**Abstract**

The BDSM community is generally regarded as having strict consent practices, such as safewords and explicit negotiations. However, no research to date has examined the flexibility of norms around these consent practices. The present study was designed to investigate the nuances of consent communication norms among BDSM practitioners, specifically the degree to which relationship context impacts the depth and nature of consent negotiations. A total of 202 BDSM practitioners (89 women, 64 men, and 49 gender expansive) between the ages of 18 and 83 (*M* = 40.1, *SD* = 13.4) recruited from the Science of BDSM Research Team newsletter rated the acceptability of consent communication practices in the context of either pick-up play (BDSM activities conducted between people who have just met) or scenes in romantic relationships (BDSM activities conducted between romantic relationship partners). Participants generally endorsed stringent consent communication but showed greater flexibility in consent communication practices in longer-term relationships than short-term relationships. Additional results demonstrated that although intoxication was generally considered unacceptable during consent communication, intoxication during consent communication was considered more acceptable in existing relationships than new relationships and for non-BDSM sexual activities than for BDSM activities. Results demonstrate nuance based on context within strong consent norms in the BDSM community.

*Keywords*: consent, kink, BDSM, relationships, safewords

**Consent Norms in the BDSM Community: Strong But Not Inflexible**

BDSM (bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadism and masochism) contains a diverse range of activities and practices typically centered around power exchange, bondage, and intense sensation. Wiseman (1996) defines BDSM as:

The knowing use of psychological dominance and submission, and/ or physical bondage, and/ or pain, and/ or related practices in a safe, legal, consensual manner in order for the participants to experience erotic arousal and/ or personal growth. (p. 10)

In a study by Joyal et al. (2015), approximately 53% of men and 65% of women fantasized about being dominated sexually, and approximately 60% of men and 47% of women fantasized about dominating someone sexually. In a study by Holvoet et al. (2017), 48.6% reported participating in at least one BDSM activity and another 22% reported fantasizing about at least one BDSM activity, but only 7.6% self-identified as BDSM practitioners. These data suggest that a majority of people have BDSM interests but only a relatively small minority identify as BDSM practitioners.

The critical component that differentiates BDSM from abuse is consent (Pitagora, 2013). As Wiseman (1996) explains, “SM play differs from abuse in many of the same ways that a judo match differs from a mugging” (p. 41). The importance of consent to BDSM practitioners is reflected in the BDSM community’s long-standing emphasis on affirmative consent (Klement et al., 2017; Pitagora, 2013). Because of this emphasis, the discourse surrounding consent within BDSM has been proposed as a model for discussing consent more generally (Dunkley & Brotto, 2020).

Consent is foundational for BDSM. This can be seen in the differing models that have been used as guidelines for ethical BDSM, including Safe, Sane, and Consensual (SSC); Risk Aware Consensual Kink (RACK); and Consent, Communication, Caring, and Caution (4Cs) (Williams et al., 2014). These models have been employed throughout the BDSM community as frameworks for negotiating consent (Williams et al., 2014), but the way consent is communicated varies, with some BDSM practitioners navigating consent through detailed, written contracts, while others rely on more casual, verbal negotiations (Beres & MacDonald, 2015; Wiseman, 1996). The present study was designed to investigate the nuances of consent communication among BDSM practitioners, specifically the degree to which relationship context impacts the depth and nature of consent negotiations.

Many BDSM scenes happen between partners who know each other well, sometimes as long-term, non-romantic play partners, other times as long-term romantic partners who engage in BDSM. In contrast, some scenes are conducted between people who do not know each other well, possibly not knowing each other beyond the scene. The latter type of scene is called pick-up play, which is not uncommon at BDSM events. Similar to hookups, pick-up play scenes occur when people, who may or may not know each other prior to their scene, meet and decide to negotiate and do a scene. Some BDSM practitioners might consider pick-up play to be too risky to engage in, while others may enjoy the excitement of sceneing with new people, potentially heightened by the uncertainty involved in a first-time scene. In order to parallel prior non-BDSM research that compared hook-ups to sex within the context of a romantic relationship, the present study compares pick-up play to BDSM scenes conducted within the context of a romantic relationship.

