

University of Vermont

ScholarWorks @ UVM

---

UVM Honors College Senior Theses

Undergraduate Theses

---

2017

## Histories of Consent: Consent Culture and Community in Feminism and BDSM

Amanda Meltsner  
*University of Vermont*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/hcoltheses>

---

### Recommended Citation

Meltsner, Amanda, "Histories of Consent: Consent Culture and Community in Feminism and BDSM" (2017). *UVM Honors College Senior Theses*. 203.  
<https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/hcoltheses/203>

This Honors College Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Theses at ScholarWorks @ UVM. It has been accepted for inclusion in UVM Honors College Senior Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ UVM. For more information, please contact [donna.omalley@uvm.edu](mailto:donna.omalley@uvm.edu).

# Histories of Consent: Consent Culture and Community in Feminism and BDSM

---

Amanda Meltsner

University of Vermont Honors College

5/1/2017

## Table of Contents

Introduction	2
Methodology	4
Definitions and Descriptions	4
A Brief and Incomplete History of BDSM, With Assorted Add Ons	13
Beginnings	13
Leather: Bars, Clubs, and the Scene	15
Writings and Community	19
The Internet and Kink Community	26
Third Wave Feminism	32
Consent: A History, a Discourse	38
Kink and Consent	40
Origins	42
Academia	50
Feminist Understandings of Consent	53
Comparisons	60
<i>Fifty Shades of Grey</i> : Debates, Connections, and Progress	63
Critiques and Critics	64
Conclusion	78
Acknowledgements	80
References	81

## Introduction

This work aims to explore the conversations and disagreements between pro-kink and anti-kink feminists in the world of feminist writing from the early days of BDSM communities through the publication of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. It will examine how conversations about consent emerged from these issues in relation to BDSM, and how mainstream examples of BDSM have shaped how feminists talk about consent in mainstream culture in the US. By examining both the history of BDSM and feminism, this piece aims to bring together both sides of the feminist BDSM issue and show how recent conversations about consent have been the product of layers of disagreements and conversations between BDSM practitioners and feminists over time.

Since the 1970's, there has been intense controversy within the feminist community about what constitutes safe, acceptable, feminist sexual practices. In particular, there have been strong disagreements between kink-positive and kink-negative/ anti-kink feminists over whether BDSM (bondage/ domination, dominance/ submission, sadism/ masochism, also categorized as "kink") practices are acceptable and/or feminist. There has been a constant exchange between pro- and anti-porn feminists, lesbian separatist S/M practitioners and the mainstream lesbian community, feminists who advocate for personal autonomy of sexual choice and feminists who believe that some sexual practices are inherently violent towards women and should not be practiced, and practitioners of BDSM vs. those who don't partake. All of these conversations have centered on, at the core, whether BDSM is acceptable for anyone to practice in such a patriarchal and misogynistic culture.

With this research, I hope to demonstrate that both pro-BDSM and anti-BDSM feminists, through their writings, have influenced the general feminist movement and how it conceives of consent culture. Consent is a huge touchstone in the BDSM community, and the ways that that

community approaches consent have been picked up by the mainstream feminist movement, despite a sometimes vehement anti-BDSM response from these feminists. I aim to show that while there were disagreements between feminists about what counts as acceptable, the overall arc of the conversation had a positive yet unacknowledged impact on current understandings of what it means to be a consent-oriented feminist. In this way, the practices of marginalized groups—sexual outsiders in terms of kink and in terms of queerness, at least initially—have informed more mainstream movements. This balance between margin and center is at the heart of what I examine in this work: where practices have been picked up or discarded and where they become intertwined and indistinguishable between and among groups.

In terms of trajectory, this thesis will be broken up into three chapters, each of which covers a different aspect of the kink/feminist divide. Chapter 1 will start with the history of the BDSM community in the US on a broad scale, and how the feminist community has reacted to that subculture from the 1970's through present day. I will briefly examine the history of third-wave feminism through a description of several branches of theory that have defined parts of the third-wave feminist movement. Chapter 2 will look at how the kink community has defined and enforced consent and consent culture, and how several mainstream feminist (or arguably feminist) organizations have defined consent. Finally, Chapter 3 will examine the responses to the novel *Fifty Shades of Grey*, and how those responses fused feminist and BDSM ideas of consent into a more unified understanding of the term. This chapter will conclude with a description of overlaps between feminist-based and kink-based language around consent, and why that differs from previous iterations of the kink/feminist conversation.

## Methodology

For this paper, I have relied on a wide variety of primary and secondary sources. I chose to focus on four types of writings: newsletters, essays from the '70's and '80s which are treated as primary sources, scholarly writing across academic disciplines, and non-scholarly articles from the popular media. The newsletters came from the Leather Archives and Museum in Chicago, IL and are used with permission, though I have redacted some of the names and identifying information out of respect for privacy for the writers. I chose to treat the essays from members of the BDSM community (from anthologies such as SAMOIS's *Coming to Power* and books such as Larry Townsend's *The Leatherman's Handbook*) as primary sources because they speak to a very particular time, place, and cultural understanding. I view them as artifacts of a certain time period, written from specific perspectives. The academic studies come from a range of disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, and human sexuality. I also consulted some works in biology and the medical field, but chose not to include that line of research in this paper due to space constraints. The non-scholarly articles come from media sources that cover pop culture and news. Since BDSM has been in the wider media cycle more than ever in the past ten years, there was a wide range of articles and sources to choose from. Because of this range, I could focus on finding sources from more feminist news outlets, or from self-identified feminist authors. This allowed me to tailor my research a little more specifically.

## Definitions and Descriptions

This paper would not be complete without a fairly intensive overview of terminology. I will first begin with a general glossary, and then go into an overview of BDSM as a lifestyle. The glossary has a temporal aspect, as the terminology in the BDSM community has changed over time. For the purposes of this paper, I will be switching between more modern terminology and

the terminology used during the various time periods of study. Modern scholarship (by which I mean from the last ten years or so) uses either BDSM (bondage, domination/ submission, sadism/masochism) or kink to describe what people in the 1960's-80's called S/M (sadism/masochism) or leather.<sup>1</sup> The term leather was often specifically linked to the gay (and lesbian, sometimes begrudgingly) S/M community, and I use the terms S/M and leather interchangeably unless otherwise indicated.<sup>2</sup> There is arguably a difference between the practices of leather and S/M as individual establishments, but for the purposes of my research I do not believe this is a huge concern. In the history section, I will also use the terms gay and lesbian individually, referring to the traditional splits between men who are interested primarily in other men and women who are primarily interested in other women. The term “gay” will also be used as a blanket term (as in “gay leathermen and women”) to indicate non-hetero people partaking in various communities. This language is the language of the earliest time period discussed, and reflects the understandings and identity categories of the time. I do not intend to marginalize bisexuals, asexuals, pansexuals, or transgender or gender nonconforming people. Additionally, I will use the term “vanilla” to refer to non S/M practitioners, which in this case also implies vanilla homosexuals as well as the wider heterosexual world. The opposite of “vanilla” is “kinkster”, or someone who practices kink<sup>3</sup>. When the term “queer” appears in this paper, it will be either related to modern scholarship (in which it is a common blanket term for the LGBTQ+ community) or as a blanket term when no specificity is needed. Considering that queer was an

---

<sup>1</sup> Pat Califia, “A Personal View of the History of the Lesbian S/M Community and Movement in San Francisco,” in *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1987), 245–83; Larry Townsend, *The Leatherman's Handbook*, 3rd print (San Francisco: Le Salon, 1977); David M Ortmann and Richard A Sprott, *Sexual Outsiders: Understanding BDSM Sexualities and Communities* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015); Kathy Sisson, “The Cultural Formation of S/M: History and Analysis,” in *Safe, Sane and Consensual: Contemporary Perspectives on Sadomasochism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 16–40.

<sup>2</sup> Townsend, *The Leatherman's Handbook*; Geoffrey Mains, *Urban Aboriginals: A Celebration of Leather Sexuality*, 1st ed (San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> Ortmann and Sprott, *Sexual Outsiders*.

offensive term during much of the history examined in this paper, I am going to be careful with using it.

Before I define BDSM specific terms, I will first define feminist and/or wider historically based terms that become relevant in later sections. Broadly speaking, I will cover a range of feminist time periods, and it is important to note that each time period comes with specific understandings of what it means to be feminist. Though some of the definitions presented in this paragraph are not wholly relevant for the content of this paper, they are included because having a brief historical background to provide context is useful in understanding the wider trajectory of the feminist movement. Generally speaking, historians have divided the feminist movement in the United States into three categories: first wave, second wave, and third wave. First wave feminism began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and focused first on abolition of slavery, which then gave way to the eventual push for suffrage. This facet of feminism is credited with securing women the right to vote in the United States. Second wave feminism emerged roughly in the 1950's and '60's, and focused on issues of women in the workplace, lesbian and gay rights, and the voices of women of color, though all of these issues were often taken up by different second wave groups. One of the more important groups in the second wave for the purposes of this paper were the radical feminists, who focused specifically on dismantling the patriarchy and what they viewed as harmful stereotypes against women. This, for many radical feminists, included anti-BDSM ideologies and an exclusion of transgender women from their ranks, particularly in radical lesbian spaces. This aspect of feminism will be examined later in the paper. Finally, third wave feminism emerged in roughly the late 1980's and early 1990's, and historians and feminists still view this wave of feminism as the current prevailing feminist ideology, though there has been talk in activist spaces about the potential for a fourth wave to be

clearly defined.<sup>4</sup> Third wave feminism will be thoroughly defined for the purposes of this paper in later sections.

In terms of specific activities, BDSM has an extremely wide range of options, both physical and psychological. In general, BDSM eroticizes power, which in turn becomes the locus through which most BDSM activities are understood.<sup>5</sup> This eroticization is a central point of BDSM, though it is important to note the difference between the erotic and the sexual and to understand that not all BDSM is sexual, and that the understanding of its sexual or asexual nature may vary from person to person. For this section, I am drawing on the “Power of Language” chapter in David Ortmann and Richard Sprott’s excellent and thorough book *Sexual Outsiders: Understanding BDSM Sexualities and Communities*.<sup>6</sup> Their definitions and descriptions of BDSM activities and practices are some of the best ones I have come across over the course of my research, so they are the primary source for this section unless stated otherwise.

In terms of the acronym “BDSM”, each of the letters can have multiple meanings. Generally speaking, “bondage” refers to some kind of restraint, either with ropes, straps, or other devices. Discipline refers more to psychological restraint or constraints on a person, as well as more physical aspects such as punishment of varying types. These two subsets are not always viewed as related by kinksters, so I chose to define them separately instead of in a linked acronym.

Dominance/submission, or D/s, is a large part of the BDSM world for many people. D/s refers to a power dynamic between two or more individuals where one is the Dominant partner and one is the submissive. In other words, BDSM (and specifically D/s) eroticizes the actions of

---

<sup>4</sup> Martha Rampton, “Four Waves of Feminism,” *Pacific University Oregon*, October 25, 2015, <https://www.pacificu.edu/about-us/news-events/four-waves-feminism>. All definitions for this paragraph come from this source.

<sup>5</sup> Pat Califia, *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex*, 1st ed (Pittsburgh, Pa: Cleis Press, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> Ortmann and Sprott, *Sexual Outsiders*, 15–22.

exchanging power. The Dominant partner (also referred to as the Domme, Domina, or Dom, or perhaps Master/ Mistress/ Sir/ Miss) takes the assertive role, which means they are on the receiving end of a power exchange where one partner has control of one or more aspects of an encounter or relationship. The submissive (also known as the sub) is in the non-assertive role, which means relinquishing (or bequeathing) power to the Dominant, for whatever negotiated dynamic the two have. These roles can be distinct or overlapping with top/bottom roles, which indicate a more giving/receiving dynamic in terms of actions (so the Top would be the spanker, the bottom would be the spankee, for example) without a power exchange. Each D/s dynamic is unique, as a set of partners negotiates their own limits and boundaries within the relationship. Some D/s dynamics may only extend to a scene (a scene is a kink encounter between two or more people), while others are 24/7 lifestyle dynamics where each partner has a specific role they enact most or all of the time. For more information on the specifics of these dynamics in layman's terms, Dossie Easton and Catharine Liszt's *When Someone You Love is Kinky* and Jay Wiseman's *SM 10: A Realistic Introduction* are excellent resources for the curious bystander and the kink novice alike.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, the S/m in BDSM refers to sadism and masochism. Sadism refers to being aroused or into inflicting pain in others, while masochism is being aroused by or enjoying receiving pain. The actual acts of sadism and masochism may vary widely, as each person has specific things that turn them on or that they find fun. Initially, sexual sadism and sexual masochism were viewed as pathological conditions (see the research of the sexologists of the late 1800's for more information on this subject), and it is only a recent development in the medical

---

<sup>7</sup> Dossie Easton and Catherine A. Liszt, *When Someone You Love Is Kinky* (Emeryville, Calif: Greenery Press, 2000); Jay Wiseman, *SM 101: A Realistic Introduction* (San Francisco, CA: Greenery Press, 1998).

world that this assumption has changed.<sup>8</sup> Sadism and masochism can be sexual or non-sexual, much like other varieties of BDSM.

Outside of the technical definition of BDSM, many practitioners also have kinks and fetishes. While the definitions of these two words are related and often used interchangeably, I am choosing to define them separately. A kink refers to something that's an "abnormal" sexual taste, concept, or fantasy, while a fetish is a sexual taste that requires a certain object, act, or fantasy for sexual fulfillment. The difference is somewhat trivial, but I feel that it's important to acknowledge the nuances between the two. In this paper, the term "kink" will be used unless there is a specific reason for me to use the term "fetish". I feel that "kink" leave a more open interpretation, and acknowledges that kink as a practice (which is different from kink as a specific noun) and BDSM can be non-sexual.

The sexual/non-sexual binary is important to acknowledge when examining kink as a concept. While many vanilla folks and mainstream culture generally understand kink to be purely sexual, or as a "lead-up" to sexual activity, kinksters understand that BDSM can be both sexual and nonsexual. For example, some masochists may find pain to be a very sexual experience in that they can achieve orgasm from pain, while others are in it specifically for the endorphin release or mental catharsis that comes from a beating. There is a wide spectrum of sexual expression and sexuality within kink, with some practitioners linking kink and sex very tightly together while others have completely non-sexual relationships with partners with whom the practice. The term "play partner" is useful here— "play" refers to any type of kink activity, which by definition can either include sex or not. A play partner is someone with whom to do kink, but not necessarily someone with whom you are dating or having sex. Play partners can be

---

<sup>8</sup> R. von Krafft-Ebing et al., *Psychopathia Sexualis: The Classic Study of Deviant Sex* (New York: Arcade Pub./Skyhorse Pub., 2011), <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=1320587>. See also the work of Magnus Hirschfeld, who published a wide range of works that study this subject.

platonic or sexual, but they are always kinky. For example, two partners may partake in a dynamic where they do rope together (meaning they engage in bondage activities), and that may be a non-sexual experience for both of them, while another set of partners may also engage in the same dynamic and activities but find intense sexual satisfaction in those activities. In addition, some people may only do rope when they have sex, and don't view the rope part of the dynamic as separate from the sexual aspect. All of these positions on kink and sex (and the infinite number of options not listed) are valid and accepted within the community.

Additionally, the boundaries of kink and fetish are often blurred when it comes to interactions between partners.<sup>9</sup> For example, one partner may have a fetish for latex, but only when someone else is wearing it. This may prompt the other partner to wear latex for scenes, even though they do not get any thrill out of it, because they know their partner loves it and gets some kind of fulfillment from the presence of latex. This type of give-and-take relationship is important in kink-based dynamics— negotiation and disclosure of expectations for everything from a simple one-time scene at a party to a full time dynamic between partners in a committed relationship.

In this vein, the concept of negotiation and obtaining consent is one of the basic tenets of kink culture and community. It is a standard within the community that before playing or interacting with each other, potential partners will engage in conversation about expectations, limits, and boundaries. These negotiations may vary from something as simple as establishing a

---

<sup>9</sup> One important kink/fetish aspect worth noting is the presence of race play in BDSM. Race play involves partners having kinks or fetishes for a specific race. A similarly controversial issue within kink is the fetish for Nazi-based play, wherein practitioners wear Nazi uniforms and often enact prison or camp-based scenes. These two fetishes are extremely controversial for a number of reasons, including the fact that racism can and does appear in the BDSM community, as it does in any majority-white community in the United States, and that the presence of even pseudo-white supremacy can be extremely triggering for those who aren't on board with the scene or that kind of play. While I am not discussing the issues of race and racism in BDSM in this paper, I am acknowledging them here because they are present in these contexts and do come up in both play dynamics and social interactions in the BDSM community.

safeword (a word or phrase that stops a scene) and where someone can/can't be touched in a scene to a drawn out affair with checklists, intricate negotiations, and establishment of extensive (or non-extensive) boundaries for physical and mental engagement, toys, and limits. The concept of limits is fairly standard in any negotiation, though limits for each person may vary depending on trust, experience levels, and the venue in which the scene is taking place. A limit, simply put, is a boundary that a person doesn't want crossed. Limits can be hard or soft based on how uncomfortable a person is with an idea or action. The establishment of limits is incredibly important for kink scenes-- crossing limits is seen as a consent violation and can be very triggering for the person on the receiving end of non-consensual limit pushing. Key here is the concept of consent, which the hallmark of all types of discussion around potential kink-related activities. Partners must establish consent before engaging in any activities with each other. This phenomenon of basically universal consent expectations in the BDSM community will be discussed later in the paper.

BDSM itself is, in the words Ortmann and Sprott, a "neutral".<sup>10</sup> It is not inherently good or bad in concept or in practice. The people and relationship dynamics can be healthy or unhealthy, but the concepts themselves are not inherently harmful or helpful. It is important to keep this in mind when considering the history of BDSM, and the ways in which BDSM practitioners have been treated by the medical community and by vanilla society in general. There are many stigmas against kinksters, both historically and currently, and it has taken massive efforts from within the kink community to start to remove some of those stigmas.

With this work, I hope to aid the anti-stigma campaign, as well as produce useful research that is accessible to both academia and the average person. BDSM is still considered to be on the fringes or even over the line of acceptable sexuality in Western culture, despite the

---

<sup>10</sup> Ortmann and Sprott, *Sexual Outsiders*, 68.

rising number of mainstream depictions of kink in various forms. However, even with *Fifty Shades of Grey* bringing a certain type of BDSM to the general consciousness, there are still many problems with the depictions of kink and the people who practice it, even within the feminist mainstream that has intertwined with many ideas taken from within the kink community. It is this tension that I hope to examine and illuminate. The studies of tensions between groups often reveal deeper intricacies than those originally seen on the surface, and by examining the tensions between kink and feminist communities, and I hope to show that both communities have commonalities. These commonalities will hopefully serve as a lens through which both the average person and the educated feminist can view BDSM as more generally acceptable, without taking away the status of the BDSM community as an edge culture that merits careful and non-fetishistic consumption and contemplation.

