lifestyle. More specifically, the researchers sought to answer whether the disclosure of BDSM identity would alter the patient-therapist relationship. Their results allowed them to categorize five separate therapy outcomes related to patient

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disclosure. The categories formed were *termination*, *prejudice*, *neutral*, *knowledgeable/supportive*, and lastly, *non-disclosure* (Hoff & Sprott, 2009, p. 3). Hoff and Sprott (2009) note one interviewee whose therapist terminated their therapy sessions, after almost seven years of treatment, in direct relation to that patient's BDSM disclosure. This particular therapist did admit to not having any prior knowledge about BDSM and that they were unable to recommend someone else as a result (Hoff & Sprott, 2009, p. 3). That patient did state they felt abandoned due to their therapist's sudden decision to terminate the counselling relationship (Hoff & Sprott, 2009, p. 3). Concerning the rest of the participants, most of the participants experienced prejudice or neutrality coming from their therapist once they disclosed. The most common ways in which prejudice was indicated came in the form of negative verbal comments and ill-advice from their therapists (Hoff & Sprott, 2009, p. 3-4). And the patients that opted not to disclose at all expressed "concerns that the impact of disclosure would be negative" (Hoff & Sprott, 2009, p. 5). The researchers describe sexual stigmatization as the main force behind patient's calculated and narrowed topics of discussion with their therapist (Hoff & Sprott, 2009, p. 6). In these cases, stigmatization hindered the quality and quantity of help that patients received as a part of their mental-health care (Hoff & Sprott, 2009).

### *Erotic Power Exchange*

The purpose of Langdridge and Butt's (2005) article is to steer away from the medical and social perspectives of pathologizing BDSM and learn from the experiences of BDSM practitioners. Through their method of hermeneutic interpretation, the meanings and symbols assigned to the performance of BDSM are seen as a construction of one's own erotic self (Langdridge & Butt, 2005, p. 66). And one manner in which people came to construct their own

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BDSM sexual identities is through erotic power exchange (EPE) (Langdridge & Butt, 2005, p. 68).

EPE is a social negotiation concerned with balancing the wants, desires, limitations and boundaries of kink practitioners. EPE also gives kinksters an empowered sense of control when engaging with sadomasochism as the actions and behaviours of others are manipulated with a common purpose. As Bi community news (1998) attests, “[p]ower relations are defined by choice, and so the object of [BD]SM is mutual pleasure, not violence or cruelty” (para. 3) as there are no naturally *predestined* roles assigned to those with seemingly ‘more power’ (Langdridge & Butt, 2005, p. 69). The dominant figure may demonstrate that they have more, but in any responsible and consensual display of D/s representation, the submissive holds the power to end the experience, and it is the dom’s responsibility to oblige. As practitioners have explained, a key detail separating EPE from abuse is that consent is constantly communicated at all stages of the power performance (Bean, 1994; Langdridge & Butt, 2005, p. 70). Participants in Langdridge and Butt’s (2005) study expressed that labels, such as sadist and masochist, have little significance in EPE because nothing is fixed, rather there is fluidity in EPE that allows for D/s members to experiment with other roles and actions— even elements that work outside the realms of sadomasochism. The main emphasis in EPE is constructing power hierarchies that facilitate the roles and behaviours each partner desires to perform in order to express a meaningful part of themselves (Langdridge & Butt, 2005).

Langdridge and Butt’s (2005) research analyzes how EPE practitioners develop their sexual identity and give it meaning in a more nuanced way through D/s practices. Power-based performances may be enacted without the infliction of pain, so the meanings of such kink labels are internalized and made significant through each individual performing them. Psychological

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EPE is an equally arousing avenue for those engaging in power exchanges (Langdridge & Butt, 2005) because it transcends modern-day comprehensions of what sadomasochism involves.

### Performative Tropes

As power exchanges make up the core of sadomasochistic performances, characteristic tropes and behaviours have been developed to guide submissive and dominant performances. These tropes divide submissive and dominant personas into various categories based on behaviour, characteristics, fetishes, desires, and so on. According to Lords (2019) and the Fetlife glossary (Kinktionary, n.d.), there is an array of submissive roles one can embody such as the *little*, *baby* and *kitten* characters. Below is a short description of these commonly used typologies.

A *little* may play on the notion of assuming child-like behaviour. They may adjust their appearance and mannerisms so as to mimic younger individuals (Lords, 2019). They may seek attention, whine, want to be cuddled, and incorporate a displacement of power with their ‘parent’ or authority figure (Kinktionary, n.d.). *Baby* personas do share similarities with *littles* (Lords, 2019), but they may exhibit behaviour of a bratty nature, demanding to be spoiled and wanting to be nurtured (Kinktionary, n.d.). These submissive traits present to the dominant the expected behaviour from their submissive partner as well as how they themselves may react to such a submissive persona. The disposition of a *kitten* is a more primal and playful one because a submissive kitten reacts in an instinctive way (“Kitten Play 101”, 2018). The performance is based on an *owner/pet* relationship. The sub kitten acts like a feline to attract their owner’s attention while the owner may ‘train’ their kitten to respect the rules of the home (“Kitten Play 101”, 2018).

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These submissive typologies guide the performance through the use of appropriate signs, behaviours, and mannerisms (Lords, 2019). These characteristics are basic guides and leave room for the sub performer to implement their own meaning as they create a sub persona they are comfortable embodying (Sarah, 2018).

### *Diversity in BDSM*

An ongoing problem with the way BDSM is visually represented, is related to the over-used depictions of white practitioners (Bauer, 2018; Cruz, 2015; Rubin, 2011a; Turley, 2016). The racial disparity in BDSM porn has much of the spaces occupied by white performers (Fight the New Drug, 2019a; Tuohy, 2015), with Black performers more likely to be in the submissive role (Cruz, 2015; Fight the New Drug, 2019a). Furthermore, the blatant use of the master/slave dichotomy are terms liberally used within a predominantly white space. And for those performers using these terms, it remains unclear whether they are mindful of the historical and political implications of applying these labels in an interracial D/s performance. Not to mention that Fetlife has a rather disproportionate user demographic (Scott, 2015), with people of colour falling well within the minority. It is increasingly difficult for people of colour to enter such a virtual space, even when Fetlife's mission statement emphasizes inclusivity (Scott, 2015). Women of colour are at a particularly difficult position when wanting to engage with subversive sexual experiences, especially through interracial D/s performativity.

### *Black Female Kinksters*

Black bodies, especially those of Black women, are perceived as evoking a “legacy of sexual trauma” (Cruz, 2016, p. 2). A part of the reason why Black female kinksters (BFK) are under-represented in the BDSM scene is because of colonialist links to the master/slave label.

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The language of slave and master is used to signify sexual obedience to one's dominant partner. And to feminist scholar, Ariane Cruz (2015), these labels are racially loaded terms exemplifying the past and current racialized violence experienced by Black women. These racialized BDSM labels are drawn from the actual incidences of violence and discrimination Black women and their ancestors have faced. Therefore, when the slave label is appropriated for D/s performances, real sexualized trauma faced by Black slaves is not immediately erased from the consciousness of its current racialized practitioners. Cruz's (2016) exploration of Black female sexuality and kink unmasks these experiences and the unique contradictory position Black female kinksters face. One struggle for inclusion can come from the reluctance of white dominants not wanting to engage with submissive Black females for fear of social and moral repercussions. Also, BFK may be disinclined to join a space so readily accessible to a vast majority of white individuals because of discomfort and the risks of being racialized or victimized (Cruz, 2016).

Researchers have also found that Black women face scrutiny not only from their white female counterparts, but also from within their racial groups (Crenshaw, 1991; Cruz, 2015; Patel, 2019). The within-group discrimination may come from objections to BFK engaging with white participants for fear of being racially and sexually victimized, or from criticism towards Black sub-women allowing themselves to be the sexual slave to a white man. Since D/s performances use racial scripts to demonstrate power exchanges through simulated acts of domination and submission (Cruz, 2015, p. 410), this distortion of historical systems of oppression negatively affects the representation of BFK identity within BDSM spaces, which hinders overall diversity in the kink scene.

As a result, academics have found that non-white kinksters are put in a relatively difficult position when wanting to explore their sexuality (Crenshaw, 1991) via BDSM (Cruz, 2015;

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Cruz, 2016). And the very fact that BDSM uses such historically and politically charged words may discourage BFK from wanting to engage with kink altogether, producing a gap in BDSM's inclusion of visible minorities, consequently limiting the spaces where BFK can freely perform their sexual selves. The obvious disconnect between same-race BDSM practices and interracial BDSM is a growing area of academic literature in need of more exploration, as interracial kink relationships can provide meaningful insight into racialized power discourses, the politics of agency and empowerment.

### Power Imbalances

The overt displays of power performed by the dominant may be startling for the submissive newcomer. To an outsider, D/s can seem risky and dangerous because it involves trusting someone to perform acts which contradict hegemonic ideas on eroticism, sexuality and pleasure (Airaksinen, 2018, p. 2). According to Airaksinen (2018), society's conceptions of "violence, sex, pain, and enjoyment either lose their conventional meaning or become...controversial" (p. 1) in BDSM. And due to sadomasochism's seemingly violent undertones, many people remain misinformed on the true essence of D/s relationships. While consent is a crucial component in executing any sexual activity, many criticisms have arisen around the fact that kink reproduces the same oppressive structures found in public life as in private, intimate settings (MacKinnon, 1982, p. 534) because safeguarding against hidden power dynamics proves especially difficult. Admittedly, the unquestionable requirement of consent in D/s performance does not consider the external power differences participants may be bringing *into* their sexual experiences. And in scenarios where an imbalance of power proves unavoidable, consenting to these sexual activities may not connote equitable, uncoerced sexual situations (Ferguson et al., 1984). Therefore, consent cannot be the only distinguishing marker

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separating ‘good kink’ from ‘bad kink’. However, as sadomasochism is often wrongly reduced to simply the infliction of pain (Airaksinen, 2018; Moore, 2016; Turley, 2016), the layers of symbolism attached to D/s performances are rarely considered by those critiquing BDSM (Hopkins, 1994) and erotic power exchanges.