**Consent in the BDSM Community**

Affirmative consent is central to BDSM practices and communities. One of the major functions of BDSM communities is to educate about safety and consent; as such, consent is discussed frequently within the BDSM community (Graham et al., 2016). Communication before, during, and after scenes is seen by many practitioners as the bedrock of BDSM (Bauer, 2020). This includes the use of safewords, predetermined code words that can be used to end a scene at any time, and explicit pre-scene verbal negotiations to demarcate what activities are allowed or off limits (Holt, 2016; Tripodi, 2017). Harris et al. (2024) found that individuals who were part of the BDSM community rated explicit consent as more common for both BDSM- and non-BDSM related activities. In addition, consent discussions were rated as less sexually disruptive by BDSM participants compared to non-BDSM participants. Many BDSM practitioners write formal contracts, which explicitly detail limits, or activities that are off the table, and expectations (Bauer, 2020). In a survey conducted by the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom (NCSF, 2012), 94.3% of the 4088 respondents from the BDSM community agreed that consent should be an ongoing discussion in any relationship.

**Flexibility in Consent Practices**

In describing the nebulous nature of consent, Fanghanel (2020) said, “Consent is underpinned by a negotiation between risk and trust” (p. 14). Thus, lack of explicit communication does not always signal a lack of consent. For example, partners may negotiate blanket consent which allows one partner to initiate activities without explicitly discussing them first; because this can be risky, most people who practice blanket consent only do so with partners they have experience with (Beres & MacDonald, 2015). Beyond the BDSM community, the reliance on the mantras of “yes means yes” and “no means no” has drawn fire for being insufficient and unrealistic, and for oversimplifying consent (Harris, 2018). Consent practices within the BDSM community, and the prevalent discussions on the ethics of consent, expand and explore definitions of ethical consent practices beyond “yes” and “no” (Fanghanel, 2020). For example, the women interviewed by Beres and MacDonald (2015) discussed the importance of consent within BDSM but recognized that while new BDSM practitioners should rely more on models of explicit negotiation mandated by mantras like SSC and RACK, in practice, many BDSM practitioners rely on nonverbal communication (termed “flow”) and pre-negotiated blanket consent as they become more experienced playing with each other.

This concept of “flow” within BDSM relationships may be seen similarly in non-BDSM relationships. Ambiguously consensual interactions are perceived as more consensual when the people involved are perceived to have a greater degree of intimacy (Humphreys, 2007). Additionally, some research suggests a significant effect of non-verbal sexual scripts on undergraduate college students’ sexual communication. Willis and Jozkowski (2019) found a curvilinear relationship between sexual history and consent communication such that as people shared more sexual experiences, they relied less on explicit communication and more on context to communicate consent up to a point after which they communicated explicitly more frequently. Consistent with the upper part of this curvilinear relationship, people in casual sexual relationships were significantly less likely than people in committed relationships to explicitly verbally communicate about penile-vaginal intercourse (Willis et al., 2019). This effect may be attributed to social norms dictating that explicitly discussing consent is awkward or could kill the mood. Explicit discussions of consent are relatively uncommon between college undergraduates; instead, participants focused more on context, indirect verbal communication, and nonverbal communication, although direct verbal consent discussions were more common between long-term partners than new partners (Schumlich & Fischer, 2018). Thus, awkwardness may be a barrier to explicit consent communication between new partners, but this awkwardness may dissipate as partners become more comfortable with each other.

**The Present Study**

Consent is integral to the BDSM community, but does the practice of consent in BDSM differ in different relationship contexts? This study seeks to compare community norms around how consent communication is thought about and practiced between newer scene partners versus scene partners with greater experience together. Because the ubiquity of discussions around consent in the BDSM community is expected to remove the awkwardness surrounding explicit consent communication between newer partners, we expect that our sample will report greater levels of explicit communication in new relationships than is typically found in college student samples. Similar to Beres and MacDonald (2015), we expect participants to become more flexible in their consent communication as they know each other better. Thus, we expect that consent communication standards across dimensions (e.g., safeword use, acceptability of reliance on non-verbal cues) will be more stringent in newer relationships compared to longer-term relationships.

We operationalized newer relationships versus longer-term relationships in two ways. First, we compared consent practices in pick-up play scenes versus scenes in the context of ongoing romantic relationships. This was done to compare BDSM-specific consent practices such as safeword usage. We recognize that BDSM activities occur within other types of relationships such as between long-term, non-romantic play partners. We chose these two contexts (pick-up play versus scenes in romantic relationships) because they allow for a more direct comparison with non-BDSM literature which often focuses on romantic relationships or hookups. Second, we compared consent practices in new romantic relationships versus existing romantic relationships. This was done to compare consent regarding BDSM activities versus consent regarding non-BDSM sexual activities. Finally, we focused on the difference between topping and bottoming within a scene because these roles have clear scene-related implications, where the top is the do-er and bottom is receiver (e.g., in a scene, the top might tie up and spank the bottom). Other BDSM role distinctions such as Dominant versus submissive relate more strongly to power exchange than to scene activities. Further, in a BDSM scene, a Dominant may be receiving an action from their submissive. Thus, where scene role was relevant, we used top and bottom.