## **A Brief and Incomplete History of BDSM, With Assorted Add Ons**

This section will entail a brief historical timeline of the BDSM community and its relation to the feminist movement, from the 1970's up to the publication of *Fifty Shades of Grey* in 2012. Establishing a chronological timeline allows me to develop a cohesive narrative of BDSM and feminism and how they relate. However, it is important to note that this timeline is just one aspect of the history of both communities, and that this timeline focuses on specific aspects of a larger history in order to draw certain connections and comparisons. I will do an overview of the BDSM community (referred to as the S/M community up to a certain point due to temporal linguistic patterns) in terms of formation, and then link that formation to the Feminist Sex Wars of the 1970's and '80's and explore the historical conversations and disputes between pro S/M and anti S/M feminists through that lens. I then will discuss the advent of the Internet for community formation in the BDSM world, discuss the concepts of third wave feminism that emerged at around the same time as online groups for kinksters, and finally bring the two together with *Fifty Shades* and the disputes that followed its publication. I will not go into deep detail in any of these sections, but rather provide a topical overview of relevant points and events that show how BDSM and feminism have played together over time.

### Beginnings

By most accounts, the modern S/M community (in this case focused on the United States) started around the 1940's and 50's, depending on who you ask. Most writers on this subject agree that by the 1950's, there was an interest in leather, and by the '60's, gay leather bars were the home of S/M and leather as a sexual practice. There is also a general understanding that the terms sadism and masochism came, respectively, from the Marquis De Sade and his early 19th century writings on the pleasures of giving pain, and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch and his

writings on feeling pain in a sexual sense from the mid-19th century.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, the idea of positive representation of S/M as a culture was not apparent until the 1970's.<sup>12</sup> Generally speaking, the pathologizing of S/M and related fetishes was part of the first studies of sexuality and the field of sexology, which can be seen in the works of Richard von Krafft Ebing.<sup>13</sup>

However, before the beginnings of sexology as a field and the “official” study of sadomasochism scholars across disciplines have asserted that “S/M has roots reaching far back into history”<sup>14</sup> and some in fact go as far back as the ancient world and reference the practice of keeping slaves and homosexual marriage in Rome and Greece to vouch for modern day S/M cultures.<sup>15</sup> In this vein, examples of flagellation through history have been presented to show a type of temporal community for S/M through the years, including a whole history of flagellation written by an English pastor in the 1800's! Most of these presentations up to the 1970's were negative in light and tone, though Paul H. Gebhard, a colleague of noted sexologist Alfred Kinsey, wrote about sadomasochism in a historical and non-negative light, and emphasizes a cultural theory construction of S/M type relationships that said that those dynamics had been around for a very long time.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, until the 1940's, there was no clear distinction between S/M as a sexual orientation and S/M as a practice in the scholarly or mainstream literature.<sup>17</sup> This point becomes important when focusing on the formation of a community after the 1940's.

---

<sup>11</sup> Townsend, *The Leatherman's Handbook*.

<sup>12</sup> Eric Chaline, “On Becoming a Gay SMer: A Sexual Scripting Process,” in *Safe, Sane and Consensual: Contemporary Perspectives on Sadomasochism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> Krafft-Ebing et al., *Psychopathia Sexualis*.

<sup>14</sup> Townsend, *The Leatherman's Handbook*, 6.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 7–8.

<sup>16</sup> Levi G.W. Kamel, “The Leather Career: On Becoming a Sadomasochist,” in *S/M: Studies in Dominance and Submission* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1995), 52–53.

<sup>17</sup> Sisson, “The Cultural Formation of S/M: History and Analysis,” 19.

## Leather: Bars, Clubs, and the Scene

Clearly, the practice of S/M has been present for many years, though in its current form writers tend to mark the 1950's as the start of the community as we know it, citing "black leather and motorcycles"<sup>18</sup> and the gay motorcycle clubs that eventually coalesced into gay leather bars that were the starting point for loosely organized communities of S/M folk, particularly in New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles in the '50's. San Francisco, generally regarded as a hub of S/M activity, didn't really get its start until the 1960's with the infamous bar the Tool Box, which first opened in the early part of that decade.<sup>19</sup> Along with the bars, communities began forming around S/M support groups, such as the Eulenspiegel Society in NYC and Society of Janus in San Francisco.<sup>20</sup> These types of organizations, as well as the bars, were key in creating community spaces, which in turn led to a wider network of S/M practitioners that created all types of printed works that also helped sustain those spaces and advocate for S/M acceptability within both straight and gay/lesbian spaces.

For much of the modern day scene (defined here as starting in the 1960's), bars, clubs, and private parties were the primary locus of community for S/M folk. Many of these parties took place in the backs of bars (leather or gay affiliated), rented spaces, in private residences, due to the stigma of having such parties even within the gay community. The bar scene in particular was initially associated with bikers in general and not necessarily affiliated with S/M, but that assumption slowly shifted and by the '70's leather bars were in full swing in many major cities. As the introduction to *Leatherfolk*, a classic anthology of writing by members of the leather community, states: "while not everyone associated with these early clubs had an interest in

---

<sup>18</sup> Townsend, *The Leatherman's Handbook*, 6.

<sup>19</sup> Gayle Rubin, "The Catacombs: A Temple of the Butthole," in *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics and Practice* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1991), 119.

<sup>20</sup> Sisson, "The Cultural Formation of S/M: History and Analysis," 24.

sadomasochism, they provided a welcoming space for men who did”.<sup>21</sup> Leather bars eventually developed as places where S/Mers could meet each other, and often could play right in the bar. Many bars had back rooms or play spaces where any manner of events could be going on.<sup>22</sup> Bars, if they had back rooms, could also host parties. Parties were a major gathering point for the community, and had their own sets of rules and etiquette that was similar across genre, style, and participants, regardless of setting.<sup>23</sup> This similarity helped form a solid community, a catalyst which was also encouraged by the very definition of an S/M party. As Charles Moser, a sex educator and clinical sexologist, notes in his 25 year study of kink parties, “S/M parties also have a social function... S/M parties are similar to other parties, in that they are a place for socializing, refreshments are usually available, and they are an enjoyable way to spend social time.”<sup>24</sup> This emphasis on socialization in addition to play demonstrates the affinity the community had for personal interaction on multiple levels, which often started with play but branched out into activism and other social engagements. Knowledge of these parties was largely passed on by word of mouth, though in later years when organizations began to flourish, newsletters and mailing lists were hubs of communication.<sup>25</sup> This phenomenon will be discussed later in this work.

Parties remained the hub of communication and engagement in the community for many years, and were in fact the site of many important interactions outside of kinky or sexual gratification. Contacts at parties and through S/M networks created at parties helped form the first leather bars and have continued to be “important mechanisms for building and maintaining

---

<sup>21</sup> Mark Thompson, ed., *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice*, 1st ed (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1991), xv.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Moser, “S/M Interactions in Semipublic Settings,” in *Sexual Deviance: A Reader* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003); Pat Califia, “A Secret Side of Lesbian Sexuality,” in *S/M: Studies in Dominance and Submission* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1995).

<sup>23</sup> Moser, “S/M Interactions in Semipublic Settings,” 235.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>25</sup> Thompson, *Leatherfolk*.

leather and S/M communities.”<sup>26</sup> This effort of community maintenance was also important in terms of identity formation, which became an extremely necessary and integral part of the larger S/M community. Finding acceptance and like-minded individuals was a key element in many S/Mer’s search for community, and the formation of a shared identity through shared experiences boosted the presence and feeling of a community even outside the parties. In fact, parties were the beginnings of several organizations. One such organization was the Society of Janus, which was formed by Cynthia Slater in 1974 after she began attending parties at the Catacombs in San Francisco, which catered specifically to gay men interested in fisting (though it later expanded to include lesbians and people of other identities.)<sup>27</sup> In terms of the Catacombs, which has a unique and fascinating history, Gayle Rubin, a well-known gender theorist and cultural anthropologist who also actively participated in the leather scene, notes in her enchantingly titled “The Catacombs: A Temple of the Butthole”, “the Catacombs facilitated the formation of important friendships and lasting networks of support.”<sup>28</sup> These support networks were part of what created a shared S/M identity among players, even if tastes differed.

This affinity has been studied by anthropologists and sociologists, both fields of which conclude that S/M is a sexual subculture and even a tribe. Geoffrey Mains, an active leatherman who produced *Urban Aborigines*, classic anthropological text on the leather community, notes that “leatherfolk have an affinity for other leatherfolk.”<sup>29</sup> He also asserts that this does not mean that leatherfolk are necessarily uncomfortable with the gay community (or even the straight community), but rather that there is an immediate closeness with other people involved in leather and the S/M lifestyle. This points to a type of sexual culture that one feels attached to, just as one

---

<sup>26</sup> Rubin, “The Catacombs: A Temple of the Butthole,” 121.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 130; David Stein, “S/M’s Copernican Revolution: From a Closed World to the Infinite Universe,” in *Leatherfolk, Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1991), 136; Sisson, “The Cultural Formation of S/M: History and Analysis,” 24–25.

<sup>28</sup> Rubin, “The Catacombs: A Temple of the Butthole,” 139.

<sup>29</sup> Mains, *Urban Aborigines*, 81.

might feel culturally close to a religion or a community one grew up in and can return to. Charles Moser notes that “an acceptance of S/M identity role is clearly part of the reason that individuals attend. It is also an atmosphere where individuals can garner support for their behavior.”<sup>30</sup> This type of community and affinity of identity points to a type of sexual culture that fulfils several roles for people, depending on their needs. S/M communities provide an origin story, establish behavioral codes, create a system of shared meanings, and generate a sexual identity, among other things.<sup>31</sup> David Stein, in recounting his own experiences with getting involved in the S/M community, noted that “more than sex, I needed role models, mentors, to reassure me that S/M was okay, to show me that it could be done safely, positively, not self-destructively.”<sup>32</sup> This need for a community expressed in Stein’s description speaks to the overall need to find others who have similar sexual identities and desires. It is this drive that created the bars and parties that helped for the community in the ‘60’s and ‘70’s, and it is this drive that also created the organizations, publications, and communications that helped the community both grow and stabilize from its beginning in the ‘60’s to the birth of the Internet in the ‘90’s.

Kink communities tended to form in larger metropolitan areas, passed along by word of mouth, but that is only one facet of the whole. In fact, many gay and lesbian S/M practitioners came to the community through print media—books, pamphlets, and personal ads. Kink was still taboo for many people, even in the days of gay cruising areas, bars, and clubs, though S/M friendly varieties of these venues definitely existed. The proliferation of materials describing S/M activities, encounters, information, and pride during this time was a touchpoint for many who became involved socially, sexually, or both. These printed works, which were sometimes sponsored by brick-and-mortar gathering places, helped create both kink-friendly spaces and a

---

<sup>30</sup> Moser, “S/M Interactions in Semipublic Settings,” 239.

<sup>31</sup> Sisson, “The Cultural Formation of S/M: History and Analysis,” 31.

<sup>32</sup> Stein, “S/M’s Copernican Revolution: From a Closed World to the Infinite Universe,” 143.

set of social norms for the curious as well as the self-identified S/M practitioner. Many of these texts also dealt with the “closeted” aspect of being part of the non-vanilla (but still queer) world, and also provided resources to address these issues. These publications were entirely necessary for many gay leathermen and women, because the very existence of a leather community was either an issue of contention or one that was entirely private and not mentioned in the open. These communities functioned much like the vanilla gay and lesbian communities in that they often had to hide from heterosexual prying eyes and stigma and develop in private. However, the gay and lesbian leather communities often had to develop or exist separately from “mainstream” gay/lesbian entities, because the issue of S/M was often one of respectability, if not simply an issue of differing interests. I will examine this split in greater detail in the following pages.

### Writings and Community

Personals and advertising proved to be crucial for community development, though writers who chose to be overt instead of covert with their wording often ran into difficulties. As it turns out, the vanilla community was not so into the idea of S/M, especially as the ‘70’s wore on and the feminist movement gained a voice. There were two splits that happened in terms of acceptance: one between the kink and vanilla worlds in general, and one specifically between the kink and non-kink folks in the lesbian feminist movement. The gay male movement as an entity did not have the same problems within its ranks between leather and non-leather, though there was definitely still contention on day to day level that can be traced.<sup>33</sup> Geoffrey Mains also asserts that the status of the leatherman is to be “in a form of mental isolation from the mainstream of society that has been maintained by stigma. An almost universal condemnation of

---

<sup>33</sup> Eric E. Rofes, “Snapshots of Desire: Surviving as a Queer Among Queers,” in *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1981).

leathersex... raises a barrier about their social life, companionships, and expectations.”<sup>34</sup> This sentiment is echoed by other writers who were observing their own communities, especially along the lines that S/M is somehow an aberration of love and therefore not in line with the mainstream homosexual community that had a somehow purer standard of love. S/M was consistently viewed as a negative facet of the homosexual community, even by those within that larger community.<sup>35</sup> It is worth noting that most writers who have experienced the scene and the changes it went through from the ‘60’s to the ‘80’s have noted that the infiltration of heterosexuals into what were once almost exclusively gay spaces happened as S/M voices got louder, not when society was more accepting of those voices.<sup>36</sup> For once in queer history, heterosexual allies couldn’t really help a homosexual cause, regardless of how much they may have tried.

These tensions between communities are perhaps best illustrated by the many issues faced by the lesbian S/M community in their interactions with the greater lesbian and the greater feminist communities from the late 1970’s into the 1990’s. Groups such as SAMOIS (a lesbian S/M organization) were extremely vocal about their S/M ties and their ties to the feminist community, and that vocalization caused them many problems, both on a group and a publishing level. Many lesbian S/M practitioners felt so shunned by their own communities of women and so few were talking about S/M before the founding of the women’s leather scene in the late ‘70’s and early ‘80’s that they ended up mixing solely with gay male leather groups, because they were the most welcoming to other S/M identified people. Pat Califia, a scholar and active S/M participant, notes in their essay on the beginnings of lesbian S/M that “I hang out in the gay

---

<sup>34</sup> Mains, *Urban Aboriginals*, 19.

<sup>35</sup> Kamel, “The Leather Career: On Becoming a SadoMasochist.”

<sup>36</sup> Rick Houlberg, “The Magazine of a SadoMasochism Club: The Tie That Binds,” in *S/M: Studies in Dominance and Submission* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1995), 283.

community because that's where the sexual fringe starts to unravel."<sup>37</sup> They also argue that lesbian S/Mers had nowhere else to go, and had to create their own communities when they were rejected by both conservative gay liberationists from the broader homosexual community and from orthodox feminists who ended up being a vocal part of the anti-porn and anti-sex faction that attempted to destroy what they viewed as dangerous expressions of sexuality.<sup>38</sup> This type of hostility worked both ways to some extent, however. An article from 1964 covering the infamous Tool Box bar in New York asserted that "the hostility of the minority "leather" crowd towards the rest of the "gay" world is exceeded only by the bitterness of individual homosexuals towards the "straight" public", while Levi Kamel argues that "mainstream gays often shun leathermen out of fear, S/M men exclude certain groups themselves, out of a fear more justified."<sup>39</sup> However, as the lesbian S/M practitioners argued, fear of something you deliberately don't understand is different from fear of known violence and threat of community destruction that was so heralded by the anti-SM factions of the feminist movement.

SAMOIS and their experiences with trying to break into the mainstream lesbian feminist movement illustrate the issues that they had with the wider community. When SAMOIS first started advertising in the lesbian feminist community, their publications were met with much resistance. When their first book, *What Color is Your Handkerchief?*, was published in 1979, its presence in feminist bookstores was met with a lot of resistance. The stores would often refuse to carry SAMOIS publications due to the content, because on the whole these cooperatively owned stores fell into the anti-S/M camp, based on the idea that S/M couldn't be feminist, was violence

---

<sup>37</sup> Califa, "A Secret Side of Lesbian Sexuality," 140.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>39</sup> Kamel, "The Leather Career: On Becoming a Sadoomasochist," 239.

against women, or that it was a reproduction of patriarchal power structures.<sup>40</sup> These stores found it in their interests to censor pro S/M publications so they would not be faced with endorsing behavior against their stated beliefs. Other stores, if they decided to carry the booklet at all, would either keep it behind the counter like something that had to be regulated, or distribute it with anti S/M content along with purchase of the booklet.<sup>41</sup> This censorship made it difficult for the lesbian S/M movement to educate, because they were often at the mercy of the spaces they were trying to bring educational material to. The censoring of material based solely on perceived content, not intent, also extended to other forms of printed media as well.

In particular, feminist journals and newspapers that professed to be open minded were incredibly against publishing any sort of S/M content, and often did so under great caution, if they published at all. Both Gayle Rubin and Pat Califia describe the struggle of getting the call for papers for what would become *Coming to Power* out to the greater lesbian community. They did their own mailings to contacts they had within the community, but they also reached out to bookstores, newspapers, and other publications. They found out rather quickly that most newspapers and many of the feminist and/or lesbian journals refused to circulate their information, based solely on the fact that they were involved in S/M. When they did end up getting papers, about half of them were either received or published under pseudonyms, for fear of retribution within either the lesbian or the wider heterosexual communities in which writers passed unnoticed.<sup>42</sup> These debates took place both within the leadership meetings of these publications and within the pages, though this debate was often censored. The Society of Janus

---

<sup>40</sup> "Excerpt from Shelix Newsletter," *The Lunatic Fringe: Newsletter of the Outcasts*, 1989, Leather Archives and Museum.

<sup>41</sup> Gayle Rubin, "The Leather Menace: Comments on Politics and S/M," in *Coming To Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Alyson Publications, n.d.).