### Elements of Foucault

In transcripts from interviews with Michel Foucault conducted between 1961–1984 are accounts of topics related to various areas of social and political life. I am interested in his specific discussions on sex, power and identity where he helps situate the experience of D/s performativity. Despite the power exchanges mimicking those of our social world, Foucault (1996) argues that the act of creating contrived D/s power imbalances are not correlated to institutional systems of control. Although existing social differences are present, the desire to sexually submit feels liberating because it is an individual choice made to circumvent hegemonic power structures. He states that the performance of submission transgresses social and cultural norms allowing for greater control and influence garnered at an individual level (Foucault, 1996). Following his logic, I argue that submissive performativity is empowering because it elicits a subjective *reality* that is meaningful and emancipatory.

As much as it is an embodied experience, Foucault (1996) also suggests that sexuality is something we create ourselves– as part of “our world freedom” (p. 382), and not something that should surface from the depths of secrecy (Foucault, 1996). Sex is an avenue to create new meaning be it through novel sexual relationships, falling in love, and so on (Foucault, 1996).

Sadomasochism<sup>5</sup>, as interpreted by Foucault (1996), delves into the production of new

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<sup>5</sup> I use the term *sadomasochism* to maintain the same terminology Foucault uses in his 1961-1984 interviews.

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avenues for pleasure through the “eroticization of the body” (p. 384). Sadomasochism is not inherently violent, it is a subculture where experimentation is encouraged in order to create pleasurable possibilities via the stimulation of non-conventional (Foucault, 1996), or non-erogenous<sup>6</sup>, parts of the body (Rathus et al., 2016). The production of pleasure in sadomasochism extends beyond the physical scope and is left to the individual (Airaksinen, 2018; Foucault, 1996; Rathus et al., 2016; Turley, 2016). Although there is the imitation of power dynamics or simulation of violence within a D/s performance, Foucault (1996) argues that it differs from real institutional systems of oppression because sadomasochism strategically provides its participants with the fluidity and malleability to inhabit a variety of powerful roles (p. 387). This role fluidity is not present in true instances of political power and oppression. For example, a corporate CEO does not relinquish control to their secretary; but a D/s imitation of such a role may differ. A dominant may very well become the submissive and vice-versa, “[D/s] is always a game” – in a sense (Foucault, 1996, p. 388). D/s performance is a creative outlet for expressing one’s sexual identity and fulfilling such desires in non-conforming ways.

The de-emphasis of conforming to social expectations in sadomasochism may create feelings of empowerment for the players involved as there is no longer that pressure for gender and sexual conformity. As academic and philosopher Bob Plant (2007) suggests, Foucault is perhaps suggesting we take up a less serious perspective on sexuality as we explore it with curiosity and “experimental playfulness” (p. 534). Recall that Foucault (1996) thinks sexuality is less about discovering and more about creating. It is not about discovering pleasure as though it were something deeply rooted in our past or subconscious (Foucault, 1996, p. 382),

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<sup>6</sup> A non-erogenous zone or body part is one not commonly associated with sexual arousal or pleasure (Rathus et al., 2016).

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understanding our sexual selves serves to help us produce novel sensations that bring us to that point of arousal, whether it be physical or psychological. Therefore, if we continue to sexualize pleasure, we run the risk of restricting “its creative [and] transformative possibilities” (Plant, 2007, p. 535).

### Discussions of Power & Oppression

Over time, power— as an oppressive force— may become static (Foucault, 1996). To clarify, an imbalance in power may be present, but the oppressive tactics or behaviour are not always present (Foucault, 1996; 1997, p. 291-2; Plant, 2007, p. 536). For power imbalances to truly exist, there has to be some form of resistance standing up to that oppressive force (Foucault, 1997; Plant, 2007). Power is imposed strategically on others (Foucault, 1996; 1997; Plant, 2007) in order to create an unjust or oppressive situation. So, too, are power dynamics strategically created in D/s performances. The level of strategizing and managing impressions entail similar acts of manipulation, control and contrivance. But the difference in institutional power is that it goes through many channels of social life and eventually becomes embedded within a society’s institutions and culture (Foucault, 1996; 1997) making it difficult to overcome. In these instances of power, we can observe its rigidity because it is severely limiting (Plant, 2007, p. 538), especially for disadvantaged groups; the insidious nature of this form of power is systemic (Foucault, 1996; 1997). In sadomasochism, however, power works in different ways because it is meant to mimic or distort elements of social reality— where practitioners have greater control in the outcome of their own identity.

### Liberation Through D/s Performativity

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One of the many reasons a D/s performance is a symbol for empowerment is because it involves self-agency and cooperation. There is much to consider when preparing a kink scene; it is imperative that rules are followed, and personal boundaries be respected. Therefore, when a dominant and submissive negotiate what is going to occur during the D/s performance, it gives them a greater sense of control. And this control allows them free range to explore novel paths to pleasure that prove to be quite emancipatory (Airaksinen, 2018; Hammers, 2014; Hopkins, 1994; Turley, 2016). According to their own accounts, rape survivors use submissive and dominant role-play scenarios as a way to regain control over their bodily image and sexual identity, something that had previously and violently been taken from them (Hammers, 2014, p. 76-7).

In Tomazos et al.'s study (2017) on BDSM vacation 'hotspots', they observed that many of their recruited participants spoke about sadomasochism and their appropriate venues with a very "nonchalant attitude" (p. 36) hinting that such BDSM spaces were part of the normalized landscape of that particular vacation site. For these kinky travelers, so long as what was being played out felt real for them, D/s activity had potentially liberating possibilities (Tomazos et al., 2017). Kink desire exists to be re-defined, re-imagined and re-created in unique ways (Tomazos et al., 2017, p. 37-8; Weiss, 2006). The interesting notion of their study relates to having the stigmatized spaces of sadomasochism out in the open where practitioners' fantasies were no longer confined to their thoughts. In everyday society these 'scandalized' settings would be hidden, but the pro-kink environments provided solace and a positive space for practitioners to express their sexuality, even if temporarily.

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D/s spaces offer those involved permission to transcend social norms by presenting “their [sexual] self” (Redmon, 2003, p. 28; Seregina, 2018). These liminoid<sup>7</sup> environments, as Tomazos et al. (2017) describe, permit opportunities where people can temporarily escape the pressures to conform by defying normative sexual expectations and ultimately unite through shared liberating spaces (p. 32).

### *Fantasy*

Fantasy is associated with imagery and the pursuit of pleasure (Seregina, 2018, p. 32). Žižek (1997) further describes the basic purpose of fantasy is to produce the “hallucinatory realization of desires” (p. 13). Fantasy is not a concrete, tangible concept, making it highly theoretical and not easily studied in an objective fashion. This does not mean that discourses on fantasy have not been examined throughout history; in fact, the concept of fantasy has shifted drastically throughout time and place. Mackay (2001) believes fantasy is “intertwined with a larger nexus of beliefs and norms” within a given culture (as cited in Seregina, 2018, p. 32), and is therefore an ever-evolving construct that reflects the cultural time and place in which it is situated.

Within the pre-industrial period, western conceptualizations of fantasy were closely linked to spirituality and religion (Seregina, 2018, p. 33). Fantasy was structured around rules and ritualized habits because of its close connection to metaphysical and religious entities (Seregina, 2018). Social and religious customs gave meaning to people’s perceived reality, and so by believing in faith, there was also a validation of fantasy-driven beliefs. Fantasy provided

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<sup>7</sup> The term liminoid is linked to liminal events or rites of passage, commonly associated to the field of anthropology, but they do not occur as part of the resolution of a life stage, and are therefore optional transitional rituals (Turner, 1974).

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meaning to people's lives which fostered a richer and deeper sense of self (Seregina, 2018).

However, the period of industrialization began the severance of ontological ties between *reality* and *fantasy*; allowing the surreal to be studied as an independent concept (Saler, 2012; Seregina, 2018).

With the severance between reality and fantasy largely due to the industrialization of western society, cultural ties to the metaphysical and spiritual elements waned among the masses (Seregina, 2018; Turner, 1982). An individual's innermost thoughts and desires enabled them to assign meaning to their own experiences (Campbell, 1987) because there was less cultural pressure to abide by a collective belief system. Post-industrial thought was marked by technological innovation and pragmatism, which effectively reshaped cultural and social belief systems to prioritize the growth of the economy and enable the prosperity of global markets. Therefore, fantasy was positioned externally to the rational 'realm of reality' of post-industrial thought, as its continued existence was restricted to the human mind (Seregina, 2018, p. 34). Although labelled as irrational, Kaplan (1986) discusses that believing in and creating fantasy is an empowering act, for it gives control directly to the individual and allows for temporary reprieve from the hardships of real life (as cited in Seregina, 2018, p. 35).

As it has been studied, fantasy is often juxtaposed to reality in an ongoing dualism that places each concept on opposing sides. But studying such theoretical concepts has proven difficult for many researchers because both cannot be objectively measured nor universally defined (Seregina, 2018). Therefore, with the realization that fantasy and reality are subjective, these elusive concepts are dependent on one another in order to sustain their relevance in western cultural thought (Saler, 2012). As Saler (2012) points out, fantasy stems from what one *believes*

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to be their *own* reality. And that is why fantasy can transgress cultural and social norms (Seregina, 2018, p. 38) because reality is a perception and not a universal facet of life.

### Approaches to Understanding Fantasy

According to Seregina's (2018) overview on fantasy, there have been multiple approaches to studying and contextualizing fantasy. One such approach consists of placing fantasy at the helm of producing "other worlds" or environments (Seregina, 2018, p. 42). To the individual creating such spaces, fantasy leads to rather emancipatory feelings once the person realizes they have the "freedom to go beyond what they know and believe" (Seregina, 2018, p. 42). These fantastical spaces are avenues for the personal exploration of desire. Fantasy can also be explored as reinforcing such desire. In this framework, fantasy is driven by pleasure— what brings us joy and satisfaction— whether it be physical or emotional. Learning how we build our desires through fantasy is a significant way to learn about contemporary social behaviour and interactions (Seregina, 2018, p. 45).

I put forth that fantasy does not live outside the construct of reality because the two are interlinked. One person's fantasies may become part of their reality, making both concepts important in the meaning and symbolism attached to a person's identity. Not only are these important constructs encompassing individual experiences, but also social life and everyday collective performances. The general theoretical construct of fantasy is a key factor in my discussion of Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory. There are thus important connections that link fantasy and the art of performance.

### Performance & Fantasy

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Goffman (1959) acknowledges that different versions of the self may present themselves in various circumstances, but are all part of the complexity of a “unified, continuous self” (Seregina, 2018, p. 59). Therefore, playing out our fantasies does not make them distinct from the portrayals of our authentic selves, rather they are an extension of our complete self. The self, as a whole, is reified through the repetition of a performance. Our understanding of performance is “guided by conventions and norms” (Seregina, 2018, p. 60), which are naturalized as a result of repeated performance (Butler, 1993b). For example, one repeats a gendered performance because they wish to be acknowledged by others, thus producing a sense of self that actively seeks to find meaning through normative performativity (Butler, 2005). By using performance as a theoretical approach to my research, this will enable me to analyze how a submissive performance transgresses socially accepted performances and instils D/s practitioners with a sense of empowerment.

I argue that submissive performativity fosters feelings of empowerment because the contrived power exchanges form a meaningful part of a submissive’s *subjective* reality. At the heart of performative methodology is the interplay between reality and fantasy and how they are used to understand social performances (Seregina, 2018, p. 57). Performance is an ongoing and reflective process making the theoretical approach of performativity well-suited for exploring fantasy and identity (Seregina, 2018) in D/s roles.

### **Theory**

Theatrical metaphors may be used to represent social reality (Rozik, 2002; Vösu, 2010) because there is a likeness, or familiarity, with using them to relate to the experiences of individuals (Rozik, 2002). These metaphors tell us a lot about how social interactions unfold. What unfolds during a social *scene* can help us understand the social, political and cultural

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experiences of others living in a specific time and place (Võsu, 2010, p. 131). My research uses Goffman's performative theory as a theoretical approach to studying D/s performativity. More specifically, Goffman's theory of performativity disrupts the preconceived belief that fantasy is a separate concept from reality, as submissive performances are an extension of the varied roles submissive practitioners play in their everyday lives.

In addition to my emphasis on performance, a crucial element to D/s performativity is understanding the importance the concept of fantasy brings into this dramaturgical framework. In this section, I suggest that fantasy is linked to the subjective expression of individual performers and does not inherently exist *outside* reality, but is rather a part of a person's *perceived* notion of reality and identity.

### Goffman: Definitions

According to Goffman's (1959) theoretical descriptions in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, a social performance is defined by individuals sharing a physical space or setting, while at the same time conveying a persona for the sake of preserving the realness and believability of a social exchange (p. 15). As social science researcher, Ester Võsu (2010) states, it is important to keep in mind Goffman's perspective does not relate to a "specific type of behavioural repertoire...but rather strives to describe certain general principles of social behaviour" and engagement (p. 150). The performance, therefore, serves to influence each actor and their reactions by "applying different strategies of expression" (Võsu, p. 151) and impression management (Goffman, 1959). This theatrical paradigm can extend to personal or institutional relations, so long as there is a social exchange taking place (Goffman, 1959). A social actor, or performer, is someone playing an implicit role in manipulating their speech or behaviour so as to foster a favourable or authentic impression during the social performance (Goffman, 1959, p.

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17). Each social actor is both *performer* and *character* (Goffman, 1959; Vösu, 2010). The *performer* relies on the engagement of others in order to present a version of their character. The *character* is the specific figure the performer uses to interact with their fellow actor (Vösu, 2010, p. 152). Roles blend the portrayed characters with the traits of the performer (Vösu, 2010, p. 152). Although there are strategies employed to produce a convincing performance, the performance itself need not be sincere (Goffman, 1959). Given that deception and manipulated impressions may happen during a scene, Vösu (2010) argues that “the central feature of Goffman’s approach is interaction” (p. 155) and that deception may be a by-product of the performance and not necessarily a motive for engaging in a social scene.

Subsequently, a team is defined as a set of performers “who cooperate in staging a single routine” (Goffman, 1959, p. 79). The setting of a performance may range anywhere from a public environment to a more intimate space. The setting may also be staged to foster and inspire the actors in giving a believable performance (Goffman, 1959, p. 23). All of these theatrical metaphors serve each performer in their own intended ways. Recall that a social performance is all about managing identity and reactions, in an attempt to keep the authenticity of the interaction going. These aforementioned elements all belong to the frontstage.

The frontstage serves as a general setting for showcasing the performance to the audience (Goffman, 1959, p. 22). The frontstage carries with it all the equipment or tools necessary for illustrating the legitimacy of the social situation. Within the frontstage comes the mannerisms and appearance of the social actor, known as the personal front. Manners are cues that help the audience, or fellow actors, foretell the direction the performer is attempting to take. Appearance relates to the signs and symbols helping to distinguish one’s social status or social differentiation from others (Goffman, 1959, p. 24). Although closely related, manner and appearance do

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sometimes oppose one another and should be considered distinct forms of the personal front (Goffman, 1959). There is another component of the 'stage' that produces interesting dynamics between fellow actors. This is the backstage.

The backstage is "a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted..." (Goffman, 1959, p. 112). In essence, the purpose of the backstage is multifold. For one, it exposes the amount of work involved with giving a performance (Goffman, 1959, p. 114) as the props and rehearsals are readily exposed in this behind-the-scenes setting (Goffman, 1959). A second use for the backstage is that it draws the realism of the performance from the frontstage to the backstage. Furthermore, anything that is not permitted or should not be allowed onstage is hidden in this locale; this can include private conversations among performers, not intended for the audience to hear (Goffman, 1959, p. 112). Here the actors can maintain a more relaxed demeanor knowing that the audience is prohibited from entering the backstage.

Once more, the relevant aspect of Goffman's theory is that it utilizes metaphors related to dramaturgy and theatrical performance (Rozik, 2002; Vösu, 2010) to comment on the guises people assume when engaging in social settings. Goffman argues that we present a version of ourselves under the guise of characters and roles so as to control how others see us (Goffman, 1959; Vösu, 2010). It is important to discuss that although Goffman's approach draws upon the ideas brought on by a theatrical performance, he is not suggesting that life has no set reality or that events in our lives are not real. Rather, his social theory concerns itself with the amount of impression management involved in contributing to our perceived reality (Goffman, 1959, p. 254; Vösu, 2010, p. 155-6). A performer relies on other actors to accept the subtle cues and details of their performance (Rozik, 2002) in order to create and solidify the believability of the

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role(s) performed (Goffman, 1959, p. 51). The interesting notion about creating authentic spaces is that, at times, the social actor is aware they are performing their roles to a pragmatic end.

Performances are reflexive processes that engage with individual and collective realities (Seregina, 2018). There is little effort for illusion when everything is designed and calculated to evoke a certain feeling or fulfil a desire.

Authentic spaces are constructed when there are mutual feelings and ideas shared among a collective of individuals. The label of *normal* or *abnormal* is assigned by members of a collective society. Therefore, when there is uniformity in the collective ideology, Tomazos et al. (2017) explain that people are generally unconcerned with trying to oppose stigmatized behaviour. Goffman (1963) argues that environments where people can freely express themselves, reduces the fear and incidence of stigmatization. Therefore, dedicated kink spaces can not only be “vehicles of exploration” (Tomazos et al., 2017, p. 32) but also means to express one’s “authentic self” (Tomazos et al., 2017, p. 35) without the fear of stigmatization.

### Idealized Performances

As Schechner emphasizes (2006), the actors, the context, and the performance cannot exist without one another because they each inform the other. When similar ideas about a performance, or character are revisited throughout multiple stages or social situations, then a routine becomes idealized (Goffman, 1959, p. 35). Schechner (2006) clarifies that idealized performances recycle elements from previously performed behaviours, as roles and performances can never be acted the same way twice because of the changing settings. These changes can never reproduce what was once performed (Seregina, 2018). A performance may be conceived individually, but it is tweaked and adjusted to relate to other performers and contexts (Turner, 1987). Essentially, these repeated performances gain influence over time as they

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emulate realness through the allocation of symbolism and meaning (Butler, 1990). In such cases, the potential for feeling empowered during submissive experiences comes from making fantasy feel real within a very intricate sexual performance.

### Exploring Team Dynamism

Drawing from Goffman's (1959) theory on teams, at least two individuals need to work together to "stag[e] a single routine" (p. 79) during a performance. A teammate, therefore, is a partner working co-dependently with others and is tasked with giving appropriate meaning and significance to a situation or performance (Goffman, 1959, p. 83). There are characteristics or traits emblematic of a team performance, such as loyalty, honesty and commitment. A team performance is unique in that there is active collaboration among the performers whose goals are to showcase the authenticity of a performance (Goffman, 1959, p. 80). A co-dependent performance does not merely serve to showcase the character of the performers, it is designated to demonstrate the characteristics and direction of the routine as well (Goffman, 1959, p. 77). In addition, the characters and personas chosen by the D/s performers not only add symbolic meaning and influence toward the kink performance but create an added layer of intimacy and pleasure.

According to Goffman (1959), teammates establish important relationships with one another. A performative team can be described even further as a relationship built upon "intimate cooperation" (Goffman, 1959, p. 104) in constructing a series of interactions or situations aimed at eliciting various forms of pleasure. General team and BDSM performances demonstrate a "reciprocal dependence" (Goffman, 1959, p. 82) on one another; teammates gauge their performance and conduct themselves in an appropriate and expected way when they are attuned to their partners actions and responses. The team performance manifests an ongoing transmission

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of expressions and signification<sup>8</sup> that enhance the performance because partners are constantly communicating and relaying signs to one another. And partners tend to stay in character when maintaining the “line” of the performance (Goffman, 1959, p. 167). The vision and believability of the performance are specific to a given performance and to the actors coming together in a cooperative setting to fulfil their fantasy.