<sup>42</sup> SAMOIS (Organization), ed., *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M, S/M: A Form of Eroticism Based on a Consensual Exchange of Power*, 3rd U.S. ed., and updated (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1987).

ended up doing a concentrated flyering campaign after several magazines published anti-S/M rhetoric that targeted the group as one that was anti-feminist and anti-lesbian. SOJ resorted to flyering and in-person campaigns because the publications that were offering critiques of S/M often wouldn't publish rebuttals from pro S/M writers on the grounds that publishing pro S/M content was against what they were about as feminists.<sup>43</sup> This type of one-sided discourse was also demonstrated in groups that were supposedly dedicated to all aspects of the lesbian experience. Margaret Hunt, a contributor to *Coming to Power*, writes in her essay on her experiences at the 1986 Mount Holyoke conference on issues in feminism and sex that there was a strong link at the conference between anti S/M feminists and anti-porn feminists, who she also classified as anti-sex. She believed that the whole conference was anti-sex and pro-censorship when it came to lesbian sex magazines and any kind of S/M content, especially if the content was positive (i.e. S/M themed porn or erotica).<sup>44</sup> These examples indicate that the S/M movement was hemmed in on many sides, and that censorship was apparently encouraged when it came to acts and ideas that the feminist community couldn't agree on. Pat Califia reflected on this phenomenon in the 1990's, saying that "S/M literature is always being confiscated, banned, or burned by government officials or prudish, politically correct gay or feminist activists."<sup>45</sup> This prudishness was a hallmark of the discord between the S/M and vanilla communities, which has continued even post *Fifty Shades*.

In addition to the evidence cited in the academic world, writing from the wonderful *Lunatic Fringe* demonstrates the discord between lesbians, S/M women, and the burgeoning lesbian/feminist movement of the 1980's. *The Lunatic Fringe: Newsletter of the Outcasts* was, as

---

<sup>43</sup> Califia, "A Personal View of the History of the Lesbian S/M Community and Movement in San Francisco," 252.

<sup>44</sup> Margaret Hunt, "Report on a Conference on Feminism, Sexuality and Power: The Elect Clash with the Perverse," in *Coming to Power: Writing and Graphics on Lesbian S/M*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1987), 82–86.

<sup>45</sup> Califia, *Public Sex*, 229.

their official title states, the newsletter of the Outcasts, an S/M group for women in the Bay Area that formed in the spring of 1984, after the old discourse about lesbian only vs. woman only S/M spaces rekindled and became an issue.<sup>46</sup> The October 1987 Ex-Coordinator's report indicated that the group was meant for "separatists and bisexuals, lesbian-identified women and women who identify as heterosexual, yet play with other women, women by assignment and women by choice, women who play heavy and women who play light. Let a thousand hankies bloom."<sup>47</sup> This emphasis on inclusion indicates that perhaps the S/M world of this time period was slightly more accommodating of a wide variety of women and woman-identified people than the average lesbian separatist feminist, and that inclusion was a central point of the organization. Their official tagline on every newsletter was "An Educational, Support and Social Group for all Women interested in SM between women including Lesbian, Bi-Sexual and Transsexual women", showing both an emphasis on education and a respectful and welcoming environment for all women.

The Outcasts clearly had no time for the anti-porn shenanigans of the lesbian feminist sector: a particularly emphatic article entitled "!!!! ANTI-PORN ALERT !!!!!" from a 1988 issue made members aware of a "new anti-porn group called Women Organizers Against Pornography and Prostitution (WOAPP), which in their conference against porn in the Bay Area said in their invite that 'we request attendees refrain from wearing black leather and/or SM paraphernalia, in respect for sexual abuse survivors.'" The SM activists were clearly not amused, and provided information for how to get in contact with the offending organization and about the potential of attending in protest or picketing with local sex workers. This sentiment was

---

<sup>46</sup> I am choosing not to include the authors of the publications in this writing, because of issues of privacy. The original authors were writing to a specific and vetted audience, and I don't think publishing their names to a very different audience is an ethical move.

<sup>47</sup> "Ex-Coordinator's Report," *The Lunatic Fringe: Newsletter of the Outcasts*, 1987, 4, Leather Archives and Museum.

reiterated in 1989, when *LF* printed an excerpt from the Shelix newsletter about the closing of the Womanfyre bookstore in Northampton MA, due to anti porn/anti SM lesbians protesting, destroying materials, and harassing the owners/workers. The protestors also started another bookstore (Lunaria) that was deemed the “clean PC feminist bookstore” that those lesbians wanted.<sup>48</sup> The tone of the piece suggested outrage that other lesbians would be attacking a legitimate and loved business, and that the censorship and destruction of S/M and pornographic materials was designed to intimidate and shame those who wanted to partake. It is important to acknowledge this quasi-violent history against S/M women specifically at the hands of radical feminists and lesbian separatists who seemed at one point hell-bent on eradicating S/M practicing women from larger, woman-only spaces. This history is evident at the now infamous Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival (MWMF), which caused quite a stir due to its policies over the years that attempted, at various points, to ban trans women from its premises. While the festival gained the most notoriety for that controversial policy, it also in 1989 decided to ban S/M play and practice from its premises, due to an apparent concern about abuse from festival-goers. This decision, of course, did not go over well.

The August 1989 issue of *The Lunatic Fringe* contained a reprinted letter from the Outcasts organization to the organizers of the MWMF in response to their decision to ban S/M activities from the festival. The letter strongly indicated that “safe, sane, and consensual” were the buzzwords of kink, and that the organizers were discriminatory in their assumption that S/M was abusive. The “Editor’s Soapbox” section of that same issue contained the assertion that “safety, sanity, consensuality are the items on which we expect ourselves to agree as a community. Beyond that, what you do and how you do it is between you and your partner.”<sup>49</sup> In

---

<sup>48</sup> “Excerpt from Shelix Newsletter,” 3.

<sup>49</sup> “Editor’s Soapbox,” *The Lunatic Fringe: Newsletter of the Outcasts*, 1989. Leather Archives and Museum.

response, the May 1990 edition printed a rebuttal from the organizers of the MWMF, saying that having open air or even private but audible S/M activity was a violation of “community consent”, among other things.<sup>50</sup> This key lack (or refusal) of understanding about community standards for S/M and the apparent unwillingness to compromise on what might be called anti-porn, anti-sexuality values was a now obvious hallmark of a certain sector of the lesbian/feminist community during the 1980’s and into the 1990’s. This mentality is thankfully not as prevalent as it once was, but it can still be found in various sectors of the internet and in certain lesbian or woman-only spaces.

### The Internet and Kink Community

This history of place, communication, and discord between kinksters and others is extremely important in relation to the Internet and the dawning of the *Fifty Shades* era further down the road. Kink communities in general faced a large shift from the ‘80’s into the ‘90’s and early 2000’s, due to the AIDS crisis, the advent of third wave feminist thought, and the rise of the Internet and online communities. As detailed above, many of the main kink communities and hubs for kink activity were run by and populated with gay men and women (broadly speaking). AIDS devastated these communities of gay men in the US through the 1980’s, and that devastation spread to the kink community as well. Many clubs were forced to close due to fear of the disease, which for a period of years was not well understood or tracked.<sup>51</sup> However, the need for community was still there, as AIDS became better understood, kinksters began to rebuild their spaces. Much of the casual sex aspect of the scene changed in the post-AIDS years, as did the sexuality components: by the 2000’s, the scene was largely heterosexual in both the physical realm and in reputation. Additionally, evidence from both *The Link* (the newsletter of the

---

<sup>50</sup> “Response from the Organizers of the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival,” *The Lunatic Fringe: Newsletter of the Outcasts*, 1990, 11. Leather Archives and Museum.

<sup>51</sup> Rubin, “The Catacombs: A Temple of the Butthole.”

National Leather Alliance- International) and *The Lunatic* indicates that by the mid 1990's, organizations both large and small were moving from the physical realm to the online world. The phenomenon of the Internet exploded, and by the late '90's and into the 2000's, much of kink communication and information moved online. This coincides with the general rise of the blogosphere, chat rooms, message boards, and listservs, the technology of which many kinksters latched onto and harnessed for their own purposes.

Primary source material comes in useful here: newsletters from the 1990's show the actual shift from print to online communication. Both *The Link* (NLA-I's newsletter) and *The Lunatic Fringe* cover very early versions of the Internet, including how to access it and where one could join message boards or email lists of fellow kinksters. A particularly interesting early manifestation of online kink culture comes from the September 1994 edition of *The Link*. The newsletter chose to actually include a dedicated column to internet issues, entitled "SM in Cyberspace". The author describes her discovery of the internet, specifically BBS, or bulletin board service, saying "through the conversations we shared, the notes written back and forth and the stories read, I discovered a vibrant, exciting community."<sup>52</sup> The recollection of an online interaction in a still very much physically printed newsletter provides an interesting viewpoint of the interactions and shifts between the "real" world and the "online" world. Additionally, the author relates her experiences with community interactions online, saying "we've made an interesting discovery: there are thousands of folk out there (hundreds here in Columbus alone) who practice SM and don't even know it," referring to the discovery of a whole community of online players who apparently had no idea there was a wider real life community with rules, protocol, and history, but had still managed to find each other, communicate, and play online.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> Purrfect, "SM In Cyberspace," *The Link*, September 1994, 6, Leather Archives and Museum.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

By 1995, the Internet was apparently a place that needed some guidance, as evidenced by the charmingly titled “What Is This Thing Called Internet?” in *The Link*. It gives an overview of the concept of the internet, recommendations for chatrooms, BBSs, and email/listservs, as well as a plug for the World Wide Web.<sup>54</sup> By 1997, *The Link* contained warnings about surfing the Web on the clock at work and using work emails on mailing lists (privacy concerns changed rather drastically with the Internet age).<sup>55</sup> Interestingly, most ads and listings by this point contained emails and websites that people could go to for more info, along with or instead of PO boxes or mailing addresses. The November 1997 issue of *The Link* featured a “Links of the Week” column, which ran for more than a few issues and featured new things to do and see on the Internet.<sup>56</sup> By 1998, veiled advertisements for paid porn sites were appearing, with the age of Internet porn apparently at hand. By the early 2000’s, Internet ads and links were completely standard, with many organizations featuring their own websites and listservs. This surge in Internet advertising and an apparent proliferation of real life S/M groups making a concentrated organizational appearance online indicates that the kink community was ready and willing to engage with online community organizing and fun, in addition to keeping the older, printed traditions alive (up to a point).

This trend of moving online continued up through the advent of fetish specific sites. Much like the vanilla world the fetish world grew and changed with the rise and fall of various technologies, moving from message boards to email to even Facebook over time. Researching this particular shift is difficult due to the ephemeral nature of certain web mediums and the surprising inaccessibility of digital archives of long-gone websites and web content. While I was

---

<sup>54</sup> Leonard Dworkin, “What Is This Thing Called The Internet?,” *The Link*, July 1995, 13, Leather Archives and Museum.

<sup>55</sup> “Internet Tidbit,” *The Link*, March 1997, 5, Leather Archives and Museum.

<sup>56</sup> “Links of the Week,” *The Link*, November 1997, Leather Archives and Museum.

not personally witnessing the kink aspect of these changes, I can assume, given the trajectory of the Internet as a whole, that online kink spaces evolved along with the rest of the Internet in terms of changing technology. It has been incredibly difficult to track these changes and find “proof” of my assumptions, but I have done my best as someone who has very little knowledge of Internet archival material and online forensics techniques.

As chat rooms and online personals or discussion boards waned in popularity, new, kink-specific sites and blogs began to proliferate. Many of these sites were community based. Some were specifically for finding other kinksters, either for online role play or real life encounters (ALT.com). Still others combined all of the above, providing information, opportunities to find partners, and networking for local and national event promotion (Fetlife). Many sites were open to the public in the sense that anyone over the age of 18 could make an account and have access to all content on the site. ALT.com, one of the major online gathering places for kinksters of all stripes, advertises itself as “BDSM & Alternative Lifestyle Personals”, was founded in 1996 and has a large following specifically for its emphasis on personal ads. It is an offshoot of the larger umbrella site Adult FriendFinder, which incidentally filed for bankruptcy in 2013 and has been plagued by billing fraud scandals over the years.<sup>57</sup> ALT.com aims to “make it as easy as possible for you to meet people, using the power of the internet. At ALT.com, you'll find a community of people using the site as a tool to make connections and find partners for dating, romance, friendship, and a variety of encounters.”<sup>58</sup> Though the site is one of the longer running non-location based kink-friendly spaces on the Internet, it does not have the reputation as a

---

<sup>57</sup> Marie Beaudette, “Penthouse Publisher FriendFinder Files for Bankruptcy Protection,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 17, 2013, sec. Business, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323527004579080821727792140>.

<sup>58</sup> “ALT.com Help,” accessed April 26, 2017, [http://alt.com/p/help.cgi?answer=14&category=GENERAL\\_INFORMATION&who=r,2/L7qkWJv4Ilo7kWkna5c1bfAD3L15iwRpvJY\\_C47o5opSgn4OkxjGKU7vtZS5UbIDPLAxxw/1a0eZi43tjT6\\_cUKsrMGflxGXNONzU2v6JA2F5n9/5CSh\\_6cApQYfnr](http://alt.com/p/help.cgi?answer=14&category=GENERAL_INFORMATION&who=r,2/L7qkWJv4Ilo7kWkna5c1bfAD3L15iwRpvJY_C47o5opSgn4OkxjGKU7vtZS5UbIDPLAxxw/1a0eZi43tjT6_cUKsrMGflxGXNONzU2v6JA2F5n9/5CSh_6cApQYfnr).

community based space, due to its emphasis on hookups/ play and what some people refer to as the influx of professionals (aka various types of sex workers) and fake profiles. ALT.com also faced issues in terms of charging users for certain content (they currently have several membership options, ranging from free to premium), and dissatisfaction with how the site handled the switch from totally free to payment-based content. However, the issue of money and content is not just an ALT thing. Fetlife.com, a site founded in 2007 as a more community based answer to ALT, has weathered money-based storms over the years, and has a current format where users can pay for a membership that allows access to videos and certain upgrades on basic features.

Fetlife itself is widely regarded as the online heart of kink organizing, a “social network for kinksters and people curious about exploring their sexuality.”<sup>59</sup> The Fetlife guidelines state that the goal of the site is “to create a fun and safe place for kinksters, like you and I, to call home here on the interwebs.”<sup>60</sup> Colloquially speaking, Fetlife is like kinky Facebook, but with more nudity. It functions as a site for education, community building, finding partners, and picture and video sharing. Kink networking happens within groups on the site, via wall to wall messaging, in comments on writings or photos, or via private messages. One can find a party, munch (a gathering of kinksters in a vanilla space for social purposes, usually involving food), or educational event in their area, in addition to people who choose to list their locations. One can also search by fetish and by username, but not by age or location, which the site has specifically chosen not to enable in order to ensure safety for members. In the “Guidelines” section of the site, the word “community” is prevalent. The whole site is based around the idea of a kink community, where people can gather virtually and use those connections to interact and educate

---

<sup>59</sup> “Terms of Use | FetLife,” accessed April 4, 2017, <https://fetlife.com/legalse/tou>.

<sup>60</sup> “Guidelines | FetLife,” accessed April 3, 2017, <https://fetlife.com/guidelines/community>.

and make safe kinky spaces in real life. The guidelines also recommend that users “join groups... read what other people have to say, participate in discussions and strike up conversations with people that pique your interest.”<sup>61</sup> The very concept of networking and community is built into the way the site recommends users conduct themselves: another section of the guidelines says that “FetLife is for entertainment, informational, and educational purposes only.”<sup>62</sup> Implicit in all of this is consent. In the Terms of Use (TOU), Fetlife prohibits a long list of behavior, including racism, trolling, stalking, distributing pictures without consent, impersonating, stealing other’s work, harassing people, and collecting or distributing other people’s personal information. One can report harassment, sexual assault charges, or sex offender status to the site caretakers and have them address the issue.<sup>63</sup> However, Fetlife prohibits the public naming of abusers unless there is a cut and dry legal case on the books. This policy has come under fire from people who would like to name abusers or consent violators in order to protect their local communities. The site, thus far, has stood its ground on keeping the no-name policy.

This contention is reflective of how issues of consent manifest online, and how sites try protecting both themselves and their users in ways that do not always clearly work for everyone. In the real world, communities have their own methods of policing consent issues, and there is often a strict etiquette in place for communal interactions and behaviors that members adhere to. However, the standards on online interactions are often much looser, and sites TOUs or codes of conduct reflect that looseness. It is harder to corral large groups of people in virtual space, and it is often much easier to hide one’s identity. Fetish sites have done their best to address these issues, but there is still a certain amount of tension between real life and online communities

---

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> “Terms of Use | FetLife.”

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

when it comes to issues of behavior. Some real life organizations have addressed this by creating their own virtual spaces, where behavior can be more closely enforced.

In addition to public fetish sites, many groups throughout the US produce their own listservs, websites, or other closed or private / members-only online content for specific purposes. Many organizations have a public website presence in addition to private email lists for members (Black Rose DC, The Eulenspiegel Society, and the New England Leather Alliance are prominent examples). In these instances, the issue of money is less contentious, because it is established that members pay in and get substantial benefits from the organization, ranging from invites to parties, private events, and classes to discounts on event tickets, fetish gear, and party fees, not to mention the social benefit of being affiliated with a large organization in good standing.<sup>64</sup> Being in good standing in these communities means adhering to the rules of the organizations and being a good community member, the mechanics of which will be examined in the chapter on consent practices and understandings. These websites provide the public faces for somewhat private communities, and serve as gateways to education, play, and community in a more streamlined and community oriented way than the public, non-organization fetish sites.

### Third Wave Feminism

In addition to the rise of the Internet, the transition from second to third-wave feminism impacted the kink community and its dealings with the wider world. Broadly speaking, third wave feminism considers several issues: intersectionality, trans rights and equality, and the ability for women to have autonomy over their bodies and choice in sexual practices, sexuality, and partners without judgement. Defining the beginning of third wave feminism is difficult, as is laying out exactly what it contains in terms of theory and how it manifests in day to day life. For

---

<sup>64</sup> “Membership | Black Rose,” accessed April 27, 2017, <http://br.org/br/membership/>; “Member Benefits | The Eulenspiegel Society,” accessed April 27, 2017, <http://www.tes.org/index.php/whats-tes/member-benefits/>.

the purposes of this thesis, I will be referencing now-canon articles that outline some of the main principles of third wave feminism.

In my opinion, one cannot talk about third wave feminism without referencing legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw's seminal work on intersectionality, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics, first published in 1989. In a nutshell, Crenshaw proposed the idea that people have intersecting and layered identities. In her article, she considered just the intersection of gender and race (black women face layered oppressions due to both race and gender that white women do not), but that idea quickly spread and applies to race, gender, sexuality, religion, class, ability, education level, citizenship status, etc.<sup>65</sup> This idea was initially applied to the legal field, but it was picked up by the general feminist movement, and by the mid to late '90's "intersectionality" was a moderately popular feminist buzzword, with various genres of feminist thought using the term as they saw fit. Though the concept of waves of feminism may be an inaccurate metric by which to measure historical feminist trends, intersectionality has become a hallmark of third/fourth wave feminist critiques, and its usage is fairly ubiquitous (though it is worth noting that there are excellent decolonial feminist critiques of intersectionality, in addition to a wide range of intersectional-critical thought that works to center voices of color in the face of white feminism).

In addition to Crenshaw, there are several other authors of note whose writings make up a solid basis for third wave feminist thought. Judith Butler, a philosopher and gender theorist, produced several important works on gender theory in the 1980's and '90's, including *Gender*

---

<sup>65</sup> Kimberle Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, no. 1989 (1989): 139–67.

*Trouble* (first published in 1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (first published in 1993).<sup>66</sup> However, it was her 1988 essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” that started much of the discourse around performative gender theory. Butler’s writing collapses many ideas about gender and sexuality, with the concept of “doing gender” taking center stage in much of her work. She also examines normalization and creation of gendered norms via performativity, and the playing with subject and signifiers/signified that comes with dissecting gender performance has become a standard in third wave gender theory.<sup>67</sup> Butler’s work is unavoidable in third and fourth wave feminist thought: her writing comes up in classes, is referenced in many other writings, and if one chooses to do so, one can find her rather dense works explained via pictures of cats on the Internet. Butler’s work has profoundly influenced the trajectory of academic writing in the field of gender theory, and her idea of gender performativity may be one of the more recognizable, if dense, pieces of feminist theoretical work in the last few decades.

While Butler is one of the more recognizable cisgender voices in gender theory, Susan Stryker is one of the more influential transgender voices, working from the mid ‘90’s through present day. While Stryker’s list of publications and projects is long and varied, her academic work on transgender history, theory, and experience has arguably had the most impact on third wave feminism. Her article, “Transgender Feminism: Queering the Woman Question”, says that the idea of transgender as a category opens up the idea of gender as a spectrum or a series of notes on a continuum, much like Adrienne Rich does with the idea of lesbian.<sup>68</sup> Additionally,

---

<sup>66</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge Classics (New York: Routledge, 2006); Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits Of “sex,”* Routledge Classics (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>67</sup> Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519–31, doi:10.2307/3207893.

<sup>68</sup> Susan Stryker, “Transgender Feminism: Queering the Woman Question,” in *Feminist Frontiers*, ed. Verta Taylor, Nancy Whittier, and Leila J. Rupp, 9th ed. (McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2011), 64.

Stryker asserts that gender is a form of social control, and says that the physical body is a site of socially constructed labels and hierarchies.<sup>69</sup> Throwing a wrench into the classic gender binary formed by these hierarchies results in “gender trouble” that can form at the intersectionality of issues of gender and sexuality.<sup>70</sup> Trans feminism shaped the third wave by showing that a diverse approach to gender can open up the feminist viewpoint. This differs from second wave attitudes, where trans people were seen as somehow outside the feminist experience, and trans women were especially vilified. Stryker frankly calls out the second wave on its trans exclusive practices, and advocates for a third wave that is trans inclusive and that uses trans feminism to examine social constructions of gender and sexuality. This attitude clearly defines the difference between second and third wave, though it is worth noting that the continued problematic existence of trans exclusionary radical feminists (TERFS) in the present day poses an unfortunate potential roadblock in third wave feminist progress. While this example of third wave feminism is not specifically relevant to the topic of this thesis, I have included it because I think it sheds light on the very important issue of trans identities within feminist spaces, which was and is an extremely contentious issue that came up specifically in lesbian feminist spaces alongside the issue of S/M. Having this context is important, especially when considering the history of feminism and how the viewpoints defined within feminism moved and changed over time.

Additionally, an important pillar of third wave feminism is what might be called the sex-positive movement, which has developed less in the academic world and more in activist movements and in mainstream media and pop culture. For a definition of sex-positivity and specifically the sex-positive movement, I looked at Eliza Glick’s article “Sex Positive:

---

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 64–65.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 67–68.

Feminism, Queer Theory, and the Politics of Transgression.”<sup>71</sup> While Glick is less “canon” than Stryker, Butler, or Crenshaw, her scholarship is sound and her points are useful here. Glick’s article addresses both the history of and the problems with the concept of sex positive feminism in ways that articulate both pros and cons of the movement. She argues that “pro-sex’s promotion of transgressive sexual practices as utopian political strategies can be traced to a foundational tenet of identity politics: the personal is political.”<sup>72</sup> From this description, sex-positive feminism can be loosely defined as the idea that sex and sexuality, in particular for women, can be the gateway to liberation. In referencing Carol Hanisch’s 1969 idea of “the personal is political” (which, incidentally, was one of the founding tenets of second wave feminism), Glick ties the sex-positive movement to that of early feminists, giving it a backdrop and a history that legitimizes its creation. The initial framing of the sex-positive movement as a liberation-based quest for feminist sexuality that transgresses political and/or social fits the movement neatly within the feminist movement, which looked to liberate women in every way possible. However, the sex-positive movement arrived at roughly the same time as Playboy and the free love movements, both of which clearly commodified sex and sexuality, though no one seemed to notice this clearly capitalist regime.<sup>73</sup> Regardless of the holes in the logic of the sex-positive movement, it eventually morphed into what we know today as modern consent culture, which emphasizes a “no means no” form of sexual consent and embraces the idea that women can choose partners and expressions of sexuality without judgement by peers or society. Most third wave feminists have rallied around this identifier, and the loose umbrella of sex positive culture has been used to work in everything from self-love (both physical and mental) to abortion

---

<sup>71</sup> Elisa Glick, “Sex Positive: Feminism, Queer Theory, and the Politics of Transgression,” *Feminist Review*, no. 64 (2000): 19–45.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

rights to birth control access. Third wave consent philosophy will be examined in the next section.

While the issues examined above are by no means the only priorities of third wave feminism, I think they provide a useful backdrop for examining consent culture as it stands today in both feminist and kink contexts. I recognize that there are huge omissions in the scholarship I have chosen, and I admit to picking the more well-canonized writers in an attempt to hit the broadest possible range of scholars (though frankly, trying to explain Judith Butler in a paragraph is perhaps an impossible task). My intent with this section was not to examine third wave feminism in depth, but to provide a useful brief background to give some context for other scholarship I draw upon later in the paper. Third wave feminist thought is wide and deep, and covers everything from abortion to prison reform to immigrant justice. Additionally, there are many extremely pertinent and valid critiques of mainstream third wave feminism coming from the decolonial feminist viewpoint, as well as a lot of criticism over the years of white feminism by POC feminist writers. These viewpoints are not included in this paper because of space limitations and a lack of direct relevance given the current scholarship on BDSM. However, they are acknowledged here as sites of potential research and overlap for the study of both sexuality and kink culture.

## Consent: A History, A Discourse

Through both of the histories described above, the concept of consent has had a consistent presence. Both the feminist and the BDSM communities base some of their central understandings of sex, sexuality, and pleasure on the power and presence of verbal consent. There are several ideas that need to be unpacked in both movements to fully examine the concept of consent, and how it has become both a political discourse and one that sets boundaries and expectations for participation in either given community. I will undertake this unpacking through an examination of yet more history, followed by a comparison of feminist vs. kink understandings of consent culture and what the practice of consent looks like, and finally an examination of *Fifty Shades of Grey* as a convergence point in those narratives and how new understandings of community practices of consent came about through critiques of the novel.

Consent as a concept seems fairly straightforward on the surface. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, arbiter of proper definitions and style in this day and age, has two definitions of consent. The first, for consent (n), says “permission for something to happen or agreement to do something”, while the second, for consent (v), says “give permission for something to happen” (OED). The entry additionally cites the etymology, which says that the word originally comes from Latin, a combination of *con* meaning “together” and *sentire* meaning “feel”.<sup>74</sup> The dictionary definition seems to cover a broad range of possibilities: wherever two or more people might interact, for example, the definition of consent could be applied. On paper at least, consent as both a theoretical and an action seems relatively uncomplicated. The notion of permission or agreement implies black and white, yes or no situations where either consent for something is given (with a verbal agreement, a contract, or physical affirmation, for example) or not given

---

<sup>74</sup> “Consent - Oxford Reference,” accessed April 15, 2017, [http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199571123.001.0001/m\\_en\\_gb0173250](http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199571123.001.0001/m_en_gb0173250).

(with a verbal dismissal, a refusal to sign a contract, or a distinct physical non-affirmation).

However, this black and white notion of consent is often not so black and white when it comes to actual human interaction. Unsurprisingly, this does not stop communities from attempting to set boundaries that invoke the concept of consent, to define it using their own community metrics and expectations, and to utilize it as a political and ethical jumping off point for establishment of community norms.

Interestingly enough, when you look up the synonyms for “consent”, one of the synonyms that appears is “submission”. The *OED* defines submission as “the action of accepting or yielding to a superior force or to the will or authority of another person.”<sup>75</sup> This may be useful later for an analysis of the BDSM community and consent, but it also becomes useful when examining what a consent culture might look like vs. what mainstream cultural norms around consent currently are. Submission itself is a loaded word with many contextual meanings, but its presence as a suggested dictionary synonym for consent could perhaps be read as an indication that consent can be forced or given up after fight: after all, one can willingly submit to a beating in a kink scene, or one can submit as the loser of a martial arts match after putting up a tremendous fight. In both cases, the term consent could be applied to both parties: the bottom consented to play with the top and vice versa, and the two fighters consented to the match. However, one could also say that a victim of sexual assault submitted to their attack (in terms of them being overpowered), but also that they did not give consent in that situation. In this way, the idea of consent becomes problematized, and the definition becomes much less straightforward. Both kinksters and feminists have recognized this complication, and have made

---

<sup>75</sup> “Submission - Oxford Reference,” accessed April 15, 2017, [http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199571123.001.0001/m\\_en\\_gb0824690](http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199571123.001.0001/m_en_gb0824690).

attempts over the years to do a better and more thorough job of defining and enforcing consent within their communities.

The following two sections will examine how each community defines consent, and how each community chooses to enforce consent norms for its members. It will become apparent that the two source pools I have chosen (archival for the BDSM section and organization-based for the feminist section) are not equal in their detail or thoroughness. This is for two reasons: first, I was granted access to a kink-specific archive, and made use of the resources there accordingly. Over the course of researching this thesis, I have found that while kinksters have made a concentrated effort in non-academic spaces to define their communities on an organizational level, feminists have not, or have done so in a way that was harder to research and access, especially pre-Internet. For this reason, I chose to work with organizational understandings of consent for the feminist section, which meant looking more broadly and in a less detailed manner at those definitions, because I did not have access to more detailed archival material during the course of my research. Additionally, there is already a wide body of scholarship on the trajectory of feminist history in relation to sex, sexuality, and politics, which often covers the issue of consent on a legal and social level. I encourage readers to seek out these resources if they are interested. However, I felt that since those historical narratives were not the strict focus of this thesis, they should not be included at risk of doing a disservice to an already well-documented and researched field of study.

### Kink and Consent

In the BDSM world, across subcultures, groups, countries, and practices, the concept of consent is an important common denominator. The common refrain in writing, both academic and mainstream, is “without consent, BDSM is abuse”. In other words “a central aspect to

BDSM is consent among participants; any deviation from this central feature constitutes rape and/or sexual assault and is not considered BDSM.”<sup>76</sup> There is a clear understanding of certain communal norms, where consent is both an action and an institution. It provides protection, regulation, and boundaries for communities and individuals. This understanding has a long and varied history, which began in the leather culture of the ‘70’s and ‘80’s, which established consent as just one of a series of codes and conducts within the community. Contemporary S/M communities provide an origin story, establish behavioral codes, create a system of shared meanings, and generate a sexual identity, among other things.<sup>77</sup> It is these behavioral codes and their focus on consent that I am particularly interested in.

The BDSM community, like many other specialized groups, has its own specific in-group language and vocabulary. One of the older linguistic sites of consent practices is the term Safe, Sane, and Consensual, or SSC. Generally speaking, “safe” refers to physical safety in the scene: making sure the person doing the flogging or bondage or whatever act is happening “[does] not lead to injury or some ongoing physical impairment.”<sup>78</sup> “Sane” refers more to the psychological: making sure practitioners don’t cross personally unhealthy mental boundaries, establishing limits on scenes vs. real life, and being aware of those limits within play. Finally, “consensual” refers to the process of negotiation, and the adherence to those established limits within a scene or during play. This term has been subject to no small amount of debate, both from “Old Guard” kinksters and those who are barely millennials, due to various disagreements around the meaning of each word in the phrase. In their observations, Ortmann and Sprott note that

---

<sup>76</sup> Benjamin C. Graham et al., “Member Perspectives on the Role of BDSM Communities,” *The Journal of Sex Research* 53, no. 8 (October 12, 2016): 896, doi:10.1080/00224499.2015.1067758.

<sup>77</sup> Sisson, “The Cultural Formation of S/M: History and Analysis,” 31.

<sup>78</sup> Ortmann and Sprott, *Sexual Outsiders*, 37.

Some in the community have objected to the word *safe* because there is always some inherent risk in any activity, and the word *safe* makes people think, especially when they are not paying attention, that there is *no* risk involved. Hence, some have proposed the term *Risk Aware Consensual Kink* or RACK, as a more accurate articulation of the common values of the BDSM community.<sup>79</sup>

The term “common values” becomes useful in this analysis of consent practices. The parsing of definitions is less important: rather, the fact that there *are* common values is perhaps what defines it as a community.

### Origins

The origins of the term SSC reflect this emphasis on community values in relation to consent. This section is not meant to give the idea that before the term SSC was coined, there was no defined understanding of consent in the BDSM community. Rather, this is the first written account of a standardized phrasing that defines community norms around consent that I could find. This phrase could not have been coined without the presence of discourse within communities leading up to the invention of the term, so I feel it is safe to assume that consent was a topic of conversation among S/M practitioners before SSC, just not necessarily in the written discourse in such a specific manner. There is evidence of the concept of consent in Larry Townsend’s *The Leatherman’s Handbook* and SAMOIS’s *Coming To Power*, both published before the term SSC was coined, but those works both look at smaller communities within the wider kink culture and thus can’t necessarily reflect a community-wide norm.<sup>80</sup> SSC, for the purposes of this thesis, serves as a marker for the beginnings of standards that were both marketable from a public relations standpoint and widely adopted by the community.

---

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Townsend, *The Leatherman’s Handbook*; SAMOIS (Organization), *Coming to Power*.

In my research at the Leather Archives and Museum in Chicago, IL, I came across an email exchange between two members of the BDSM community, both of whom were involved in the scene in the 1980's. The original questioner, DS, posted in August 1999 on a GL-ASB listserv hosted by Queernet, an older internet forum, asking about the origins of the term SSC. The responder, JB, provided firsthand information on the origin, since he was part of the contingent that made the decision to publicize the term. (I am not sure of the protocol on privacy for these messages, so I am choosing to use the initials of the writers, as their names are not relevant and this was a private correspondence that was willingly given to the archives). I will include the original emails below, because the wording and context are useful.

DS (original post): everyone seems to agree that the slogan 'safe sane consensual' entered into widespread use as a result of its prominence in the S/M-Leather-Fetish Contingent at the 1987 March on Washington, where it appeared on a banner and in pre-March publicity documents as well as on literature handed out at the March and the National Conference the day before... i [sic] have always believed that the main purpose was to distinguish BDSM overall from assault and abuse, rather than to provide a standard for evaluating specific practices.<sup>81</sup>

JB's response is below, in which he paraphrases a conversation with another man, BD, about the origins of SSC. The following conversation is a direct copy of the email, which is in turn a paraphrase of a spoken conversation. It is all written in JB's words.

BD: I guess it could be said that I brought it to the table when we were planning for the march. The words, maybe not in exactly that form, had been used before at GMSMA, but this was a different use... this public use for a sort of motto.

JB: So, 1987 was the birth of the motto out of possible previous use...

---

<sup>81</sup> DS, "SSC Origins," *GL-ASB*, August 29, 1999.

BD: I think GMSMA may have used them to describe SM, but they would have been put together, if they were put together in that order, to try and get a description that included everyone... of just SM, not a type of SM or a style of activity. It was, even at the march, different from what it is today.<sup>82</sup>

Context is useful here. The March of 1987 refers to the second of two marches on Washington for AIDS awareness and gay and lesbian rights which took place on October 11th, 1987. The 1987 March had a specific focus on “more Federal money for AIDS research and treatment and for an end to discrimination against homosexuals.”<sup>83</sup> The base population of the March was a coalition of various gay and lesbian groups, as well as individuals and allies. The importance of this event for the S/M community becomes clear in a commemorative writing celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Gay Male S/M Activists (GMSMA). Entitled “How GMSMA Changed the World”, the piece asserts that

ten years ago [in 1981], s/m was a dirty little secret, equated with sleaze, drug abuse, and promiscuity. But in the planning for the 1987 March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, a seat on the national steering committee was reserved for male and female representatives of the s/m-leather community, and that community responded to the outreach with more than a thousand marchers-- as well as packing the stately Commerce Department auditorium building the day before the march for the first truly national s/m-Leather Conference.”<sup>84</sup>

---

<sup>82</sup> JB, “Response to SSC Origins,” *GL-ASB*, August 29, 1999.

<sup>83</sup> “200,000 March in Capital to Seek Gay Rights and Money for AIDS - NYTimes.com,” accessed April 16, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/10/12/us/200000-march-in-capital-to-see-gay-rights-and-money-for-aids.html>.

<sup>84</sup> David Stein, “How GMSMA Changed the World,” *A Decade of Pride by Gay Male S/M Activists*, 1991, 3–4, Leather Archives and Museum.

This conference, which took place on October 10th, 1987, marked the first real national gathering of kinksters from a variety of backgrounds, organizations, and kink subcultures.<sup>85</sup> The presence of so many kinksters, both at the conference and as a unified contingent at the March, generated plenty of publicity surrounding the kink contingent's presence. The planning committee for the SM contingent acknowledged the importance of a unified front, and settled on Safe, Sane, and Consensual as a slogan to demonstrate a singular message for a wide and diverse group of kinky gay and lesbian people. This slogan emphasized what DS originally stated as a way to "distinguish BDSM overall from assault and abuse, rather than to provide a standard for evaluating specific practices."<sup>86</sup> The vanilla perception of kink at that time was that kink was abusive and wrong: in response, a public stance from within the community was taken via the creation of this slogan. This example of true community unification is the first of several examples of the prevalence of consent as a culture within kink communities, not just an action or a concept. Barry Douglass observed in *The Link* overview of the March that "our community also used the March weekend to hold the largest S/M-Leather conference ever. On Saturday, October 10, an ornate marble hall echoed to the tap of bootheels as more than 700 leathermen and women celebrated our right to choose any safe, sane, and consensual way we wish to express our sexuality."<sup>87</sup> This gathering proved to be a resounding success for the dissemination of the term SSC.