### Self-Awareness in D/s Performativity

D/s performances are different from everyday social situations because there is an added layer of intimate co-dependency. D/s performances are part of a conscious state of awareness that incorporate elements of fantasy to a practitioner’s *subjective* reality (Žižek, 1997).

Understanding that there might be potential disruptions in the performance does not make it distinct from our understanding of reality. Rather, fantasy is produced from our desires and aspirations (Seregina, 2018) and while creating fantasy is subjective, performing these desires is part of a reality that is experienced and fulfilled emotionally and physically (Seregina, 2018; Žižek, 1997). The act of performing fantasy is beneficial to a performer because it allows them to create personal meaning distinct from the collective meaning produced when performing in culturally influenced ways.

### Theoretical Connections to D/s Performance

There is a downside when relying heavily on such theatrical metaphors. Performance arts researcher Eli Rozik (2002), argues that the belief in art mimicking life is precisely why researcher’s use of dramaturgical theories can be misguided. Rozik (2002) further details that studying similarities between life situations and theatrical performance may prevent academics

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<sup>8</sup> meaning-making

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from seeing the distinguishing facets of each separate environment. He argues that it is in fact the differences between performance and actual social exchanges that should be explored (Rozik, 2002, p. 186), as theses have the potential to unlock new insight on “distinct systems of [meaning] and communication” (Rozik, 2002, p. 187).

Although Rozik’s (2002) argument concerning the use of dramaturgical frameworks to study social life does illustrate concern about validity and reflexivity, my topic has not commonly been used as the foundation for such dramaturgical metaphors. My research is less about how dramaturgical metaphors closely reflect society, and more on the subjective reality D/s performances afford a submissive partner. In addition, my work analyzes how submissive performativity can be empowering during a D/s exchange. The perceived subjective reality includes the fantasy and desire driven by the submissive’s performance.

### **Methods**

As a result of the misrepresentation of BDSM and D/s relations, over the years bloggers and pro-BDSM advocates have taken to the online world to write on the subject. Thus, in order to best explore how submissive roles can be empowering, I performed a content analysis of online blog<sup>9</sup> articles highlighting the role of submission as eliciting feelings of empowerment. I used purposive sampling as a method to select blogs explicitly giving accounts of submissive performance. The aim of my sociological analysis is to help answer my research question: given the premise that BDSM roles are performative, what makes the submissive role feel empowering for BDSM participants? I interpreted the accounts of these writers using a specific list of key

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<sup>9</sup> A blog is a broad term used to categorize online content. Blogs can come in the form of an online journal entry, informal article or personal opinion piece.

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themes and words (*see* Appendix) given in their personalized accounts of submissive performativity.

The blogs were all published between 2015 and 2020. This time frame was selected because the popularity of BDSM-related content made waves in popular culture (Tomazos et al., 2017; Topping, 2012), including its visibility in online blog spaces (Scott, 2015; Topping, 2012). The blogger's self-identification as a submissive, as well as their seasoned experience enacting such roles was essential to my research. The bloggers had all written about the topic of submission and/or kink for at least two years. Preliminary analysis included an examination of the words and phrasing used throughout each blog article (*see* Appendix). This preliminary stage helped me sift through the articles quickly in order to focus on the writers who displayed extensive familiarity with D/s relations.

I selected three blogs published by three different authors. These blogs are personal reflections drawing from the authors' opinions and personal journeys as a submissive participant. The blogs are personal descriptions of such experiences, and incorporate familiar terms associated with submissive identity (*see* Appendix). As an added measure of validity, I browsed their website and/or online profile to confirm whether they are connected to the BDSM community in some way (i.e. hosted BDSM parties, attended kink workshops, worked for a fetish company, etc.). Analysis on the perspectives of experienced and knowledgeable submissives provides greater validity and adds research integrity to my study.

Within these blogs, I paid attention to a few key words that help answer my overall research question. The key themes I created to analyze these blogs are the following: *submissive performance, sub-pillars of D/s performance, liberation, empowerment, and emotional bonding.*

## Submissive Performance & Empowerment

The submissive performance was indicated through the bloggers' self-disclosure of their sub identity, along with the mention of any of the key terms found in the Appendix. The theme of submissive performativity was merely categorized by the writer's use of commonly associated terminology related to submission. Therefore, any subsequent feelings or emotions stemming from performing submission were interpreted in the analysis and discussion of the blogs. The secondary traits linked to maintaining BDSM etiquette were sorted under sub-pillars of D/s performance. Any mention of safety, sanity and/or consent was also categorized under the sub-pillars of D/s performance (*see* Appendix).

Empowerment and liberation are similar, but I differentiated them by defining liberation as a site for self-discovery and sentiments of personal freedom. For my research, liberation was defined by feelings of sexual discovery/awakening, fulfillment, and the ability to freely choose how the author's enacted their submissive identity. In the literature, liberation is commonly juxtaposed with feeling constrained, or hindered (Airaksinen, 2018; Hopkins, 1994; Turley, 2016), and can also elicit emancipatory feelings (Seregina, 2018, p. 42).

Based on their submissive narratives, I defined empowerment as the ability to make choices independently and feel in control. The choice of being a submissive illustrates self-agency, which is a crucial component in the accounts of empowerment. The feelings expressed about making decisions with a partner, have also been observed in the accounts and expressions of empowerment (Lords, 2015).

I defined emotional bonding as traits or physical gestures that demonstrated sentimental connection (*see* Appendix) within the D/s performance and within the romantic relationships in which the partners were involved. The key words classified under emotional bonding can be found in the Appendix.

## Submissive Performance & Empowerment

I used a simple Google search in order to find my blogs, with a mix of certain key words: BDSM, kink, submissive, empower, D/s partnerships, sadomasochism, and so on. From the blogs that I came across, I cross-referenced the information on the potential authors in hopes of finding other articles or new sites that may be used for my analysis. Any blogs that required signing-up/logging in were avoided. The selection of blogs was restricted to those publicly available by authors who openly share their stories on their sites.

Since blog sites are personal accounts akin to virtual journal entries, there is need for care when analyzing and discussing sensitive topics. One of the purposes of disclosing online is to connect with, share, and communicate ideas with many people. Ethical dilemmas surrounding research on social media sites are commonly related to ownership and (re)distribution of online content (Woodfield & Iphofen, 2017), as well as questions concerning what constitutes private versus public material (Hookway, 2008, p. 105). Some researchers believe that if the source material is publicly available online, there is little expectation of privacy (Sudweeks & Rafaeli, 1995; Walther, 2002). As qualitative researcher, Nicholas Hookway (2008) points out, blog postings “are firmly located in the public domain...[therefore] it can be argued that the necessity of consent should be waived” (p. 105).

Public blogs are meant to be read and the level of anonymity and confidentiality rests upon the blogger. The bloggers have control over the identifiers they use and the level of security they wish their readers to abide by such as, having the readers subscribe to the site by divulging some personal information. In my research, I selected blogs from a public forum that did not require readers to enlist or subscribe to the site. I retained the authors’ names in the same way they identify themselves in their online forum.

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I have selected content analysis because this technique allows for the interpretation of multiple qualitative sources by systematically organizing and grouping data by common themes and ideas (Creswell, 2007; Schreir, 2014). Content analysis examines forms of communication to see what can be revealed in a given society or online space (Bryman & Bell, 2019, p. 272). Meanings and interpretations are important as well as “formal categorization” and quantification of themes, words, and so on (Bryman & Bell, 2019). In analyzing potential themes of empowerment, liberation and emotional bonding, this level of analysis will give my broad topics a more interpretative focus (Bryman & Bell, 2019, p. 284).

Another reason I have chosen to perform content analysis is due to its flexibility. Bryman and Bell (2019) suggest that data can be analyzed even before such codes and themes are established by the researchers since new unanticipated categories can be observed (p. 287).

According to Schreir (2014), content analysis is systematic; this method demonstrates efficiency through the assignment of codes to overarching themes and ideas found in the research. In so doing, this method of analysis helps reduce data by clustering information into major themes, allowing the researcher to analyze the data in a more comprehensive and succinct manner (Schreir, 2014). In addition to being organized, content analysis is a relatively unobtrusive method of study which works well for my research as it deals with sensitive subject matter.

I interpreted the accounts of BDSM practitioners in order to understand how meaningful their submissive identity is to them vis-à-vis their accounts of empowerment while performing the submissive role.

### **Data**

## Submissive Performance & Empowerment

I have selected three blogs written by submissive women. I was not exclusively looking for women submissives, as I did come across blogs written by submissive men. However, the blogs written by men did not fall within my assigned criteria (*see* Methods section above). Interestingly, I came across a few mistresses<sup>10</sup> writing on behalf of their subs, but I did not want a second-hand account of the submissive experience, therefore those articles were excluded. Unfortunately, finding male subs openly discussing their subordination to their mistress proved difficult to find. This could be due to societal pressures surrounding men's social standing to women. Men are commonly depicted as being in a superior social position (Gerhard, 1996) than women, and anything deviating from that may lead them to feeling ostracized and 'less masculine' (Sadker, 1995; Thorne, 2002).

The earliest article from 2015 was written by Kayla Lords, a published freelance author, better known as an erotic blogger. Lords is part of a heterosexual D/s partnership. She is open about her submissive identity and has been in an enduring D/s relationship with her husband for numerous years, she is also a mother. Her writings specialize in D/s relationships as well as other topics of BDSM and overall sexual health (Lords, n.d.). The blog titled *A Day in the Life of a 24/7 Submissive* (Lords, 2015) was analyzed. It was written as a journal entry and details a personal summary of her daily life in the submissive role. Her personal site and guest blogs demonstrate that Kayla Lords' (henceforth referenced as K.L) sexual identity features prominently in her life.

The second blog, written by Kitten Sarah, takes a different approach to demonstrating the experience of submissive reality. Her blog post was published in 2018, and she has periodically

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<sup>10</sup> A mistress is the female equivalent to a master, and represents a female dominant.