When defining consent within kink, one can also look back to the newsletters as a resource for consent policies and understandings. Both *The Lunatic Fringe* and *The Link* provide an interesting background in consent norms after SSC but before the Internet made it somewhat

---

<sup>85</sup> Barry Douglas, "For Love and For Life: The March On Washington," *The Link*, Summer/Fall 1987, Leather Archives and Museum.

<sup>86</sup> DS, "SSC Origins."

<sup>87</sup> Douglas, "For Love and For Life: The March On Washington," 26.

easier to disseminate norms and provide educational materials. Albert Kraus, Co-Chair of NLA-I, said in the 1994 newsletter that “we have used this opportunity [as an international organization] to show that we really are just ordinary normal people.”<sup>88</sup> In this case, “normal people” means people who are not abusers, or pathological, or somehow illegal or immoral humans. To this end, the community put forth a concerted effort to identify and educate around issues of domestic violence and violence prevention within the scene. A section entitled “The Domestic Violence Project” in the same 1994 newsletter described the following goals: take action and become responsible in assisting those who are abused and the abusers themselves, bring “carefully screened speakers will further domestic violence education programs throughout the country about our lifestyles and practices”, and define the difference between safe, sane and consensual SM and abuse/domestic violence.<sup>89</sup> The piece also acknowledged that “the Leather/SM/Fetish community is widely reputed nationally for being frontrunners in disseminating information about safe sex, AIDS education and basic human rights and in rallying other minority groups behind these causes.”<sup>90</sup> This emphasis on community advocacy and education around safety and wider issues that affected many communities shows the basis of a wide and deep framework for building a community. Mark Frazier, Mr. NLA International 1994, remarked in his address to the community that “it is our duty to be there to help educate them to a Safe, Sane, Consensual and Compassionate lifestyle. It is equally important that we encourage their involvement and contribution to the community in which they live.”<sup>91</sup> Another writer in this issue, Sallee Huber, said that the newly released standards on Domestic Violence were “both influenced our own community and made other communities much more aware of the issues and

---

<sup>88</sup> Albert Kraus, “Letter from the Co-Chair,” *The Link*, February 1994, 1, Leather Archives and Museum.

<sup>89</sup> KT Chase, “The Domestic Violence Project,” *The Link*, February 1994, 2, Leather Archives and Museum.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> Mark Frazier, “From Mr. And Ms. NLA International,” *The Link*, February 1994, 2, Leather Archives and Museum.

the difference between SM and violence.”<sup>92</sup> This emphasis on distinguishing violence from kink and making it both a community standard and a community issue speaks to the understanding of consent as a necessity within the kink community. What does one get for participation in kink organizations that have these values? Dean Walradt, a former director of NLA-I, explains that members get “a backbone for the community that understands what domestic violence is, safe, sane, and consensual education and programming, and a defense against allegations of abuse in terms of legal action and assistance.”<sup>93</sup> These benefits are all part of the community mentality that was built up from the beginnings of the scene.

In his ten year retrospective on GMSMA, David Stein also reflects this mentality of a consent-based community. “Each to his own taste,” he says, “as long as it’s safe, sane, and consensual.”<sup>94</sup> He lauds the advances in the “open sharing of information and techniques, one could also argue that s/m teaching today is better than ever-- more comprehensive and far more safety-conscious.”<sup>95</sup> He spends a lot of his address saying how much safer things are, and that “it is remarkable how much these organizations agree on when it comes to the parameters of safe and sane s/m action.”<sup>96</sup> This emphasis on the universal aspect of SSC, of community standards, and of the importance of ensuring the safety of individuals and the community is not only prevalent in the strictly gay male kink scene.

As observed in the previous chapter, the lesbian community in particular has had its share of disagreements about whether S/M is an acceptable and/or feminist undertaking. The writings from *The Lunatic Fringe* capture some of this contention, and shows some of the steps taken by the lesbian S/M community to alleviate potential finger-pointing by anti-SM women. While

---

<sup>92</sup> Sallee Huber, “Year in Review,” *The Link*, February 1994, Leather Archives and Museum.

<sup>93</sup> Dean Walradt, “What I Get for My \$30.00-- A Gift That Just Keeps Giving: Part 2: Domestic Violence and NLA International,” *The Link*, January 1995, 13, Leather Archives and Museum.

<sup>94</sup> Stein, “How GMSMA Changed the World,” 7.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

many of the issues were somewhat politicized in the context of the 1970's and '80's and the larger feminist discourses around porn and censorship, one of the larger accusations against the lesbian S/M community was that their engagement with BDSM was at best a misguided emulation of the patriarchy and at worst abusive. This debate can be neatly demonstrated by the issues around the 1989 Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, described above in the history chapter. A strongly worded defense by the Outcasts as a group said that "S/M people have a shared ethic—make it 'safe, sane, and consensual.' What we do is not violence but S/M is something that makes us, as a group, different."<sup>97</sup> This notion of a "shared ethic" echoes the communal norms described by the writings from within the gay kink community. In fact, those writings even honor the politicized notion of S/M in lesbian spaces: David Stein, in reference to the Lesbian Sex Mafia (LSM), one of the original lesbian kink groups, says that "LSM, in fact, defined itself as a haven not just for women into s/m but for women interested in 'politically incorrect sex' of all types, including fetishes, fantasies, toys, and butch/femme role-playing."<sup>98</sup> The notion of "politically incorrect sex" becomes very important when discussing notions of sexual propriety and consent within the lesbian and the feminist communities. The feminist take on this issue will be discussed in the next section of the chapter.

An example of contention around what consent actually looks like within kink can be found in a series of responses to *The Lunatic Fringe's* coverage of an Outcasts event called Rebel Panel. The November 1990 edition of *The Lunatic Fringe* contained a summary of the event, which focused on pushing limits and boundaries in terms of play. Over the next few issues, there was a significant amount of backlash from readers, many of whom wrote in to say that the types of play described by the boundary-pushing panelists was not "safe, sane, and

---

<sup>97</sup> Victoria Baker, "Letter from The Outcasts to The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival," *The Lunatic Fringe: Newsletter of the Outcasts*, July 1990, 4, Leather Archives and Museum.

<sup>98</sup> Stein, "How GSMMA Changed the World," 6.

consensual”, and that they were offended that an organization that claimed to follow those guidelines would allow such a topic to be examined at one of their regular events. The panelists responded with what amounted to “we will not censor our personal experiences to fit with your definitions of SSC.”<sup>99</sup> Even within the community, there are debates around what qualifies as safe, sane and consensual and whose definitions you should abide by. For example, in an email to the sm-act listserv in July of 2001, the notion of legal language around consent becomes increasingly important. The author, “Teramis” (a screen name), wrote in response to the Arkansas Supreme Court striking down the state’s same sex sodomy laws. “Teramis” observed that “again and again in court decisions which are overturning sodomy laws on the basis of violating state constitutions, the language of the decisions frequently touches upon that one, key word: ‘consensual’. The more the bdsm community is identified with consensual activities, the better our chances for supporting our pursuit of ‘private, noncommercial, consensual sex.’”<sup>100</sup> Here, consent is a legal issue that allows for mainstream acceptance and freedom from the police and the state, perhaps. In a revamped version of *The Lunatic Fringe*, written by the Exiles, a reformation of the Outcasts, a June 1997 edition reported on the Novices Rule! event. The agenda covered quite a lot, including negotiating a scene and how consent works, though the word “consent” was never specifically used.<sup>101</sup> Safewords and negotiation were prominent topics, as was the implementation of safe sex practices. Safer sex supplies and knowledge seemed to be a huge thing in this particular community, and the writers of *The Lunatic Fringe* made a point of advocating specifically for safer sex each month and to advertise resources for

---

<sup>99</sup> “Rebel Panel Recap,” *The Lunatic Fringe: Newsletter of the Outcasts*, November 1990, Leather Archives and Museum.

<sup>100</sup> Teramis, “Arkansas Sodomy Laws,” listserv, *Sm-Act*, (July 6, 2001).

<sup>101</sup> “Program Report: Novices Rule!,” *The Lunatic Fringe: Newsletter of the Exiles*, August 1997, Leather Archives and Museum.

safer sex supplies. This is another aspect of community standards within a smaller community that have developed along with the consent norms in varying ways.

An important addition to the BDSM concept is that kink and sex are not always linked. BDSM can be completely asexual in the sense that it does not have to include sex acts or sexual feelings. This addition to the consent narrative opens up a wide range of possibilities for the implementation of a consent culture. When things like touch, sensation, and psychological stimulus are negotiated, consent becomes a much broader action and necessitates wider implementation. Broad examinations of this kinky phenomenon, as well as many others, have appeared in various academic studies over the years.

### Academia

So, where is kink culture today in terms of consent? More than a few academics have observed the kink community in various capacities, and their observations indicate that consent is still a central theme of community organizing and engagement. While the study of BDSM as a cultural and communal phenomenon as opposed to a medical or pathological event is relatively recent in terms of academic scholarship, the concept of it as a distinct subculture is less so. Geoffrey Mains' *Urban Aboriginals: A Celebration of Leathersex*, pioneered the application of academic study to the leather community. Mains used a combination of cultural anthropology, social theory, biology, biochemistry (in which he had a doctorate) to examine and codify what he viewed as the "tribal" mentality of BDSM culture.<sup>102</sup> His work is often referenced in later studies, and acknowledge within the community as an important historical and cultural record.

Much of the more recent work on BDSM communities deals with how those communities educate about consent and enforce expectations. Darren Langdridge, a psychologist who has studied BDSM for a number of years, observes that within kink communities, "ongoing

---

<sup>102</sup> Mains, *Urban Aboriginals*.

interaction between the practitioners will often involve the active negotiation of consent...

Communities give themselves boundaries through the active creation and maintenance of rules and regulations.”<sup>103</sup> These two actions (creation and maintenance) imply that consent is not viewed as static or solid by community members; rather, it must be continuous and fluid. This is consistent with community norms discussed earlier in the paper. S/M begins with negotiation, where limits and boundaries are discussed before any play occurs.<sup>104</sup> BDSM implicitly includes consent as an active part of play, due to the communal expectation of the pre-play negotiation. Graham et al, in their survey of member perspectives on BDSM communities, noted that “the frequency with which BDSM community members identify issues of consent as a part of the community role suggests that issues of safety and consent are a common part of the social norms of the communities.”<sup>105</sup> Members acknowledging consent as a metric by which community members are judged and assimilated indicates that an overarching consent culture might be at work in these communities.

In addition to using consent as a method of community culture-building, the kink community has also utilized consent for political purposes. Moser and Kleinplatz note that “SM is *consensual* by definition. Just as the difference between consensual coitus and rape is consent, the difference between SM and violence is consent. Non-consensual acts are criminal.”<sup>106</sup> Defining SM *as* consent-based and consent-motivated is a tactical decision made by the community over time to protect itself from allegations of abuse. There have been several high profile prosecution cases against BDSM-practicing individuals over the years, including the

---

<sup>103</sup> Darren Langdrige, “The Time of the Sadoomasochist: Hunting With(in) the ‘Tribus,’” in *Introducing the New Sexuality Studies*, ed. Nancy Fischer and Seidman Steven, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 345.

<sup>104</sup> Charles Moser and Peggy J. Kleinplatz, “Themes of SM Expression,” in *Safe, Sane, and Consensual: Contemporary Perspectives on Sadoomasochism*, ed. Darren Langdrige and Meg Barker (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 37.

<sup>105</sup> Graham et al., “Member Perspectives on the Role of BDSM Communities,” 905.

<sup>106</sup> Moser and Kleinplatz, “Themes of SM Expression,” 37.

Operation Spanner case in the UK and what has come to be known as “Paddleboro”, which took place in Attleboro, MA.<sup>107</sup> I will not go into the details of these cases because the legal narratives are not relevant here. However, I will point out that these cases were all brought by outside authorities: Spanner and Attleboro both involved police raiding spaces where consensual kink activities were taking place and prosecuting using the legal definitions of assault, which can override consent depending on the laws and location. Moser and Kleinplatz address the issue of assault in their research: they report that “although dominants may appear to be imposing their will on ‘unwilling’ submissives, by definition, all SM is consensual; if the submissive were not willing, the act would be assault and legally actionable; this is actually quite rare in organized SM communities.”<sup>108</sup> The rarity of assault taking place within the community can be debated, though some excellent large scale phone survey work indicates that participation in BDSM does not correlate to higher rates of sexual coercion or negative sexual experiences.<sup>109</sup> (Note that this survey took place in Australia—however, the findings are still useful and relevant for the purposes of this thesis).

The emphasis on consent not only within the community spaces but also in the vanilla world points to the persecution (not to mention legal prosecution) that BDSM practicing people have experienced since the 1950’s and ‘60’s. Though much of the stigma of BDSM came from the medical community and pathologized portrayals of kinksters circulated by early sexologists (as discussed in the introduction), a good portion of it came from feminists who were unsure about being able to consent to what they viewed as acts of violence and assault. Much of this phenomenon was examined in the history chapter, but it is important to understand the

---

<sup>107</sup> Peggy J. Kleinplatz and Charles Moser, “Is SM Pathological?,” in *Safe, Sane, and Consensual: Contemporary Perspectives on Sadomasochism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 55–62.

<sup>108</sup> Moser and Kleinplatz, “Themes of SM Expression,” 41.

<sup>109</sup> Juliet Richters et al., “Demographic and Psychosocial Features of Participants in Bondage and Discipline, ‘Sadomasochism’ or Dominance and Submission (BDSM): Data from a National Survey,” *The Journal of Sexual Medicine* 5, no. 7 (July 2008): 1660–68, doi:10.1111/j.1743-6109.2008.00795.x.

viewpoints on consent from feminist movements when discussing how various communities construct consent narratives and expectations.

### Feminist Understandings of Consent

Just as the BDSM community has changed its priorities and definitions over time, so too has the feminist community seen its fair share of change when confronting BDSM and consent. There was a point in time where BDSM was conflated with abuse, with the patriarchy, with too much rigidity and suffering and not enough freedom and love. This debate was very much intertwined with the larger debates around porn and appropriate sexuality during the 1970's and '80's, which followed the radical free love of the 1960's. Much of the discourse around these issues came from within the lesbian separatist community, though the pathologizing vanilla understandings of BDSM permeated the larger feminist community for some time. Critical thinking can be difficult in the face of a medical community that is supposed to be rational and right, and for a while the feminist community definitely backed the medical endorsement that practitioners of BDSM were all abused as children (these ideas are covered more thoroughly by Pat Califia and by Ortmann and Sprott in their book on sexual outsiders in the psychological world).<sup>110</sup>

One can see from the infamous Michigan Womyn's Music Festival issues described in the History chapter, as well as from the work of anti-porn activists such as Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, that feminism doesn't necessarily mean inclusive when it comes to sex and sexuality. While the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival focused on banning S/M out of a misguided attempt to enforce safety, Dworkin and MacKinnon became most famous for their work on radical feminist anti-porn ordinances. Both published separately and had varying views

---

<sup>110</sup> Califia, "A Personal View of the History of the Lesbian S/M Community and Movement in San Francisco"; Ortmann and Sprott, *Sexual Outsiders*.

on BDSM, mainstream sex, and women's sexuality.<sup>111</sup> Dworkin in particular was explicitly anti-S/M, and her outspokenness against S/M women in particular was a topic of much contention within the feminist community. In the book *Coming to Power*, an author going by the pseudonym Juicy Lucy notes that “among lesbian feminists a closed mind is the usual reaction to sexual S/M.”<sup>112</sup> The introduction to that same book asserts that “anti S/M attitudes are embedded in many areas of lesbian feminist ideology... examination of our experiences is a feminist inquiry.”<sup>113</sup> This assertion specifically links anti-S/M with a lesbian feminist viewpoint, which for some years in the '70's and into the '80's had both influence and a media presence within the general feminist movement. One can say then, that the feminist movement as a whole has been guilty of being on the “wrong side of history” in this respect, as continued non-issue of BDSM in the more mainstream feminist movement demonstrates (though this is not a complete argument by any means—some of the feminist pushback against kink will be examined in the next chapter). Pat Califia sums up this notion rather well, saying in a 1995 article that “I don't know how long we will continue to let women's groups who believe that S/M and pornography are the same thing and cause violence against women go unchallenged because they are ostensibly feminist.”<sup>114</sup> This so-called “violence against women” has been glossed over by feminists themselves, or decried as backwards and something that stays firmly in the past. This is mostly true, though the continued work of protecting kink community members from harassment and legal prosecution for consensual activities is still necessary. Eric Rofes, a contributor to the book *Leatherfolk*, details this necessity:

---

<sup>111</sup> “The Prisoner of Sex,” *NYMag.com*, accessed April 19, 2017, <http://nymag.com/nymetro/news/people/features/11907/index3.html>.

<sup>112</sup> Juicy Lucy, “If I Ask You To Tie Me Up, Will You Still Love Me?,” in *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1987), 29.

<sup>113</sup> SAMOIS (Organization), *Coming to Power*, 8.

<sup>114</sup> Califia, “A Secret Side of Lesbian Sexuality,” 198.

A friend recently asked me why I join leather groups and attend the National Leather Association's Living in Leather Conference annually. My answer was simple. I participate because these organizations do the work of making the world safe for kinky people. They make it possible for me to survive a life in the gay and lesbian community.<sup>115</sup>

This network of safety, based on consensual practices that were not always viewed as consensual by outsiders, has changed over time. Feminists also have their own safety networks, often in the form of organizations and organized rhetoric.

In terms of more recent understandings of what consent looks like in a feminist context, I turned to institutional definitions. Many feminist organizations over the years have publicized their own definitions of consent in order to establish guidelines for their organizations and for the type of world they wanted to live in. "Feminist organizations" refers to organizations that were or are designed to help women or others in need using principles that would generally be recognized as feminist. While this is a broad and nebulous definition, I think it is a useful one in this context because the feminist movement has been largely involved in issues like domestic violence prevention, sexual assault prevention, and access to reproductive justice, all of which are central issues covered by the organizations referenced below. I chose these specific organizations because they are well known, longstanding, and have positive reputations in the third-wave feminist context.

The first organization I consulted was RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network), which describes itself as "the nation's largest anti-sexual violence organization" (RAINN). RAINN was founded in 1994, and now provides a 24/7 hotline via phone and online chat for people who need help, in addition to working with more than 1,000 sexual violence prevention

---

<sup>115</sup> Rofes, "Snapshots of Desire: Surviving as a Queer Among Queers," 183.

organizations across the country. The organization's website has many resources, including a whole page dedicated to consent. The official definition provided is as follows:

Consent is an agreement between participants to engage in sexual activity. There are many ways to give consent, and some of those are discussed below. Consent doesn't have to be verbal, but verbally agreeing to different sexual activities can help both you and your partner respect each other's boundaries.<sup>116</sup>

The emphasis on sexual activity is indicative of several issues. I am not expecting an organization that focuses on sexual assault to necessarily shy away from focusing on sex. However, sexual violence does not necessarily include what would be considered "sexual activity", because the definitions of sex are often fuzzy outside of a legal context. This is not necessarily problematic, but it is worth examining for several reasons. First, by saying specifically that consent is an agreement to engage in sexual activity, the organization seems to negate the possibility of consent negotiations in other contexts. This is not unheard of in the mainstream feminist movement: consent and sex often go hand in hand, which is somewhat different from norms in the BDSM community. Kink and sex are not inherently linked, and neither are consent and sex. RAINN's emphasis on consent in a purely sexual context leaves out some of the necessary conversations around consent, and limits its applicability to the world in general. This lack of a broader definition of consent is not just limited to organizations that deal with sexual violence.

Planned Parenthood, another high profile feminist organization, has similar issues. The organization is dedicated to reproductive justice, health care for women and trans people, and sex education and STI prevention and management (among other things), and has an extensive question and answer section on its website detailing physical, mental, sexual, and relationship

---

<sup>116</sup> "What Consent Looks Like | RAINN," accessed January 9, 2017, <https://www.rainn.org/articles/what-is-consent>.

health in a variety of settings. Interestingly enough, when you search “consent” on the main Planned Parenthood website, the only place that actually has a definition of consent is the teen sexuality page.<sup>117</sup> The adult sections talk about relationship violence and pressure to have sex, but there is no definition where the word “consent” is used or even defined. The closest the adult section gets to explicitly discussing consent is under the “Sexual and Reproductive Control” section, where the site says that “many of us think that once we are in love, we can never say ‘no’ to sex. We might even believe that we can never say ‘no’ once we marry. No matter what kind of relationship you have, if you are forced to have sex, it is rape. If you are forced to be sexual in any way, it is sexual abuse.”<sup>118</sup> This is similar to RAINN’s definition, but centered on relationships as a potential site of coercion or violence. Planned Parenthood does use the word consent in their Great Relationship section, where one of their tips for a happy relationship is “communicate openly and honestly about sex. ... We should have each other's consent for sex every time, and we should never use pressure to get consent.”<sup>119</sup> This criteria is useful only if a person understands what consent is, and when and how it can be applied. Additionally, by placing consent in the context only of pressure or violence (even when paired with a positive), consent seems like it appears when there may be a potential for violence. While it is clearly not the intent of the organization to make consent seem like it only is worth asking for in certain circumstances, it is worth noting that the kink community, generally speaking, sets consent as a standard for any type of interaction, even when there is no threat of violence. It is a given that consent must be negotiated before any type of encounter, and Planned Parenthood could

---

<sup>117</sup> “Rape and Sexual Consent Information For Teens,” accessed April 27, 2017, <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/teens/relationships/consent-and-rape>.

<sup>118</sup> “Sexual and Reproductive Control | Planned Parenthood,” accessed April 27, 2017, <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/relationships/sexual-reproductive-control>.

<sup>119</sup> “Advice on How to Have a Great Relationship,” accessed April 27, 2017, <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/relationships/your-relationship-good-you>.

potentially learn from this example in terms of framing consent as a necessary step 100% of the time in all scenarios.

Despite the potential lack of nuance from larger organizations in terms of consent, other feminist entities seem to be moving closer to broader and more specific definitions of consent. The magazine *Teen Vogue* provides one such example. Though it may be surprising that a teen magazine that on the surface seems dedicated to fashion, music, and pop culture contains useful information about sexual health and wellness, the magazine has been publishing pointed political coverage and outspoken articles on sex and sexuality for years. One of the new features of the magazine is a column called “Not Your Fault,” which is “a *Teen Vogue* campaign that aims to educate people about the epidemic of sexual assault.”<sup>120</sup> The presence of such a campaign in a magazine aimed at a wide variety of women says a lot about how dialogues around consent have moved into the mainstream. The article I’ve chosen to examine, “Everything You Need to Know About Consent That You Never Learned in Sex Ed” by Dr. Zhana Vrangalova (known as Dr. Zhana), looks at how consent is obtained and ways to “troubleshoot” different methods of communicating consent.

Dr. Zhana’s article breaks down the consent debate, saying that

Regardless of where you think the *legal* lines should be drawn, we can all agree that we want both ourselves and our partners to be enthusiastic about any sexual encounter. That is to say that every sexual encounter is ideally met with *enthusiastic* consent, rather than a situation where someone feels obligated or pressured to say yes, despite not being totally excited about participating.<sup>121</sup>

---

<sup>120</sup> Zhana Vrangalova, “Everything You Need to Know About Consent That You Never Learned in Sex Ed,” *Teen Vogue*, accessed April 15, 2017, <http://www.teenvogue.com/story/consent-how-to>.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

The parsing of the legal understandings vs. “no means no” or “yes means yes” is complicated, and the emphasis here on enthusiastic consent potentially glosses over those issues without taking a side. Enthusiastic consent generally refers to “yes means yes” consent, but it doesn’t have to. “Yes means yes” and “no means no” are two relatively similar ideas about consent, but they come from opposite directions: “yes means yes” frames consent as something that requires an enthusiastic “yes”, while “no means no” says consent is implied unless it is specifically revoked. There is a lot of discourse in the mainstream media about which variety of consent is better, and there has been significant legislative activity to try and mandate language around consent (see the recent “Yes Means Yes” bill passed by California for more information on the legal language).<sup>122</sup>

Regardless of the language debate, *Teen Vogue* is actually quite extensive in their definitions and suggestions around consent. They note that “the person initiating the sexual encounter, or initiating the escalation of sexual intimacy in the sexual encounter has a lot of responsibility in making sure the other person feels safe, comfortable, and is truly enjoying themselves.”<sup>123</sup> However, the article also asserts that the passive or the less experienced partner has equal responsibility to give and get consent. The concluding point, after a well-explained list of how to negotiate verbal and nonverbal consent from both active and passive perspectives, is that there is no one way to “do” consent that works for everyone, and that it is important to have that conversation and/or continue to have conversations over the course of an encounter or relationship.

Interestingly, this definition of consent seems to line up most with how kinksters view consent. The article uses the word “negotiate” nearly as much as it uses the word consent, which

---

<sup>122</sup> “Yes Means Yes,” *END RAPE ON CAMPUS*, accessed April 27, 2017, <http://endrapeoncampus.org/yes-means-yes/>.

<sup>123</sup> Vrangalova, “Everything You Need to Know About Consent That You Never Learned in Sex Ed.”

aligns the mentality of consent-based action along the lines of how kinksters negotiate and execute a scene. While *Teen Vogue* still frames consent as sex-centered (much like the other feminist organizations examined previously), it manages to expand that conversation to things like making out and touching in addition to sexual acts or scenarios. There are some interesting temporal aspects to this expansion, which I will discuss in the next chapter. In examining these three definitions of consent from three high profile, potentially feminist sites, one can compare them to the definitions of consent within the BDSM community, and look for overlaps in language and mentality. These overlaps are fundamental to understanding the overall arc of modern consent culture, both in BDSM and in feminism.

### Comparisons

Clearly, there are some fundamental differences in how consent is constructed between the feminist and the BDSM communities. Perhaps the largest one is how consent itself is applied to various situations. Kinksters engage in a wide variety of acts that may or may not include sexual contact. This understanding colors the way BDSM communities define consent and how members are expected to behave both in public and private scenes. Kinksters generally view consent and consent negotiation as something that encompasses a wide range of activities—indeed, for kinksters, consent must be obtained for *any* activity between two or more people. Consent is built into the activities BDSM practitioners engage in, because as stated above, kink without consent is abuse. By building consent into their practices, BDSM practitioners and community members protect themselves physically, mentally, and sometimes legally, from unwanted and potentially abusive situations.

In contrast, by framing consent as a purely sex-based negotiation, mainstream feminist definitions of consent leave a lot of gray areas in both their education and implementation

strategies. The framing of consent as an “if-then” situation (“if consent, then sex”) can be read as an oversimplification of a complicated and layered issue. *Teen Vogue* gets the closest to a “kinky” definition of consent in terms of viewing consent as an ongoing negotiation that can manifest in many forms, it still centers on sexual activity, which limits the applications of consent in a day-to-day setting. RAINN has a similar list of dos and don’ts for communication of consent, but again it applies a narrow lens of sexual activity to the negotiation portion of the definition. Planned Parenthood has perhaps the least comprehensive definition, though the site does apply consent in several specific relationship situations (marriage, casual, etc.). There seems to be a less unified definition of consent across feminist platforms, although there seems to be some agreement about the basics of getting consent and what that conversation should look like.

Through this comparison, I do not intend to prioritize one definition or practice of consent over another, nor am I trying to poke holes in organizations and the work they do. Rather, I aim to depict how two different communities have approached a very important topic. Each community has developed to suit its needs over time. While the organizations or publications do not necessarily count as communities per se, I chose to go with “official” definitions that could conceivably be seen and utilized by a large number of people who frequent those organizations. By placing mainstream, official definitions of consent next to niche community understandings, I hope to demonstrate that there are certain potential overlaps that have developed over time<sup>124</sup>. In the next chapter, I will argue that the publication of *Fifty Shades*

---

<sup>124</sup> It is worth noting that academic understandings of third wave feminist culture can be more “cutting edge” than the definitions offered here. Emily Prior notes that “third wave feminism can also be used to discuss women's sexual identities and power by expanding the definition of this type of feminism to include women who choose alternative sexual practices and identities as a means of expressing themselves more authentically and fulfilling their sexual and emotional needs.” (Prior 2013). I chose not to cover this aspect of feminist definition because I don’t think it’s quite reached the mainstream, or rather it is still a work in progress.

*of Grey* did a lot for bringing the mainstream feminist and kink understandings of consent together, among other things.

### ***Fifty Shades of Grey: Debates, Connections, and Progress***

While it may not be the likeliest of texts to spawn a massive amount of feminist critique, thought, and discourse, E.L. James's erotic/ pornographic novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* has done just that. Since its print publication in 2012, the novel and its counterparts have made up a trilogy that has sparked discussion in various forums and across disciplines. The trilogy itself is quite popular in mainstream Western culture, and has spawned two recent movies with a potential third on the way, in addition to a branded line of sex toys and any number of imitation romance novels. The books reached the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list several times, and have sold millions of copies, both in print and in ebook format.<sup>125</sup> E.L. James, the author of the trilogy, has said that the books were originally a piece of *Twilight* fanfiction. (*Twilight* is first book of the incredibly popular series of vampire/werewolf/ teen paranormal romance books by Stephanie Meyer, first published in 2006). Broadly speaking, *Fifty Shades* has ignited quite a lot of controversy in a variety of settings, from concerned parents wanting it banned from public libraries to radical feminists treating it as the most heinous piece of written porn since the 1980's, not to mention the armies of self-appointed literary critics who took to the blogosphere to decry the quality of the prose (among other things). These types of controversies will be examined in this chapter, using the framework of interaction between feminist and BDSM communities that I have set up in previous chapters. Both the feminist and the kink communities had and have strong feelings about *Fifty Shades*, and many of those opinions largely overlap. It is this overlap where I see an intertwining of feminist and kink cultures, where the notion of consent itself becomes a unified force against a perceived threat. In this case, the portrayal of

---

<sup>125</sup> Lisa Downing, "Safewording! Kinkphobia and Gender Normativity in *Fifty Shades of Grey*," *Psychology and Sexuality* 4, no. 1 (January 2013): 92–102, doi:10.1080/19419899.2012.740067; Dionne van Reenen, "Is This Really What Women Want? An Analysis of *Fifty Shades of Grey* and Modern Feminist Thought," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 33, no. 2 (April 2014): 223–33, doi:10.1080/02580136.2014.925730.

BDSM, of women, and of sex in *Fifty Shades* ruffled quite a lot of feathers, and out of the mess emerged several pointed critiques that aimed to use consent and sex-positive feminism as patches to correct what these critics viewed as an inherent misunderstanding of BDSM, healthy sexuality, and safe, sane, and consensual. Both feminist writers and members of the BDSM community (and there is definitely overlap in these categories in the scholarship) came out in force post-*Fifty Shades* publication. The critiques took several forms, which will be examined below. There have been several “waves” of discussion that followed the publication of *Fifty Shades*, including arguments for and against its merit as a feminist text, critiques of the portrayal of BDSM as a sexuality and as a lifestyle, and a strong argument that the relationship dynamic portrayed in the book was abusive and/or non-consensual.

Before I get into the responses to the novel, a short summary is in order. This section contains spoilers, though after so much media hoopla between the books and the movies, it is more surprising to come across someone who *doesn't* know the plotline! The arc of the story follows a typical boy-meets-girl plot, with main characters literature student Anastasia Steele (nicknamed Ana) and business tycoon Christian Grey eventually falling in love and marrying in a fairly tame marriage plot scenario by the end of the trilogy. The one “twist”, as it were, is that Christian is into BDSM, and cannot have a sexually or emotionally fulfilling relationship without that element. Ana, his chosen conquest, is a virgin and has no sexual experience or knowledge of BDSM. Christian proceeds to basically coerce her into a relationship on his terms, including having her sign a contract that ensures his control over her, despite her misgivings.<sup>126</sup> While there are many more aspects to the plotline, the important reference points for this thesis are the way BDSM is portrayed in the text and the way Christian treats Ana. Many of the critiques that

---

<sup>126</sup> E. L. James, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, 1st Vintage Books ed, Fifty Shades Trilogy 1 (New York: Vintage Books, 2012).

focus on *Fifty Shades* center on these issues, and in particular the lack of consent that seems to be an accidental main plot point through the series. Both the way BDSM is viewed and presented and the traditional portrayals of heterosexuality have been linked issues for many critics of the series.

### Critiques and Critics

One of the largest points for critics of *Fifty Shades* is the issue of appropriate feminist behavior. Broadly speaking, initial response to *Fifty Shades* took on one of two forms. One side said that the novel was empowering for women because it gave them a model for controlling and exploring their sexuality, while the other said that the empowerment in the novel was a sham and that it was just a heterosexually packaged traditional romance that didn't really show women in a positive or empowered light. These two sides often butted heads, in the media and other places. In doing research for this section, one writer in particular kept coming up as someone who invoked strong reactions. Kate Roiphe, an author and journalist, wrote an article for *Newsweek* after *Fifty Shades* was published in which she argued from the feminist perspective that the popularity of *Fifty Shades* is attributed to women having sexual fantasies of submission in the face of a world where men are becoming less dominant and the hold on the patriarchy is "shakier than ever."<sup>127</sup> She also addresses the idea of S/M in the public consciousness, and notes that

We still seem to want to debate or interrogate or voyeuristically absorb scenes of extreme sexual submission. Even though we are, at this point, familiar with sadomasochism, it still seems to strike the culture as new, as shocking, as overturning certain values,

---

<sup>127</sup> Kate Roiphe, "Working Women's Fantasies," *Newsweek*, April 16, 2012, <http://www.newsweek.com/working-womens-fantasies-63915>.

because something in it still feels, to a surprisingly large segment of our tolerant post-sexual-revolution world, wrong or shameful.<sup>128</sup>

This point echoes many of the other interpretations of *Fifty Shades* in that it addresses the dissonance between fantasy and reality in terms of what women view as acceptable. Roiphe also observed that “it is perhaps inconvenient for feminism that the erotic imagination does not submit to politics,” a stance that, along with the assertion that women somehow want the patriarchy back via sexual submission, seems to fly in the face of the “personal is political” values of mainstream feminism.<sup>129</sup> Needless to say, Roiphe’s viewpoint is not very popular in a feminist movement that places a strong emphasis on a necessary deconstruction of the patriarchy and that espouses a sex-positive attitude. Her article was strongly decried by a number of other critics, despite some of her points overlapping with the anti-*Fifty Shades* bandwagon.

Despite writers like Roiphe supporting *Fifty Shades* as an acceptable fantasy in some contexts, women are still conflicted over the novel and its contents. They worry that the fantasy aspect of the work may be incompatible with a modern feminist ideology. In addition to this discussion, there has also been backlash and debate about whether it is empowering or appropriate for women to even read *Fifty Shades*, given the content. The general conclusion to this argument was that women who want to read the novel should not be judged for their choice of content. If men can watch porn, the argument says, why can’t women read erotica?<sup>130</sup> This position demonstrates a major shift from the anti-porn, bookstore-boycotting feminists of the 1980’s that organizations like SAMOIS fought against. Despite this shift in ideology, it is clear that the issue of erotica and what makes healthy and empowering content has not yet been laid to rest.

---

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Amanda Maryam Ballouk, “Fifty Shades of Feminism” (M.A., Southeastern Louisiana University, 2016), 25.

The debates around empowerment in *Fifty Shades* also cover the issue of power exchange, which is a central aspect of BDSM practice. In *Fifty Shades*, Ana eventually submits to Christian and gives up much of her bodily autonomy, as well as a certain amount of psychological individuality. Critics of *Fifty Shades* have pointed out that this representation of power exchange seems to parallel heterosexual culture and does not seem all that different from control-based patriarchal relationships. *Fifty Shades* centers on a heterosexual relationship that prioritizes male dominance and aggressive masculine sexuality, and female submission and passive feminine sexuality. The portrayal of Christian as taking what he wants and/or deserves and Ana going along with it because she does not seem to see herself as having a choice demonstrates a more traditional understanding of gender roles and their relation to sexual behavior. Additionally *Fifty Shades* does not really deviate from the traditionally heterosexual fixation on female beauty as a product of the male gaze.<sup>131</sup> Through the novel, Christian objectifies Ana, and it is implied that this is normal male behavior that he either cannot help or is excusable because it is for the purposes of BDSM and makes him happy. In this way, *Fifty Shades* portrays traditional male/female gender roles without doing any critical thinking on the issue. Christian's Dominant urges are framed within the context of normal male heterosexuality, and Ana's eventual submission falls in line with traditional expectations of how long term heterosexual relationships should work between men and women. This type of power exchange is very different from a consensual, well-negotiated power exchange in a BDSM context, even if those relationships look from the outside like traditional heterosexual dynamics.