## Submissive Performance & Empowerment

written pieces on the site *www.killingkittens.com*, where she writes under such a name. Kitten Sarah has practiced submission for a few years. The title of the blog I analyzed is: *Handle with Care: The Fragile Disposition of a Submissive* (Sarah, 2018). The website where her piece is posted focusses on women's liberation and "challenging the status quo" (Sayle, n.d.). Kitten Sarah (hereafter referenced as K.S) is a pseudonym used for her articles featured on this site. K.S has written her blog as a *how-to* guide for domination and submission. It is explicitly written with heterosexual D/s partnerships in mind, and she makes note of that fact early on in the article.

The last article was published in 2019 by Isabella Aitken-Frappier (referred to henceforth as I.A.F). I.A.F is a sexuality educator, author and "pleasure anarchist" (Frappier, 2019) as proclaimed on her personal website. The blog entry in question was a guest contribution for the site *www.shethinx.com*, and is titled *BDSM Brought Out My Inner Goddess* (Aitken-Frappier, 2019). I.A.F has been writing BDSM articles for roughly twenty years. A portion of her published work can be found online. I.A.F is a submissive with ties to the BDSM community for more than five years. She is a pro-feminist activist and hedonist with a penchant for helping others through sexual healing therapy (Frappier, 2019). I.A.F's blog was catalogued as a reflection on her personal journey in search of herself and finding sexual fulfillment through the practise of submission (Aitken-Frappier, 2019).

### **Findings**

The findings presented in this section are categorized chronologically, with each subheading dedicated to each blog. The results are described using the themes and key-words that will give meaning to their context in the analysis portion, following the description.

*K.L: A Day in the Life of a 24/7 Submissive*

## Submissive Performance & Empowerment

Before K.L began her entry, she included a small introductory paragraph detailing her personal life and that living life while playing an ongoing submissive is not all about sex; as she outlines she does not spend her days “naked and on [her] knees waiting for [her] Dominant to throw out commands” (Lords, 2015). Her dom is addressed as ‘Daddy’ and K.L as ‘babygirl<sup>11</sup>.’ K.L has a list of tasks to perform each day, as these relate directly to both her Daddy’s wishes and her identity as a *baby* submissive (*see* Performative Tropes).

### Description: K.L

Coinciding with the theme of sub performativity, K.L has daily obligations to fulfil for herself and for her Daddy. K.L’s day begins with her task from the night before, ensuring Daddy’s coffee is ready for him in the morning. This is followed by preparing his breakfast smoothie and getting the children ready for their day. Before leaving for work, Daddy decides if babygirl is wearing underwear for the day or not. K.L does as she is told, but will ask for permission to wear underwear if none are picked out for her (Lords, 2015). Once she is left alone, K.L works on her own personal tasks, unrelated to her submissive ones. At lunchtime, everything comes to a halt and babygirl and Daddy speak during his lunch hour, this event is rarely missed, exceptions are made if they are ill or if K.L must meet work-related deadlines. Around 5pm, her work is finished for the day and she tends to her sub tasks for the evening. She packs Daddy’s lunch for the following day, and in the evening both Daddy and babygirl take a brief walk together. K.L explained the walk is either to the mailbox or sometimes around their neighbourhood (Lords, 2015). Once more, the walk is only canceled due to illness or poor weather. At 8pm, while the children are in bed, babygirl prepares Daddy’s coffee and dessert and

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<sup>11</sup> The same spelling for names and roles found in each blog are maintained throughout this paper.

## Submissive Performance & Empowerment

serves it to him on her knees. The final sub task of the day is spent setting the bedroom alarm clock and “readying everything for bed” (Lords, 2015). As part of her servitude, babygirl must obey and serve Daddy, but if she is uncertain about performing a task, she will ask for Daddy’s input.

Within her submissive obligations, she does describe moments of emotional bonding with her partner. There are multiple instances where affections are displayed, from both performers. Daddy kisses babygirl throughout the day, and their topics of conversation do not simply revolve around D/s performativity. During her nighttime act of submission, Daddy often “kisses [babygirl] gently, tells [her] he loves [her], and stares into [K.L’s] eyes until [she] blushe[s]...” (Lords, 2015). Babygirl acts shyly around her Daddy in ways that are similar to how a child behaves shyly around an adult. The performative aspect of assuming the role of daddy is to ensure that he treats his baby as if she needs instruction and care. As K.L assumes her experienced role as baby girl, she understands the characteristic tropes that entails (*see* Performative Tropes). The names assigned to each performer and the enactment of submissive tropes help each partner perform in a dynamic and co-dependent manner. The fluidity of their performance demonstrates a performative team that thrives on each other’s actions and reactions. Furthermore, K.L describes how this performance helps them bond with one another.

They have moments of intimacy by showering together and walking alone, without their children listening in (Lords, 2015). K.L claims they are quite in-sync with one another’s routine and that if they miss their lunch hour check-in, they “both feel off for the rest of the day” (Lords, 2015). These displays of affection and intimate habits affect K.L’s identity, as will be discussed shortly.

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In describing K.L.'s account of feeling liberated and empowered, she uses the pronoun 'I' throughout her article. K.L. describes how she is left alone for the majority of the day, making her *own* decisions. These decisions relate to her career and the submissive tasks Daddy leaves for her. In her narrative, K.L. emphasizes that she makes ample "decisions without him throughout the day" (Lords, 2015). When there are performative disagreements between Daddy and babygirl, the issues are dealt with privately and respectfully. And K.L. mentions the importance of abiding by the BDSM rules as well as trusting and communicating with her partner (Lords, 2015). Analyzing K.L.'s narrative will help uncover the more subtle elements found in the aforementioned themes to help answer my research question.

### Analysis: K.L.

The dynamic between Daddy and babygirl is a cooperative performance because they enact their roles carefully so as to disengage their parental roles from their kink roles. The submissive duties also frame K.L.'s character as the obedient, all-serving babygirl— aimed at pleasing her dominant Daddy (*see* Performative Tropes). Due to the routinization of this specific D/s performance, there are moments where her behaviour is not a part of her *babygirl* persona. But in the instances where her behaviour is driven by her submissive identity, Daddy and babygirl present themselves in a symbolic and meaningful way that extends beyond the physical notion of sex.

Their performance occupies a smaller, intimate portion of the larger reality that encompasses their lives— as individuals, spouses, and parents. Their unique affections and kink names are only expressed when they are alone, creating a subjective D/s reality respectively shared by themselves. From the children's perspective, their parents perform their parental roles on the frontstage. K.L. is careful never to call her husband Daddy while the children are around

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(Lords, 2015) and the children remain relatively oblivious to their parents' time together in the shower (Lords, 2015). Hence, there is a considerable amount of time these performers spend managing impressions in a manner that befits the role of parent. Thus, the backstage serves as a welcoming space for these performers to showcase their sexual roles.

Once the audience is gone, the performer's sexual identities move to the personal front and give them that sense of intimacy and comfort that is fostered by the backstage. For them, 24/7 D/s performativity goes beyond the physicality of sex (Lords, 2015). K.L stresses it goes well above the tasks she performs. To Daddy, she is always his babygirl and vice versa (Lords, 2015). The shared connectedness has developed a bond of not only love, but friendship.

They look out for one another; in instances of injury or illness, the sub tasks are temporarily suspended— even though K.L is admittedly disappointed and tries to maintain them regardless (Lords, 2015). An aspect of Daddy's duties involves ensuring that babygirl feels her best. Regarding her sub duties, K.L also explains that Daddy is “willing” (Lords, 2015) to do his own breakfast and coffee because he is well-capable, but her happiness comes from a space of selflessness, where her desire and fantasy involves serving him. There is a synchrony because of their seasoned experience together, as a D/s team. More specifically, their intimate backspace reality—which doubles as a frontstage in moments of privacy— functions well as a co-dependent performance. Having analyzed the dynamic K.L and Daddy share, I now delve deeper into K.L's own personal sources of liberation and empowerment.

Within K.L's blog, there are numerous instances where she uses the 'I' pronoun to emphasize her ongoing feelings of independence. Even as a submissive partner, she describes feeling strong enough to speak her mind and express uncertainty about meeting specific sub tasks (Lords, 2015). There is an awareness, on both their ends, that K.L's work may require a re-

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adjustment in the D/s list of tasks. There is an importance about her work that does not allow for her complete attention and devotion to veer towards Daddy, and it is something that Daddy understands well enough, as K.L describes (Lords, 2015). And for K.L, being able to control the goings-on of the day does demonstrate a level of power and influence that extends to her D/s partnership. She emphasizes that submissive performativity is a social negotiation. K.L also states that having well-established communication skills makes her feel respected and in control (Lords, 2015).

When K.L and Daddy disagree, they communicate in a respectful manner– Daddy shows her “respect in all things” (Lords, 2015). In times of disagreement, the contrived hierarchy between dom and sub scales back to balance towards a more neutral negotiation of roles. Langdrige and Butt’s (2005) discussion of EPE reiterates that power exchanges are about social negotiation; and the ability for K.L to communicate her own opinions not only strengthens the bond between them, but also gives her self-confidence to speak her mind. By negotiating each other’s wants and desires during their performative disagreements, this also establishes the respective boundaries for each performer. K.L’s D/s performance is malleable while still rooted in both fantasized routine and her own reality.

K.L’s sense of self draws from her other social roles (i.e. wife, mother, woman in the workforce...) and not just her submissive identity. Daddy validates her decisions by respecting her work process and communicating when things are not going well (Lords, 2015). His only imposition where he demands she stop performing her sub duties is when she is unwell (Lords, 2015). There are rational and careful steps taken to ensure the well-being of the fellow partner is maintained. K.L’s health is important to both of them because of their relationship, both internal and external to the D/s environment.

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During these D/s performances, the characters of Daddy and babygirl are idealized because they are routinely played out. According to Goffman (1959), the smooth interplay between characters, roles, and maintaining appearances is a key component in producing frontspaces that facilitate the authenticity of a performance. Their D/s routine brings comfort knowing that each team member is dedicated to maintaining their role thereby continuing the quest for pleasure and satisfaction in the characters they play.

Daddy teases her everyday before leaving for work and the purpose is to get her thinking about him well after he is gone (Lords, 2015). As the dominant, these displays of affection serve to demonstrate his control over her thoughts and feelings as they ensure “he’s all [babygirl’s] thinking about for at least a few minutes” (Lords, 2015). Furthermore, the fact that he has selected her clothes and undergarments reminds the readers that not only does Daddy control her appearance through clothing selection, but they perform the *parent* and *baby* personas specifically to carry out such role-appropriate tasks.