To demonstrate the differences between the power exchange in *Fifty Shades* and those in the wider BDSM community, I turned to academic research. Emily Prior, an educator, researcher, and BDSM community member, examines consensual power exchange from

---

<sup>131</sup> van Reenen, "Is This Really What Women Want?," 225.

women's perspectives in her article "Women's Perspectives of BDSM Power Exchange."<sup>132</sup> In the study, she interviewed women who were involved in consensual power exchange relationships, and found that there was emphasis on ideas of symmetry and exchange of equals within power exchange dynamics. Several of her participants said that partners must be on equal terms outside of the dynamic before an exchange can take place. Additionally, Prior observed that the partner with less power theoretically has more control, as they are usually the "keeper" of the safeword in a scene the one who gives consent for actions to occur. Prior concluded that

From a third wave feminist perspective, these women are consensually engaging in sexual power exchanges that provide them with a sense of freedom and control, even to an extent where they feel free to allow someone else to have that control for a period of time. Although this seems to be the antithesis to the tenets of many radical feminist beliefs that may view BDSM power exchange and its components as oppressive or even abusive, the women I interviewed and observed did not feel this way."<sup>133</sup>

The dynamics observed in Prior's research are not the same ones portrayed in *Fifty Shades*. Ana and Christian were never on equal footing in terms of power when they first discussed their dynamic, and Ana certainly doesn't use her "bottom power" to redirect actions she feels uncomfortable with or threatened by. When she does choose to safeword, Christian explicitly ignores it several times, or coerces her into not using it, or otherwise forces her into situations she is not comfortable in.<sup>134</sup> This example of a power dynamic is not in keeping with the "real life" examples of BDSM that appear in academic studies and in personal anecdotes (Prior herself was a member of the community in which she did her research, and her personal experiences are

---

<sup>132</sup> Emily E. Prior, "Women's Perspectives of BDSM Power Exchange," *Electronic Journal of Human Sexuality* 16, no. 2013 (2013), [http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA365455101&v=2.1&u=vol\\_b92b&it=r&p=AONE&sw=w&asid=7d382e9260cb5b28b30e21604088da86](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA365455101&v=2.1&u=vol_b92b&it=r&p=AONE&sw=w&asid=7d382e9260cb5b28b30e21604088da86).

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> James, *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

part of her ethnographic reports and data). This gap between real-life and fictionalized BDSM experiences does a disservice to healthy BDSM dynamics by normalizing a fantastical and unhealthy portrayal of BDSM, and furthers notions of transgression that really only transgress norms of safety, not taboo topics.

*Fifty Shades* markets itself as being an example of a “transgressive” power exchange D/s relationship where Christian is the Dom and Ana is the sub. However, despite the kinky aspects throughout the novel, many critics argue that the relationship is both normative and traditional. *Fifty Shades* itself is actually a very traditional marriage plot, with some “spice” in the form of BDSM thrown in. It folds the transgressive into a neat package of heterosexual romance, which functions as a cure for any and all obstacles through the novel.<sup>135</sup> The obstacles to the relationship are integral to the plot itself, because in order to have a happy ending, there must be some strife for the characters to overcome. In many romance novels this strife might be money, or a cheating partner, or distance—in *Fifty Shades*, the obstacle is BDSM itself.<sup>136</sup> In the novel, Christian is portrayed as damaged due to his interest in kink. Kink is subtly shown to be pathological, something that needs psychological intervention, or that can be “cured”. Over the course of the novel, Christian visits a psychiatrist to address his “violent” tendencies, which clearly demonstrates the kink as pathology plotline.<sup>137</sup> This portrayal goes along with traditional feminist conflation of consensual BDSM and pathological mythologies of sadism and masochism in a wider social context, including the ideas that all BDSM practitioners were somehow abused as children and that there is no difference between consensual S/M and non-

---

<sup>135</sup> Downing, “Safewording! Kinkphobia and Gender Normativity in *Fifty Shades of Grey*.”

<sup>136</sup> van Reenen, “Is This Really What Women Want?,” 228.

<sup>137</sup> Emma Green, “*Fifty Shades of Grey* Gets BDSM Dangerously Wrong - The Atlantic,” accessed January 9, 2017, <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/02/consent-isnt-enough-in-fifty-shades-of-grey/385267/>.

consensual violence.<sup>138</sup> Despite this “traditional” understanding, there have been several studies conducted on the issue of pathology and participation in sadomasochism, with the aim of determining whether there is any medical truth to these stigmas. A study from Kleinplatz and Moser on the real-life experiences of S/M practitioners vs. medical understandings of those practices concluded that “there is no evidence to demonstrate that SM, however common or uncommon, creates personal distress or dysfunction for participants or otherwise endangers consenting individuals any more than occurs in other, socially sanctioned pastimes.”<sup>139</sup> Despite these findings and the strong voices from within the BDSM community decrying the pathological mindset, *Fifty Shades* still runs with this viewpoint, which frames Christian’s deviance as separate from vanilla heterosexuality, further portraying BDSM as an abnormal or sick twist in a relationship that would otherwise be normal and healthy. Ana’s role in both his deviance and his “cure” is incredibly traditional: woman tames the “bad boy” with her healing powers, which manifest in the form of happy heterosexual marriage and eventual pregnancy, which in the novel are separated from BDSM as a practice and institution. Through much of the novel, Ana merely tolerates the BDSM practices, but makes it clear that she is in it for the love she feels for Christian despite her discomfort with his personal sexual preferences. Her position is validated by her eventual marriage and ability to change Christian into the man she wants, enough that she stays despite his continued interest in BDSM.<sup>140</sup> In this way, the novel comes across as less than transgressive, because it portrays a traditional romance that manages to beat the odds *despite* BDSM, not because of or in tandem with it. Dymock notes that

---

<sup>138</sup> Sarah Stevens, “Rope Sluts, and Bottoms, and Subs, Oh My: *50 Shades of Grey* and the Shifting Discourse on Female Submission in Feminist Kink Porn,” *The Communication Review* 17, no. 3 (July 3, 2014): 256–68, doi:10.1080/10714421.2014.930602.

<sup>139</sup> Kleinplatz and Moser, “Is SM Pathological?,” 61.

<sup>140</sup> van Reenen, “Is This Really What Women Want?,” 228.

It is not a fantasy of transgressing the limits of femininity and female sexual desire that has been revealed to be its most persuasive selling point, but that it recovers the heteronormative narrative thought to be universal to women's lives, and sells it as a subversion of feminism... By upholding marriage and reproduction as institutions under which perversion may be 'tamed', the novels demonstrate that these parameters of sexuality can be safely contained and limited if perverse sexual acts are performed within them.<sup>141</sup>

In other words, *Fifty Shades* frames transgression as something that is appropriate only when it appears within wider social constructs of heteropatriarchy that ultimately suppress that transgression and assimilate the players back into the socially acceptable norm. This return to norms and enforcement of gender roles is far from progressive. This lack of progressive thinking in the novel extends to the idea of consent, which is perhaps the most discussed issue in the novel.

Though each of the above issues have been hotly debated in terms of whether *Fifty Shades of Grey* is feminist, empowering, or kink-positive, the topic of consent has spawned large amounts of discussion and discourse. Many of the responses that initially discussed *Fifty Shades* only had two standpoints: letting go of choice (submitting) in the bedroom either was either a non-feminist or a feminist act. However, as the scholarship progressed, these options came to be viewed as oversimplified. One is a retreat from the modern world of choice (falling more under the traditional pre-feminist understandings of gender roles in a relationship) while the other is a fantasy that overlooks the violence towards women that is enshrined in patriarchal culture (the

---

<sup>141</sup> A. Dymock, "Flogging Sexual Transgression: Interrogating the Costs of the 'Fifty Shades Effect,'" *Sexualities* 16, no. 8 (December 1, 2013): 882; 887, doi:10.1177/1363460713508884.

prevalence of coercion, violent relationships, etc.).<sup>142</sup> In her article “Consent is a grey area? A comparison of understandings of consent in *Fifty Shades of Grey* and on the BDSM blogosphere,” Meg Barker (a researcher, sex therapist, and activist) writes that “the understandings of consent depicted in the novels remain reflective of those prevalent in wider heteronormative culture.”<sup>143</sup> She contrasts the BDSM in the books with the BDSM of the kink community at large, which has rather different standards of consent than the generalized heterosexual community referenced above. While the locus of consent in *Fifty Shades* is always on the woman, the locus of consent in the BDSM community is community-based and follows either SSC or RACK.<sup>144</sup> This emphasis on consent in both acronyms places the responsibility for consent on both parties, because it is understood in the BDSM community that each person brings responsibility for consent to the dynamic. However, in the *Fifty Shades* version of BDSM, consent lies solely with Ana. Barker notes that “generally, Christian initiates something and, if Ana doesn’t explicitly say ‘no’ or use her safeword to stop play, they end up doing it.”<sup>145</sup> In this way, the mainstream heterosexist viewpoint that women are the keepers of consent is perpetuated, in a way that is at odds with sex-positive standpoints that consent is a two-way street for both parties. Feminists have consistently called for male responsibility in sexual situations, and for women to know how to speak up for themselves and have a healthy sex life, which is not the norm in *Fifty Shades*. Debby Herbenick, a sex educator and sex researcher, points to this phenomenon in a *New York Times* sponsored opinion panel on pornography shortly after the publication of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, saying that “young women whose ideas about sex and love are shaped by *Fifty Shades of Grey* or Hollywood romantic comedies will also have to

---

<sup>142</sup> Dymock, “Flogging Sexual Transgression.”

<sup>143</sup> Meg Barker, “Consent Is a Grey Area? A Comparison of Understandings of Consent in *Fifty Shades of Grey* and on the BDSM Blogosphere,” *Sexualities* 16, no. 8 (December 1, 2013): 896, doi:10.1177/1363460713508881.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 896–97.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 898.

make room for reality.”<sup>146</sup> This contention that *Fifty Shades* is purely a fantasy and should be acknowledged as portraying dynamics that should not be enacted in real life falls in line with the kink community’s understandings that the BDSM in the novel is not reflective of real-life experiences. In this way, *Fifty Shades* functions in a fantasy space, which critics also point out applies to the way consent is treated in the novel.

*Fifty Shades* furthers this idea of detachment from the real world by portraying kink negotiation and consent as happening in a vacuum and without a context. BDSM in *Fifty Shades* shows all the action of kink and none of the communication, context, and intimacy, and “eroticizes sexual violence, but without any of the emotional maturity and communication required to make it safe.”<sup>147</sup> The communal consent aspect of BDSM is completely absent in *Fifty Shades*—there’s no mention of community, norms, or even that other people do it, other than references to Christian’s past partners, all of whom he has interacted with individually. This cluelessness about the community trickled over into the actual community, as reported by Catharine Scott in her book *Thinking Kink*. Scott, a writer who through her research participated in the BDSM community, noted that “complaints during the 2012 influx of curious [vanillas] into the BDSM scene did not seem to be so much about the mainstreaming of the scene... but rather about clueless individuals playing with potentially deeply dangerous practices they did not understand or respect.”<sup>148</sup> This lack of understanding of communal norms clearly affected the larger population, which is part of the reason why so many writers wrote so strongly against the portrayals of BDSM and consent in the novel.

---

<sup>146</sup> Debby Herbenick, “Should Pornography Come Out of the Closet?,” *The New York Times*, November 11, 2012, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2012/11/11/does-pornography-deserve-its-bad-rap/pornography-is-no-substitute-for-sex-ed>.

<sup>147</sup> Green, “Fifty Shades of Grey Gets BDSM Dangerously Wrong - The Atlantic.”

<sup>148</sup> Catherine Scott, *Thinking Kink: The Collision of BDSM, Feminism and Popular Culture* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2015), 54.

Communal understandings of consent are essential in BDSM, and are severely lacking in *Fifty Shades*. Green notes that “consent is the ironclad starting point... because it’s a community that people choose, one with strong norms and mores, it can embrace a set of sexual values, like exploration, play, and experimentation. For most everyone else—the average *Fifty Shades* reader and moviegoer included—this isn’t the case.”<sup>149</sup> Christian has his own norms and mores, which do not line up with the longstanding norms for consent in the BDSM world. Soha Kareem, an feminist writer and BDSM participant, writes in an *Everyday Feminism* article on practicing non-oppressive kink that “kink is complex and requires active, consistent assessment and reassessment” and that “it’s crucial that on top of respecting safewords, subspaces, aftercare, hard limits, soft limits, and so forth, that we actually address each other as humans that require love and safety first and foremost.”<sup>150</sup> This “human” aspect is much of what is missing from *Fifty Shades*—Christian often seems to view Ana entirely as an object, not a person with emotional and physical needs that need to be considered even within a 24/7 D/s dynamic. It is worth noting that this type of objectification can be healthy and affirming-- Katherine Martinez, a scholar of gender, sexuality, and women’s studies, produced a study in 2016 that concluded that consensual objectification among consensual sadomasochists resulted in lower incidences of body shame in that group.<sup>151</sup> However, the key word in that study is “consent”: each person who participated in the study entered willingly into a dynamic where objectification was a norm. Ana, in *Fifty Shades*, does not have that luxury.

At the beginning of the novel, Christian basically stalks Ana because he finds her alluring— this is quite clearly an example of non-consensual objectification. Over the course of

---

<sup>149</sup> Green, “Fifty Shades of Grey Gets BDSM Dangerously Wrong - The Atlantic.”

<sup>150</sup> Soha Kareem, “Your 3-Step Guide to Practicing Non-Oppressive BDSM,” *Everyday Feminism*, July 21, 2015, <http://everydayfeminism.com/2015/07/non-oppressive-bdsm/>.

<sup>151</sup> Katherine Martinez, “Somebody’s Fetish: Self-Objectification and Body Satisfaction Among Consensual Sadomasochists,” *The Journal of Sex Research* 53, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 35–44, doi:10.1080/00224499.2014.978494.

the book, Ana slowly becomes conditioned to accept this type of non-consensual behavior, even though initially she was quite reluctant and even mentally and physically afraid his advances. One can see why one of the largest critiques of the book has been about abuse—Christian simply does not have a good background or understanding of consent, and Ana often does not know how or cannot stick up for herself in situations where she feels uncomfortable. Dymock notes that this may be the reason many people found the novel such a “page turner”. They argue that the constant boundary pushing— how far will they go? Which limits will be broken next? — was seen as a plot-based appeal, where readers wanted to see the depths to which the couple might sink in terms of taboo subjects.<sup>152</sup> This conflation of danger and “good” plot is an interesting one, which begs the question: why did many people overlook what often seem to be clear signs of abuse in the novel? Some critics argue that the characters are designed to appeal to a large audience, and that their high profile upper class life (Christian is a millionaire and has a taste for the luxurious) excuses them from potential bad or abusive behavior.<sup>153</sup> I propose that the characters do not understand consent deeply because they are representative of mainstream heterosexual culture, which often has a very cursory understanding consent, or even no understanding at all.

By looking closely the way BDSM and consent are portrayed in *Fifty Shades*, one can critically interrogate wider culture, power structures, and hierarchies and use examples from the novel to bring critical thinking around issues of consent into the mainstream.<sup>154</sup> There was some mainstream press over the course of the trilogy that argued that even though *Fifty Shades* was not a great example of sexual liberation in its content, people could still use it as a tool for sexual

---

<sup>152</sup> Dymock, “Flogging Sexual Transgression.”

<sup>153</sup> Green, “Fifty Shades of Grey Gets BDSM Dangerously Wrong - The Atlantic”; van Reenen, “Is This Really What Women Want?,” 230.

<sup>154</sup> Barker, “Consent Is a Grey Area?,” 908.

liberation for themselves on an individual level (Roiphe's article is chief among these examples).<sup>155</sup> Van Reenan argues against this concept, saying that the personal is not political when oppression still exists on a societal level and that sexual choices do not equal political liberation and equality on a macro scale.<sup>156</sup> This reasoning is partially why many in the kink community have gone out of their way to speak out against the book. *Fifty Shades* was a lot of people's first introduction to kink, which was quite exciting for a community that is traditionally marginalized by the vanilla mainstream.<sup>157</sup> However, many kinksters decried using the book using the book as a manual for safe kink, because it contains stalking, abusive relationship dynamics, and unsafe/ nonconsensual practices.<sup>158</sup> This communal effort reflects a wider understanding of the "right" way and the "wrong" way to do BDSM: consensual kink is the "right" way, while *Fifty Shades* kink is the "wrong" way. This understanding of consent-based kink as central to the kink lifestyle is presented in a survey cited by researchers Katherine Klement, Brad Sagarin, and Ellen Lee in a paper about consent cultures and rape-supportive beliefs, which says that

"In a large survey of BDSM practitioners conducted by the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom (2013) at least 85% of respondents endorsed statements such as 'a person can revoke consent at any time,' 'consent should be an ongoing discussion in a relationship,' 'consent is not valid when coerced,' and 'clear, overt consent must be given before a scene.'" <sup>159</sup>

---

<sup>155</sup> Roiphe, "Working Women's Fantasies."

<sup>156</sup> van Reenan, "Is This Really What Women Want?," 231.

<sup>157</sup> Scott, *Thinking Kink*, 96.

<sup>158</sup> Denarii Monroe, "Beyond 50 Shades: The Reality Behind 3 Myths About BDSM," *Everyday Feminism*, January 20, 2015, <http://everydayfeminism.com/2015/01/myths-about-bdsm/>.

<sup>159</sup> Kathryn R. Klement, Brad J. Sagarin, and Ellen M. Lee, "Participating in a Culture of Consent May Be Associated With Lower Rape-Supportive Beliefs," *The Journal of Sex Research*, April 27, 2016, 1–5, doi:10.1080/00224499.2016.1168353.

This example clearly underscores why the kink community disdains *Fifty Shades*: the characters in the novel do not have much respect for revoking consent, consent is not an ongoing part of the relationship, consent is viewed as valid when coerced, and consent is taken, not given. The backlash against *Fifty Shades* indicates that perhaps, a wider consent culture may be in the works. Building consent culture is part of the bigger picture for the wider community, not just the BDSM community and not just for sex. Consent cultures are hard to come by, and as Barker notes, there are a lot of overlapping power dynamics in heterosexual culture that make it very difficult to rewrite texts such as *Fifty Shades* in a consent-positive way.<sup>160</sup> However, the discourses around the novel make some effort to at least examine consent critically, and through these examinations, mainstream constructions of consent may grow and change in ways that are beneficial to the wider community.

---

<sup>160</sup> Barker, "Consent Is a Grey Area?," 907.

## Conclusion

Through the examinations of the interplay between BDSM and feminism and notions of consent, I have highlighted several overlaps and tensions that exist between these concepts and practices. The feminist and kink communities have often disagreed, but they came together as a mostly unified front after the publication of *Fifty Shades of Grey* to defend “real” BDSM, “acceptable” consent practices, and “healthy” sexuality. However, mainstream feminist understandings of consent and those from within the BDSM community have traditionally taken separate paths over issues of BDSM itself. The history shows that these two communities have been in contention for decades, yet they set aside differences in the face of a larger threat to safe, consensual practices. These discourses have helped shape a larger culture of consent by bringing together differing sides over time.