K.L.’s babygirl attitude is marked by her obedience to her dad, she must display her attire via the pictures she sends to him (Lords, 2015). Babygirl further enacts the role by displaying certain mannerisms that display childlike behaviour. For instance, she will pout and display her frustrations if Daddy does not give her a “deliciously painful spanking” (Lords, 2015) while they are in bed because it is consistent with the behaviour from a *baby* not getting something they desire. Her performative purpose is to please her father-figure and in turn Daddy will reward babygirl with something that pleases her.

There seems to be a strong personal and romantic foundation upon which this co-dependent team has built their D/s performance. Pleasure for K.L comes from much more than simply being swatted on the bum (Lords, 2015), it is in the way they think about one another,

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how they check-in throughout the day, and how Daddy tells her he loves her (Lords, 2015). It might seem ironic that she feels the most liberated when she is in a contrived routine playing a subservient role (Lords, 2015) but nevertheless, the performance is flexible enough so there is a balance between work, play, and fulfilling interpersonal desires.

In K.L.'s account, she does defend her life choices to the readers who may find her performative relationship to be "repressive or awful" (Lords, 2015). Recall that there is still stigma surrounding D/s explorations (Hoff & Sprott, 2009; Kolmes et al., 2006); and in K.L.'s case the stigma may very well be coming from having her sub identity share a space with her parental roles, or that she is a woman in a constant D/s exchange with a man as her dominant (Scott, 2015, p. 108; Stevens, 2014; Tripodi, 2017). Certainly K.L.'s awareness of this seemingly controversial lifestyle is reflected in her narrative style as she relays her D/s routine by emphasizing the positives of her partnership. She is aware that readers may criticize her choices as a submissive woman or as a parent assuming such a role. K.L.'s awareness about the potential criticisms she receives for her article reflect the westernized pressures to perform a standard ideal of *woman*; an ideal rigidly placed within gendered dichotomies. The sub persona offers her an escape from such restrictive spaces.

### *K.S.: Handle with Care: The Fragile Disposition of a Submissive*

This article was written by blogger Kitten Sarah (K.S), published on the Killing Kittens website. I will use the term *kitten* (see Performative Tropes) to reference sub women just as K.S does. This article was different from K.L.'s in that K.S's piece closely follows a 'how-to' opinion guide rather than a first-hand account of a personal D/s performance. The writing style was clearly meant for a heterosexual D/s audience where a woman takes on the submissive role and a man takes on the dominant one.

## Submissive Performance & Empowerment

K.S.'s use of the word *relationship* being paired alongside D/s implies a less playful tone than previously considered by K.L. Although these two bloggers write and format their articles in very different ways, K.S.'s blog tackles more of the logistics and foundation needed for a solid D/s relationship, while K.L.'s personal account exemplifies what a D/s performance looks like. For K.L, both Daddy and babygirl are driven to maintain the purpose and integrity of their performance. For K.S, her article depicts the moments leading up to the established bond between seasoned performers.

Another commonality from these blogs is the mention of secondary attributes related to the main rules of BDSM performativity— namely trust, respect and communication. The D/s relationship, according to K.S, needs to express these sub-pillars in order for the submissive to feel safe and want to open up to their dominant (Sarah, 2018).

### Description: K.S

K.S states that “the title of Master is earned, not assumed” (Sarah, 2018). She explains that there is a physical vulnerability in D/s relationships, but the meaningful one for her is the “psychological side” of domination and submission (Sarah, 2018). BDSM goes beyond enforcing rules and applying punishments, it is a learning process (Sarah, 2018). For K.S, it is about discussing limitations so one comes to understand “when *no* means *no* and *no* means *yes*” (Sarah, 2018). Throughout the text, she identifies the term “subspace” (Sarah, 2018), which constitutes the natural *high* that comes from fulfilling the submissive role. K.S explains there is a primitive energy entangled within the D/s performance because she claims sadomasochistic partnerships are passionately visceral experiences. Therefore, it is important for a dom to exercise discipline and control.

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The assignment of the term *kitten* is another descriptive trope that illustrates the unique performance between a dominant *pet owner* and a *submissive kitten* (see Performative Tropes). According to K.S, submissive kitten performances illustrate visceral experiences because they incorporate human and animal behaviours that creatively produce and maintain power exchanges emblematic of D/s performativity. K.S stresses the dominant's responsibility is to care for their submissive (Sarah, 2018), much like a pet owner cares for their animal. Her discussion of dominant etiquette explains that a dominant is not all about making the decisions or being right, there needs to be a balance between assertion and "soft disposition" attached to the role (Sarah, 2018). In order to establish trust while maintaining control of the submissive kitten, there needs to be a balance of mannerisms and characteristics that signal to both partners that one can trust the other (Sarah, 2018). A kitten "bounces off her Dom's energy" (Sarah, 2018) so that if the dominant is inviting while being firm in establishing rules, then the kitten is more likely to submit (Sarah, 2018) and display her loyalty to her 'owner'.

K.S continues to say that submissives may not be emotionally ready for a specific scene or able to "carry out" certain duties (Sarah, 2018). K.S views submission as more than performing tasks and obeying— it is a give-and-take relationship that should function like a team (Sarah, 2018). Interestingly enough, K.S does not use the term *performance* or use any other dramaturgical symbolism throughout her text. The semantic emphasis is placed on D/s dynamics being a *relationship* and a team effort.

### Analysis: K.S

There is a lot of K.S's views on the emotionality of being a sub woman. She reflects upon it as if it is a long journey of self-discovery. The expressive journey to unraveling one's sexual desires is what makes kittens so strong, according to K.S (Sarah, 2018).

## Submissive Performance & Empowerment

Sub women are emotionally strong because they must make wise decisions about which types of men, in this case, are suitable to fit the dominant role (Sarah, 2018). Recall that taking on the title of master or dom is not something to be taken lightly (Sarah, 2018), as it is a responsibility which entails taking care of the sub and each other. From her viewpoint, once the partner selection is made by the submissive, the demonstrative power of the performance is assigned to the dominant.

For K.S, the ability to carefully select a dom underlines that there is a manufactured implementation of power and influence embedded within D/s relationships (Sarah, 2018), as these D/s “[p]ower relations are defined by [the] choice[s]...” of the performers (Bi community news, 1998). Power, therefore, can extend beyond the institutional scope— in similar fashion to pleasure extending beyond bodily responses (Airaksinen, 2018; Foucault, 1996; Ratus et al., 2016; Turley, 2016). Therefore, the power to *choose* a dom becomes an empowering act. The sub is best represented as the team member that “strategically [conceals] the power behind the front[stage]” (Goffman, 1959, p. 102), because the dom only has as much power afforded to them as their sub is comfortable allowing. And the dom’s demonstrative power is not something that should be assumed by the dominant, because it comes with merit and experience (Sarah, 2018)— not through entitlement.

With the focus on teamwork and building relationships, K.S explains that D/s relationships start off as fragile— as feelings of uncertainty outweigh those of security. A kitten may be timid in their new surroundings, therefore wary of their owner’s intentions. But after its commencement, the D/s relationship leads into a “journey of self-discovery” (Sarah, 2018) for both partners. From K.S’s perspective, the submissive undertaking is liberating because of her ability to open up and expose herself, both literally and figuratively, to her partner. K.S subtly

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equates feelings of freedom to coincide with feelings of safety. As K.S alludes to elements of safety being enmeshed with feeling free, she explains that safety is a key criterion for making the sub *feel* liberated. K.S declares that “the act of submission can be freeing, but also draining, even for those who are not in a full-time D/s relationship” (Sarah, 2018), highlighting the seriousness of D/s experiences.

The metaphor of letting someone take you down the “kinky rabbit hole” (Sarah, 2018) gives her readers a sense that these D/s experiences can have moments where subs feel insecure, curious, and fearful. In addition to using the well-known literary metaphor, this expression also connotes how the journey can expose a submissive to the unexplored part of their own D/s reality. Not everything will begin in familiar territory, and K.S uses that literary metaphor to illustrate how novel or unexplored some D/s identities may be.

Throughout the article, K.S is attentive to her audience and her own experience with being a sub in heterosexual D/s relations. She writes in a way that draws on sub and dom roles independently, while also referencing the strengths of performing the roles cooperatively. K.S declares it is important to stimulate the mind. The eroticization of the mind is also part of opening up channels of pleasure that lie outside the physical body.

The entire tone of the blog is informative for doms, but also hints at the dangers of engaging in D/s relations with the wrong partner. And K.S’s advice is most impactful for submissive women, as research shows that victims of gendered violence are often women (Crenshaw, 1991; Cruz, 2015; Farr, 2018; Stoeffel, 2014; Weisman, 2016; Woods, 2012), and that minority women are at the greatest risk of experiencing such violence (Crenshaw, 1991; Cruz, 2015). K.S further stresses the risks involved by arguing that although powerful, “the psychological side of a D/s relationship is the...most dangerous” (Sarah, 2018). A dominant can

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expose their partner's vulnerability, carefully or carelessly, which can have long-lasting effects on a submissive performer.

K.S made less explicit connections to the dramaturgical performance of D/s play, but she approached the subject matter by exposing the effects D/s power exchanges can have on practitioners' identities, while cueing her readers on the realistic risks involved engaging in these power dynamics. Her unique perspective intended to inform readers and D/s practitioners of how fragile, yet empowering the relations between a dominant and a submissive can be, while stressing that choosing a partner makes all the difference in exploring power exchanges responsibly.

### *I.A.F: BDSM Brought Out My Inner Goddess*

I.A.F's blog took on the most self-reflexive style, as she narrates her own journey of sexual exploration as a submissive woman (Aitken-Frappier, 2019). I.A.F describes the evolution of her character and personal belief system and how it all helped her find her true sexual voice; a sexual voice she finally feels at ease expressing (Aitken-Frappier, 2019). I.A.F uses the general term *BDSM* to refer to her practice of D/s play. I.A.F is the only blogger to use the term *feminist* in her article. It is a significant detail to only have I.A.F directly speak about such connections to BDSM. Arguably, feminism is a significant underlying theme and identity associated with these writers, and whereas the other women make more subtle ties to feminism, I.A.F outwardly references it in her blog. The feminist label is later discussed in the analysis of I.A.F's writing.

### *Description: I.A.F*

I.A.F disclosed as a submissive woman later on in her life, even after she had initially been exposed to BDSM (Aitken-Frappier, 2019). Her earlier experiences with BDSM were not

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particularly healthy or enlightening, since most of I.A.F's sexual experiences involved holding back when expressing her thoughts and desires (Aitken-Frappier, 2019). But, in her social life, I.A.F describes herself as "assertive when [she] need[s] to be" and as having "strong boundaries" when socializing with others (Aitken-Frappier, 2019). As I.A.F has come to learn, she expresses her truest romantic and sexual self when she showcases her "softest, submissive energy" (Aitken-Frappier, 2019).

I.A.F states she is a service-oriented submissive, acting out small gestures of kindness for her dominant partner (Aitken-Frappier, 2019). I.A.F explains these "Acts of Service" (Aitken-Frappier, 2019) would be less appreciated and "quickly taken for granted" in her vanilla relationships (Aitken-Frappier, 2019). The times in which she felt these acts were appreciated was when I.A.F engaged in BDSM. I.A.F expressed that a sense of equality came from these kink settings because her acts of servitude would be rewarded (Aitken-Frappier, 2019).

According to I.A.F, BDSM has taught her to be strong and sexually confident without needing to portray a "masculine or dominant persona" – which she admits feels "inauthentic" to her (Aitken-Frappier, 2019). In the subsequent analysis, I.A.F's article is analyzed in greater detail as I interpret how the "foundational principles of BDSM" have influenced I.A.F's personal growth and sense of empowerment (Aitken-Frappier, 2019).

### Analysis: I.A.F

In discussing her feelings as an empowered submissive, I.A.F reflects upon her past sexual self by providing readers with a look into the evolution of her accounts from her vanilla and BDSM activity (Aitken-Frappier, 2019).

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In the past, I.A.F struggled to express her sexual desires, as she herself was not attuned to her own needs and wants (Aitken-Frappier, 2019). Unsurprisingly, I.A.F felt frustrated with her partners because this lack of communication left her partners to make most of the decisions, thus she did not feel as though she owned her voice or independence when it came to her sexual identity (Aitken-Frappier, 2019). Her continual sexual rut informed I.A.F that it was time to prioritize and reflect upon her personal desires.

In realizing that the time for disappointing sexual outcomes needed to end, I.A.F entered a period of celibacy, using the time to reconnect with herself, and to do ample research in order to “[recover] from [her] past” so she could ‘ground’ herself for the future (Aitken-Frappier, 2019). After this point, she describes her state of being as “confident, energetic” and goddess-like (Aitken-Frappier, 2019), for she regained her self-awareness and confidence by creating and communicating her sexual wishes to her partners. BDSM, for I.A.F, helped guide her towards reclaiming her own voice and identity. Furthermore, I.A.F realized that through rightful communication, she did not need to validate or apologize for speaking up during BDSM. She learned the importance of equality through demonstrations of respect. She argues that through such demonstrations of safety and respect, “BDSM can be feminist” (Aitken-Frappier, 2019).

The most apparent connection to the theme of empowerment comes from her blatant use of the term *feminist*. Although, I.A.F’s reasoning about why BDSM can be feminist is oversimplified, she extends her readers an important note for consideration. It takes more than simple safety measures and communication for kink to be feminist, I.A.F highlights. We do not really need to engage with subversive sexual subcultures to understand feminist ideology. I.A.F explains that our ability to communicate in order to establish consent within BDSM spaces has the potential to unlock those feminist ideals even outside BDSM contexts (Aitken-Frappier,

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2019). I.A.F believes that if people valued communication, consent, and respect as much as they are emphasized in kink, then our social world would be different (Aitken-Frappier, 2019).

Throughout history, feminist ideas have upheld a long-contested resistance to patriarchal oppression. Therefore, when D/s relations mimic patriarchal and heterocentric power, there is hesitation from people considering it an empowering or feminist act. In fact, one of the first questions I.A.F had on her road to self-discovery was whether or not BDSM can be a feminist affair. Her very query into this topic resonates with many submissives, especially women (Aitken-Frappier, 2019; Scott, 2015; Slutty Girl Problems, 2019) concerned with managing their identities within a gendered social reality.

There is an expectation to understand the importance and presence of power-dynamics that is especially salient in D/s environments. However, our ability to manoeuvre within a society filled with hidden power structures is not easily done. As Foucault (1996) argues, power can be found everywhere— in the most corrupt instances of government to the smallest social exchange between a clerk and a customer. As soon as there is a resistive force attempting to oppose said power, inequality exists (Foucault, 1996; Plant, 2007).

The insight I.A.F brings to her readers is how crucial a conversation is with one's partner (Aitken-Frappier, 2019). The conversation is a discussion about much more than dominant and submissive roles (Aitken-Frappier, 2019), it is the understanding that one partner is *permitting* that the exchange goes on and that the “dominant only has as much power and control as the submissive gifts to them” (Aitken-Frappier, 2019). I interpret I.A.F's use of the term *feminist* as a way for her to demonstrate the knowledge of women's social position in western culture, and learning that in specific BDSM instances, power can still be manipulated without it having the same detrimental effects on the social standing of one individual over another (Foucault, 1996;

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Plant, 2007). Furthermore, I.A.F's accounts of empowerment stem from the terms she sets for herself, as her feelings of confidence are an important part of why BDSM has positively influenced her identity as both a woman and a submissive.

The absence of an explicit discussion of D/s performativity does make I.A.F's interpretation of BDSM different from the other two bloggers. With K.L and K.S, the element of fantasy and reality were notions present throughout their writing. For instance, K.L's reality revolved around performance— her sub responsibilities were also enmeshed with her duties as a mother. And K.S's writing, although less personalized, was emblematic of the empowering and problematic facets of participating in D/s relationships. Therefore, the idea of playing a part is apparent and personally meaningful to these submissive individuals.

I.A.F felt “inauthentic” when trying to be more assertive, or dominant, as she described (Aitken-Frappier, 2019). Enacting ‘masculine’ traits felt too unnatural— to the point where I.A.F did not feel herself. In her earlier years, she did express feeling as though her sexual identity was a “piece of performance art” rather than a self-assured, strong woman (Aitken-Frappier, 2019). Her prior experiences of trying to appease sexual partners may be why she disengages from claiming those D/s roles and directly connecting with ideas of fantasy fulfillment and performance. For I.A.F, it seems her journey was about finding her own sense of belonging and meaning. Embracing a submissive identity has enabled her true sexual self to emerge. I.A.F still maintains her “regular life” individuality, but seems quite empowered when speaking about her “submissive energy” (Aitken-Frappier, 2019). Therefore, the disassociation from the performative side of domination and submission is what makes sense to I.A.F— as the performative label designates a time where she did not feel her most vocal and self-assured (Aitken-Frappier, 2019). For I.A.F, it is about transcending pre-conceived notions of gendered

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performance and embodying an individualism that facilitates stronger mental and physical connections with others (Aitken-Frappier, 2019; Turley, 2016) while satisfying her desires.

### **Discussion**

The reason I have selected a dramaturgical theory as the basis of my research is due to the resemblance these metaphors have with the realities of life. Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical metaphor provides a unique social perspective in which to discuss subversive sexual partnerships—predominantly submissive performativity in D/s performances. In this discussion, I will reiterate my major themes in relation to the theoretical component of performance. These three bloggers gave distinct accounts of how their lives were enriched because of their submissive identities.

### **Submissive Performance**

Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective does not situate performance as something external to our authentic sense of self, rather his theoretical approach illustrates how we manage different versions of our self, depending on social circumstances. Playing a sexual role liberates us from the cultural expectations of performing in everyday social interactions. In the case of BDSM backspaces, these settings provided practitioners reprieve from engaging with normative, idealized frameworks of behaviour.

For K.L, her submissive performance was just as much a part of her authentic self as her role as mother. The various roles she performed daily were informed by the setting and other social actors around her. K.L managed her impressions and performance based on her audience and with whomever she was interacting. Goffman (1959) describes that team performances are important in assigning meaning to various roles as routinized performances are based on

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“intimate cooperation” (p. 104). K.S highlights the importance of teamwork in impression management as this can produce an intensely emotional and strong bond between dominant and submissive (Sarah, 2018).

In I.A.F’s case, what is especially interesting is her disuse of the term ‘performance’. Her disassociation from the dramaturgical lexicon highlights her determination not to fall back into those spaces where she felt inauthentic (Aitken-Frappier, 2019). Nonetheless, I.A.F still made mention of contrived roles and ‘masculine’ traits which demonstrated her awareness of the influential social roles people are expected to portray. Overall, submissive performativity helped these women to express themselves in a way that distanced their sub personas from the stereotypes and pressures found in gendered society.

### *Sub-Pillars of D/s Performance*

The pillars of safety, sanity and consent are emphasized by these submissive women, but their own narratives continuously mention three significant traits that, if not present, cannot produce a healthy D/s performance. I refer to these supplementary traits as sub-pillars to the general BDSM rules, and they are: communication, trust, and respect. These bloggers added new meaning to the subcultural expectations of D/s performativity. They assigned important meaning to the sub-pillars that serve to enhance the submissive experience.

In Foucault’s (1996) explanation of power exchanges in sadomasochism, power imbalances are inspired by the inequalities seen in society, but are distanced from their oppressive, hegemonic, and domineering intent. Power imbalances are repurposed to elicit pleasure and a sense of fulfillment. By taking good communication, trust, and respect and

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positioning them as the basis for any responsible BDSM performance, these bloggers have created new contexts where these three traits enabled feelings of empowerment.