In examining the history of BDSM and feminism as both parallel and overlapping discourses, I have shown that many failings of the feminist community have been glossed over in the wider history, and that the BDSM community’s contributions to feminist understandings of consent have potentially been overlooked. *Fifty Shades of Grey* helped bring two historically differing sides together in mainstream culture, though this linking has been difficult and somewhat contentious, much like any unification of formerly opposing sides. This convergence has helped highlight several things: the past treatment of the BDSM community by mainstream feminists, the potential opportunities for the establishment of a consent culture by using BDSM-based consent techniques and definitions, and the influence of a feminist press on wider culture to correct harmful stereotypes about both BDSM and how consent should work.

The interplay between mainstream and outsider cultures becomes important in the broader study of sexuality, gender, and consent. Looking deeper into overlooked subcultures like

the kink community in relation to wider cultures like feminism may illuminate opportunities to apply behavioral standards from the smaller community that benefit the larger. Consent as a concept is an incredibly complicated and debated topic in the current media cycle, particularly across college campuses and in response to issues of sexual assault, rape statistics, and the politics of defining rape and assault. This discourse could benefit from examining how smaller microcosms of a consent culture have appeared over time, both from the BDSM community and from manifestations of consent within feminist organizations and writings. The scholarship discussed in this thesis is useful because it is relevant to these debates.

This writing is not without flaws. I have chosen not to cover certain aspects of BDSM, such as how kink communities deal with issues of violence and assault, nor have I chosen to directly reference the legislative debates around consent and assault on the state and federal level. These issues are relevant and important, and the research in this thesis could be applied to each of those topics, but it was not my intent to make recommendations to address either of these issues. Rather, I provide an accessible historical overview of how consent has been talked about in two specific discourses, and how those discourses could be used to help create a consent culture through the examination and implementation of consent practices in both communities. Both the feminist and kink communities have learned and grown from their interactions with each other, and I have shown that those interactions have been fruitful post *Fifty Shades* in terms of bringing nuanced understandings of consent to the mainstream. There is still room for more research, more work, and more discourse between these groups, and with this work, I hope to encourage the scholarly community to continue to engage critically with these issues, even if on the surface they seem taboo or already resolved. As the debates outlined in this thesis have shown, there is always more work to do.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the Leather Archives and Museum in Chicago, IL, for giving me access to their collection of newsletters, and to their archivist Mel Leverich for her help and guidance during my time wading through the archives. Additional thanks goes to Daisy Benson, research librarian extraordinaire, for her invaluable help in tracking down online archives and her general enthusiasm about this project, and to Elaine Short for her donation of several books that were incredibly helpful in my research. I am grateful to my advisor, Paul Deslandes, and my committee, Mary Burke and Chris Vaccaro, for bearing with me on deadlines and providing me with wonderful feedback during my defense, and to the University of Vermont History Department for awarding me a grant so I fly to Chicago for research. Finally, a huge shout out and thank you to my partner and my roommate, who dealt with the living room being my research space for the better part of a year. Thank you for not disturbing my very precise pile-things-on-the-floor system of filing.

## References

- “200,000 March in Capital to Seek Gay Rights and Money for AIDS - NYTimes.com.” Accessed April 16, 2017.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/1987/10/12/us/200000-march-in-capital-to-seek-gay-rights-and-money-for-aids.html>.
- “Advice on How to Have a Great Relationship.” Accessed April 27, 2017.  
<https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/relationships/your-relationship-good-you>.
- “ALT.com Help.” Accessed April 26, 2017.  
[http://alt.com/p/help.cgi?answer=14&category=GENERAL\\_INFORMATION&who=r,2/L7qkWJv4IIo7kWkna5c1bfAD3Ll5iwRpvJY\\_C47o5opSgn4OkxjGKU7vtZS5UbIDPLAxxw/1a0eZi43tjT6\\_cUKsrMGflxGXNONzU2v6JA2FSn9/5CSh\\_6cApQYfnr](http://alt.com/p/help.cgi?answer=14&category=GENERAL_INFORMATION&who=r,2/L7qkWJv4IIo7kWkna5c1bfAD3Ll5iwRpvJY_C47o5opSgn4OkxjGKU7vtZS5UbIDPLAxxw/1a0eZi43tjT6_cUKsrMGflxGXNONzU2v6JA2FSn9/5CSh_6cApQYfnr).
- Baker, Victoria. “Letter from The Outcasts to The Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival.” *The Lunatic Fringe: Newsletter of the Outcasts*, July 1990. Leather Archives and Museum.
- Ballouk, Amanda Maryam. “Fifty Shades of Feminism.” M.A., Southeastern Louisiana University, 2016.
- Barker, Meg. “Consent Is a Grey Area? A Comparison of Understandings of Consent in Fifty Shades of Grey and on the BDSM Blogosphere.” *Sexualities* 16, no. 8 (December 1, 2013): 896–914.  
 doi:10.1177/1363460713508881.
- Beaudette, Marie. “Penthouse Publisher FriendFinder Files for Bankruptcy Protection.” *Wall Street Journal*, September 17, 2013, sec. Business.  
<https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323527004579080821727792140>.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits Of “sex.”* Routledge Classics. Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2011.
- . *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* Routledge Classics. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- . “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519–31. doi:10.2307/3207893.
- Califia, Pat. “A Personal View of the History of the Lesbian S/M Community and Movement in San Francisco.” In *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M*, 3rd ed., 245–83. Boston: Alyson Publications, 1987.
- . “A Secret Side of Lesbian Sexuality.” In *S/M: Studies in Dominance and Submission*. New York: Prometheus Books, 1995.
- . *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex.* 1st ed. Pittsburgh, Pa: Cleis Press, 1994.
- Chaline, Eric. “On Becoming a Gay S/Mer: A Sexual Scripting Process.” In *Safe, Sane and Consensual: Contemporary Perspectives on Sadomasochism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Chase, KT. “The Domestic Violence Project.” *The Link*, February 1994. Leather Archives and Museum.
- “Consent - Oxford Reference.” Accessed April 15, 2017.  
[http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199571123.001.0001/m\\_en\\_gb0173250](http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199571123.001.0001/m_en_gb0173250).
- Crenshaw, Kimberle. “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.” *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, no. 1989 (1989): 139–67.
- Douglas, Barry. “For Love and For Life: The March On Washington.” *The Link*, Summer/Fall 1987. Leather Archives and Museum.
- Downing, Lisa. “Safewording! Kinkphobia and Gender Normativity in Fifty Shades of Grey.” *Psychology and Sexuality* 4, no. 1 (January 2013): 92–102. doi:10.1080/19419899.2012.740067.
- DS. “SSC Origins.” *GL-ASB*, August 29, 1999.
- Dworkin, Leonard. “What Is This Thing Called The Internet?” *The Link*, July 1995. Leather Archives and Museum.
- Dymock, A. “Flogging Sexual Transgression: Interrogating the Costs of the ‘Fifty Shades Effect.’” *Sexualities* 16, no. 8 (December 1, 2013): 880–95. doi:10.1177/1363460713508884.
- Easton, Dossie, and Catherine A. Liszt. *When Someone You Love Is Kinky*. Emeryville, Calif: Greenery Press, 2000.
- “Editor’s Soapbox.” *The Lunatic Fringe: Newsletter of the Outcasts*, 1989.

- “Excerpt from Shelix Newsletter.” *The Lunatic Fringe: Newsletter of the Outcasts*, 1989. Leather Archives and Museum.
- “Ex-Coordinator’s Report.” *The Lunatic Fringe: Newsletter of the Outcasts*, 1987. Leather Archives and Museum.
- Frazier, Mark. “From Mr. And Ms. NLA International.” *The Link*, February 1994. Leather Archives and Museum.
- Glick, Elisa. “Sex Positive: Feminism, Queer Theory, and the Politics of Transgression.” *Feminist Review*, no. 64 (2000): 19–45.
- Graham, Benjamin C., Sarah E. Butler, Ryan McGraw, Shelby Marie Cannes, and Joanna Smith. “Member Perspectives on the Role of BDSM Communities.” *The Journal of Sex Research* 53, no. 8 (October 12, 2016): 895–909. doi:10.1080/00224499.2015.1067758.
- Green, Emma. “Fifty Shades of Grey Gets BDSM Dangerously Wrong - The Atlantic.” Accessed January 9, 2017. <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/02/consent-isnt-enough-in-fifty-shades-of-grey/385267/>.
- “Guidelines | FetLife.” Accessed April 3, 2017. <https://fetlife.com/guidelines/community>.
- Herbenick, Debby. “Should Pornography Come Out of the Closet?” *The New York Times*, November 11, 2012, sec. Opinion. <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2012/11/11/does-pornography-deserve-its-bad-rap/pornography-is-no-substitute-for-sex-ed>.
- Houlberg, Rick. “The Magazine of a Sadoomasochism Club: The Tie That Binds.” In *S/M: Studies in Dominance and Submission*. New York: Prometheus Books, 1995.
- Huber, Sallee. “Year in Review.” *The Link*, February 1994. Leather Archives and Museum.
- Hunt, Magaret. “Report on a Conference on Feminism, Sexuality and Power: The Elect Clash with the Perverse.” In *Coming to Power: Writing and Graphics on Lesbian S/M*, 3rd ed. Boston: Alyson Publications, 1987.
- “Internet Tidbit.” *The Link*, March 1997. Leather Archives and Museum.
- James, E. L. *Fifty Shades of Grey*. 1st Vintage Books ed. Fifty Shades Trilogy 1. New York: Vintage Books, 2012.
- JB. “Response to SSC Origins.” *GL-ASB*, August 29, 1999.
- Juicy Lucy. “If I Ask You To Tie Me Up, Will You Still Love Me?” In *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M*, 3rd ed., 29–40. Boston: Alyson Publications, 1987.
- Kamel, Levi G.W. “The Leather Career: On Becoming a Sadoomasochist.” In *S/M: Studies in Dominance and Submission*. New York: Prometheus Books, 1995.
- Kareem, Soha. “Your 3-Step Guide to Practicing Non-Oppressive BDSM.” *Everyday Feminism*, July 21, 2015. <http://everydayfeminism.com/2015/07/non-oppressive-bdsm/>.
- Kleinplatz, Peggy J., and Charles Moser. “Is SM Pathological?” In *Safe, Sane, and Consensual: Contemporary Perspectives on Sadoomasochism*, 55–62. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Klement, Kathryn R., Brad J. Sagarin, and Ellen M. Lee. “Participating in a Culture of Consent May Be Associated With Lower Rape-Supportive Beliefs.” *The Journal of Sex Research*, April 27, 2016, 1–5. doi:10.1080/00224499.2016.1168353.
- Krafft-Ebing, R. von, Franklin S Klaf, Joseph LoPiccolo, and Daniel Blain. *Psychopathia Sexualis: The Classic Study of Deviant Sex*. New York: Arcade Pub./Skyhorse Pub., 2011. <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=1320587>.
- Kraus, Albert. “Letter from the Co-Chair.” *The Link*, February 1994. Leather Archives and Museum.
- Langdridge, Darren. “The Time of the Sadoomasochist: Hunting With(in) the ‘Tribus.’” In *Introducing the New Sexuality Studies*, edited by Nancy Fischer and Seidman Steven, 3rd ed. New York: Routledge, 2016.
- “Links of the Week.” *The Link*, November 1997. Leather Archives and Museum.
- Mains, Geoffrey. *Urban Aboriginals: A Celebration of Leather Sexuality*. 1st ed. San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1984.
- Martinez, Katherine. “Somebody’s Fetish: Self-Objectification and Body Satisfaction Among Consensual Sadoomasochists.” *The Journal of Sex Research* 53, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 35–44. doi:10.1080/00224499.2014.978494.
- “Member Benefits | The Eulenspiegel Society.” Accessed April 27, 2017. <http://www.tes.org/index.php/whats-tes/member-benefits/>.
- “Membership | Black Rose.” Accessed April 27, 2017. <http://br.org/br/membership/>.
- Monroe, Denarii. “Beyond 50 Shades: The Reality Behind 3 Myths About BDSM.” *Everyday Feminism*, January 20, 2015. <http://everydayfeminism.com/2015/01/myths-about-bdsm/>.
- Moser, Charles. “S/M Interactions in Semipublic Settings.” In *Sexual Deviance: A Reader*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003.

- Moser, Charles, and Peggy J. Kleinplatz. "Themes of SM Expression." In *Safe, Sane, and Consensual: Contemporary Perspectives on Sadoomasochism*, edited by Darren Langdridge and Meg Barker. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Ortmann, David M, and Richard A Sprott. *Sexual Outsiders: Understanding BDSM Sexualities and Communities*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015.
- Prior, Emily E. "Women's Perspectives of BDSM Power Exchange." *Electronic Journal of Human Sexuality* 16, no. 2013 (2013).  
[http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA365455101&v=2.1&u=vol\\_b92b&it=r&p=AONE&sw=w&asid=7d382e9260cb5b28b30e21604088da86](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA365455101&v=2.1&u=vol_b92b&it=r&p=AONE&sw=w&asid=7d382e9260cb5b28b30e21604088da86).
- "Program Report: Novices Rule!" *The Lunatic Fringe: Newsletter of the Exiles*, August 1997. Leather Archives and Museum.
- Purrfect. "SM In Cyberspace." *The Link*, September 1994. Leather Archives and Museum.
- Rampton, Martha. "Four Waves of Feminism." *Pacific University Oregon*, October 25, 2015.  
<https://www.pacificu.edu/about-us/news-events/four-waves-feminism>.
- "Rape and Sexual Consent Information For Teens." Accessed April 27, 2017.  
<https://www.plannedparenthood.org/teens/relationships/consent-and-rape>.
- "Rebel Panel Recap." *The Lunatic Fringe: Newsletter of the Outcasts*, November 1990. Leather Archives and Museum.
- Reenen, Dionne van. "Is This Really What Women Want? An Analysis of Fifty Shades of Grey and Modern Feminist Thought." *South African Journal of Philosophy* 33, no. 2 (April 2014): 223–33.  
 doi:10.1080/02580136.2014.925730.
- "Response from the Organizers of the Michican Womyn's Music Festival." *The Lunatic Fringe: Newsletter of the Outcasts*, 1990.
- Richters, Juliet, Richard O. De Visser, Chris E. Rissel, Andrew E. Grulich, and Anthony M.A. Smith. "Demographic and Psychosocial Features of Participants in Bondage and Discipline, 'Sadoomasochism' or Dominance and Submission (BDSM): Data from a National Survey." *The Journal of Sexual Medicine* 5, no. 7 (July 2008): 1660–68. doi:10.1111/j.1743-6109.2008.00795.x.
- Rofes, Eric E. "Snapshots of Desire: Surviving as a Queer Among Queers." In *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice*. Boston: Alyson Publications, 1981.
- Roiphe, Kate. "Working Women's Fantasies." *Newsweek*, April 16, 2012. <http://www.newsweek.com/working-womens-fantasies-63915>.
- Rubin, Gayle. "The Catacombs: A Temple of the Butthole." In *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics and Practice*. Boston: Alyson Publications, 1991.
- . "The Leather Menace: Comments on Politics and S/M." In *Coming To Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M*, 3rd ed. Boston: Alyson Publications, n.d.
- SAMOIS (Organization), ed. *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M, S/M: A Form of Eroticism Based on a Consensual Exchange of Power*. 3rd U.S. ed., And updated. Boston: Alyson Publications, 1987.
- Scott, Catherine. *Thinking Kink: The Collision of BDSM, Feminism and Popular Culture*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2015.
- "Sexual and Reproductive Control | Planned Parenthood." Accessed April 27, 2017.  
<https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/relationships/sexual-reproductive-control>.
- Sisson, Kathy. "The Cultural Formation of S/M: History and Analysis." In *Safe, Sane and Consensual: Contemporary Perspectives on Sadoomasochism*, 16–40. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Stein, David. "How GMSMA Changed the World." *A Decade of Pride by Gay Male S/M Activists*, 1991. Leather Archives and Museum.
- . "S/M's Copernican Revolution: From a Closed World to the Infinite Universe." In *Leatherfolk, Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice*, 142–56. Boston: Alyson Publications, 1991.
- Stevens, Sarah. "Rope Sluts, and Bottoms, and Subs, Oh My: 50 Shades of Grey and the Shifting Discourse on Female Submission in Feminist Kink Porn." *The Communication Review* 17, no. 3 (July 3, 2014): 256–68.  
 doi:10.1080/10714421.2014.930602.
- Stryker, Susan. "Transgender Feminism: Queering the Woman Question." In *Feminist Frontiers*, edited by Verta Taylor, Nancy Whittier, and Leila J. Rupp, 9th ed., 63–69. McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2011.
- "Submission - Oxford Reference." Accessed April 15, 2017.  
[http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199571123.001.0001/m\\_en\\_gb0824690](http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199571123.001.0001/m_en_gb0824690).
- Teramis. "Arkansas Sodomy Laws." Listserv. *Sm-Act*, July 6, 2001.

“Terms of Use | FetLife.” Accessed April 4, 2017. <https://fetlife.com/legalese/tou>.

“The Prisoner of Sex.” *NYMag.com*. Accessed April 19, 2017.

<http://nymag.com/nymetro/news/people/features/11907/index3.html>.

Thompson, Mark, ed. *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice*. 1st ed. Boston: Alyson Publications, 1991.

Townsend, Larry. *The Leatherman's Handbook*. 3rd print. San Francisco: Le Salon, 1977.

Vrangalova, Zhana. “Everything You Need to Know About Consent That You Never Learned in Sex Ed.” *Teen Vogue*. Accessed April 15, 2017. <http://www.teenvogue.com/story/consent-how-to>.

Walradt, Dean. “What I Get for My \$30.00-- A Gift That Just Keeps Giving: Part 2: Domestic Violence and NLA International.” *Th* A similarly controversial issue within kink is the fetish for Nazi-based play, wherein practitioners wear Nazi uniforms and often enact prison or camp-based scenes. *e Link*, January 1995. Leather Archives and Museum.

“What Consent Looks Like | RAINN.” Accessed January 9, 2017. <https://www.rainn.org/articles/what-is-consent>.

Wiseman, Jay. *SM 101: A Realistic Introduction*. San Francisco, CA: Greenery Press, 1998.

“Yes Means Yes.” *END RAPE ON CAMPUS*. Accessed April 27, 2017. <http://endrapeoncampus.org/yes-means-yes/>.