In K.L.'s circumstance, communication was a valued attribute for their D/s play, but especially important in their domestic life as well. Daddy and babygirl's communicative strategies ensured that their performance was well planned and reinforced the boundaries of K.L.'s work-life and submissive obligations. I.A.F valued the importance of getting to know herself because her self-confidence facilitated her ability to communicate her desires to others. Furthermore, I.A.F's journey of self-discovery led her to trust herself when making decisions, and also learning that feeling comfortable with your own identity makes it easier to trust others (Aitken-Frappier, 2019). As other researchers suggest, trusting yourself leads to better self-esteem (Govier, 1993) and overall improved mental health (Hoff & Sprott, 2009). K.S viewed trust as something to instill in others using good sense and judgement skills for partner selection (Sarah, 2018). Having a trustworthy partner strengthens compatibility and fortifies trust (Sarah, 2018) for the D/s performance. In these blogs, self-trust impacted their own sexual identities.

Respect, although a relatively subjective concept, was most often paired with the other two sub-pillars. I.A.F defined respect for her partners by the ability to voice her thoughts "without hurting anyone's feelings" (Aitken-Frappier, 2019). Respect also demonstrated that it can reset the D/s power disparity to offer the submissive an equal say in the outcome of the performance. In K.L.'s performative role, her dominant showed her "respect in all things" (Lords, 2015) in and outside their D/s routine, validating her identity and contribution to the team dynamic.

## *Liberation & Empowerment*

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These bloggers expressed that bringing your sexual desires to life through submissive play can be a liberating and empowering feeling. As previously mentioned, fantasy and reality are concepts occupying the same space of what we perceive to be ‘real’. Although we may perform different versions of ourselves in varied settings (Goffman, 1959; Vösu, 2010), they are part of a complex understanding of a “unified, [and] continuous self” (Seregina, 2018, p. 59). The subjective realities of these submissive performers encompassed fantasy-driven desires as well as the realization that such performances were meant to be taken seriously, even if done in a playful way.

As I previously explained, liberation is often contrasted to oppression or feeling restrained. In these blogs, these feelings of liberation were often described as a road to self-discovery (Aitken-Frappier, 2019; Sarah, 2018)— free from the pressures of conformity, which posed a hindrance in I.A.F’s past (Aitken-Frappier, 2019). Feelings of freedom came when these submissives felt at ease speaking their minds, and respectfully negotiating the enactment of desires with their partners. Furthermore, I.A.F and K.L emphasized their liberation with the strategic use of ‘I’ pronouns, linking them to their decision-making processes and aspirations (Aitken-Frappier, 2019; Lords, 2015).

Empowerment was described as feeling in control of one’s wants, desires, tasks, and partner choice (Aitken-Frappier, 2019; Lords, 2015; Sarah, 2018). These women used submissive personas or energies to satisfy their mental and physical needs, but their state of empowerment extended beyond submissive gestures and behaviour. Their accounts of empowerment were produced through the power and control they acquired because of their sub role. Ironically performing submission gave these bloggers the ability to control what was done to them and by whom.

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My research shows that empowered states of being and feelings of liberation are indeed possible in submissive roles. Another reason for such positive feelings is related to the emotional ties to others and the self-love expressed by these submissive writers.

### Emotional Bonding

The purpose of fantasizing is to realize our wants and desires (Žižek, 1997, p. 13). In addition to fulfilling our desires, performing alongside someone else creates a “reciprocal dependence” (Goffman, p. 82) that allows teammates to connect on a deeper, meaningful level. Teams have the strongest performative bond when their routine has become naturalized through seamless communication and impression management (Goffman, 1959; Vösu, 2010).

K.L.’s D/s partnership displayed that naturalness and comfort for it produced a routinized performance that benefitted their other social roles, too. Bonding, for I.A.F was less about others, but focused inward— concentrating on improving the self. I.A.F’s journey illuminates the benefits of her emotional connection with herself and finding her footing as a means to acknowledge her sexual identity (Aitken-Frappier, 2019). For K.S, emotions were important in the subspace (Sarah, 2018) as they consisted of the highs and lows of partaking in submission. These emotions may potentially be volatile if met with insecurity and a poor self-esteem. K.S’s realistic admission of how emotionally “draining” (Sarah, 2018) submission can be emphasizes the importance of knowing oneself before taking on a submissive role. I.A.F’s and K.S’s blogs advised readers and practitioners to first learn more about themselves (Aitken-Frappier, 2019; Sarah, 2018); after all, the sexual politics of domination and submission can have serious effects on a person’s identity.

### Limitations

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Firstly, I would like to iterate that blogs are personal reflections and opinion pieces, therefore the interpretative results from such sources cannot be generalized to the masses. Furthermore, with these self-written articles, there may be biases in the author's depictions of themselves and their true-life circumstance, feelings, and emotions. Trying to paint a favourable picture to their readers, especially on a controversial topic such as BDSM, may very well have been plausible.

Content analysis is intended to give richer, deeper meaning to the results, in a way that differs from quantitatively-focused research. But, due to this research project's small-scale, it was difficult to represent the voices of many BDSM participants. For example, these three authors were women, partaking in heterosexual D/s activity. Although their contributions did provide unique insight and important revelations about submissive empowerment, these experiences pose a problem in the represented narratives of submissive practitioners. Submissive women experience submission with a dominant man in different ways than a submissive man would engage with a dominant woman. Although these women's lived experiences differ significantly, there may have been novel insight in interpreting the narratives of those performing outside heterosexual experiences.

A further note on representation, in addition to BDSM's lack of diversity within the community, I found it quite difficult to find blogs written by submissive men. I found a handful of blogs written by men, but they did not meet my selection criteria for further analysis. There were a few examples of blogs from submissive men written because they were obliged to by their mistress. These writings were part of their submissive tasks; however, I did not see how I could interpret such blogs in a way that would separate the men's true thoughts and feelings on submission with that of the creative writings of a submissive playing a part. I did not want my

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interpretation to be mostly speculative, leaving readers questioning the significance of performance in D/s relations.

### **Conclusion**

The importance of studying sexuality is that it gives us insight into our attitudes on sexual behaviour and intimacy. The ability for individuals to freely express their sexuality is a liberty often taken for granted, as members from subversive sexual cultures— such as in BDSM— are frequently misunderstood. A sadomasochistic relationship is stigmatized for its association to pain, violence, and problematic power exchanges (Airaksinen, 2018; Tomazos et al., 2017). But, the elements of pain and violence are not exclusive to a D/s relationship, as these factors present an awareness of D/s’ staged power dynamics that are inherently different from the social inequality people face. In my research, I argued that submissive performativity feels empowering because it creates contrived power exchanges that are a meaningful part of a submissive’s *subjective* reality.

In using Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical perspective, I situated D/s performance within an array of theatrical metaphors that emphasized sadomasochism’s playfulness when creating subjective realities. Furthermore, the manufactured power-dynamics are especially important in reinforcing the nature of domination and submission through the “eroticization of the body” and mind (Foucault, 1996, p. 384). The intent in sadomasochism is not to produce greater instances of oppressive violence and power, rather D/s performativity is about learning to create avenues of pleasure that transgress western conceptualizations of sexuality, and therefore feel empowered. My research goals were to answer the following research question: given the premise that BDSM roles are performative, what makes the submissive role feel empowering for BDSM participants? In my quest to answer my research question, I conducted a content analysis

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of three blogs, written by three submissives. Their articles provided an outlook that shed new light on the term 'submissive', in a D/s context.

In my findings I learned that submission begins with looking inward, learning to understand one's own traits, sexuality and limitations (Aitken-Frappier, 2019; Sarah, 2018). Submission is not about relinquishing a piece of oneself over to a dominant partner, it is a cooperative performance (Lords, 2015; Sarah, 2018), with ongoing signals, meanings and information in constant transmission between the dominant and submissive partners. The power is exchanged throughout the entire performance and should not deliberately be one-sided. The interesting finding was how the disclosure of feeling empowered and liberated was less connected to the overall D/s exchange, but more about the preparation going into the submissive performance.

As Goffman (1959) and Vösu (2010) explain, the backstage offers performers a space to relax and rehearse their roles in an informal setting. The backstage preparation, for these submissive women, was the ultimate liberating feeling. The backspace of BDSM provided these submissive performers with greater control in what they wanted to do and who they wanted to share the experience with. BDSM backspaces offer a break from adhering to the norms of social reality by allowing submissive performers "a means of escaping from high-level awareness of self as a symbolically mediated, temporally extended identity" (Baumeister, 1988, p. 28). The fantasy of performing sadomasochism is not just a means to produce new sexual outlets of pleasure, but to explore one's identity as it exists relative to the consciousness of those performers. The contrived power exchanges are meant to be emancipatory, not oppressive, and they exist within a subjective reality that encourages the enactment of fantasy and fulfillment of

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personal desire. As Weiss (2005) underlines, these power differences are implemented in D/s play in order to be “reworked in new ways” that benefit the performers (p. 210).

Hopefully my research has incited renewed interest in the dynamics of D/s performativity. This complex and multi-layered sexual identity can be researched in many ways, and has the potential to offer insightful perspectives that may curb the stigma surrounding submissive performativity and BDSM in general.

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### Appendix. Themes and Key Words for Submissive Role Analysis

Themes	Key words related to themes
1- Submissive Performance	domination, submission, serve, slave, master/mistress, tasks, submit, punishment, reward, obedience, play, perform, fantasy, good, bad, subservient, listen, compliance, devotion, desire, temptation, secret, hidden, taboo
2- Sub-Pillars of D/s Performance	safety, 'sanity', consent, knowledge, understanding*, experience*, trust*, respect*, communication*
3- Feelings of Liberation	choice, sexual discovery, awakening, fulfillment, satisfaction, freedom, emancipation, unrestricted, independence*, free-spirited, high self-esteem
4- Feelings of Empowerment	self-agency, shared decisions, independent decisions, powerful, control, strong, opinionated, assertive, cooperative, self-reliant, determined, personal growth, feminism
5- Emotional Bonding	intimacy, love, friendship, connection, communication, understanding, trust, respect, family, <i>physical gestures &amp; displays of affection (ex. kissing, terms of endearment, embracing, hugging, performing aftercare ...)</i>

\*these words can be shared among various themes since they will be differentiated based on their contexts