We had two main hypotheses:

H1: Consent communication standards will be more stringent regarding pick-up play scenes compared to scenes in the context of romantic relationships.

To test Hypothesis 1, we asked a series of questions about different facets of consent communication. In line with the hypothesis, we predicted that (a) establishing a safeword would be considered more important before a pick-up play scene than a scene in a romantic relationship, (b) participants would perceive that potential activities should be negotiated more extensively before a pick-up play scene than before a scene in a romantic relationship, (c) it would be considered significantly more acceptable to jump into a scene in a romantic relationship than a pick-up play scene, (d) relying on nonverbal cues would be considered significantly less adequate in a pick-up play scene than a scene in a romantic relationship, (e) if the bottom has a safeword, it would be significantly more acceptable for a top to attempt activities that were not previously discussed in a scene in a romantic relationship than in a pick-up play scene, (f) renegotiation during a scene would be more acceptable in a scene in a romantic relationship than in a pick-up play scene, and (g) it would be more acceptable to consent to a scene while impaired by recreational drugs or alcohol in a romantic relationship than a pick-up play context.

H2: Consent communication standards will be more stringent in new relationships compared to ongoing romantic relationships.

For Hypothesis 2, we expected that people would be more likely to discuss a mutually agreed upon safeword in a scene in a new relationship than in a scene in an existing relationship and that compared to new relationships, people in an existing relationship could be at a higher level of intoxication and still consent.

Some of the questions differentiated the top role from the bottom role in a scene. Because bondage and intense sensation are generally experienced by the bottom (but not by the top) in a scene, we anticipated that bottoms would be accorded greater flexibility in consent communication than would tops. For example, we anticipated that participants would find it more acceptable for a bottom than a top to ask to add activities to a scene that had not been previously negotiated.

In addition, we conducted planned exploratory analyses to supplement our primary analyses. We examined whether explicit negotiations mattered more for BDSM activities versus non-BDSM sexual activities and risky versus non-risky behaviors to see whether relationships between risk and consent communication emerged with direct questions. Additionally, we assessed the relationship between consent education within a BDSM context and consent communication behaviors. Finally, we sought to replicate a National Coalition of Sexual Freedom (NCSF, 2020) finding that showed that practitioners of BDSM and polyamory experienced more consent violations outside of an alt-sex (BDSM or polyamory) context than within an alt-sex context.

**Method**

**Participants**

A total of 202 kink identified individuals responded to a survey invitation for BDSM practitioners included in the Science of BDSM Research Team newsletter distributed to an opt-in email list of approximately 1600 individuals. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 83 (*M* = 40.1, *SD* = 13.4) with involvement in kink ranging from less than a year to 53 years (*M* = 17.4, *SD* = 12.6). A more complete breakdown of participant demographics can be found in Tables 1 and 2. Participants were recruited with materials that specified they needed to be over 18 years of age and self-identify as being part of the BDSM, kink, and/or Leather community.

**Measures**

This survey consisted of questions assessing participants’ personal opinions about consent communication in different contexts (see Table 3; see supplemental materials for the full survey). Two versions of each question were presented to participants. For most questions, one version described the consent practice in a pick-up play scene and the other described the consent practice in a scene in a romantic relationship. The question set presented first was randomized to reduce order effects. For the rest of the questions, one version described the consent practice in a new relationship and the other described the consent practice in an ongoing relationship. Questions related to BDSM relationship attitudes were also asked but not included in this manuscript because they were not central to the hypotheses being examined. In addition, the survey assessed participant demographics. Participants were allowed to select multiple options within demographics questions regarding gender identity, sexual orientation, BDSM role, and race/ethnicity.

Gender identity was coded as follows: participants who selected gender-nonconforming, nonbinary, genderfluid, genderqueer, two-spirit, or agender were coded as gender expansive; from the remaining participants, those who identified as woman or trans-woman were coded as women and those who identified as man or trans-man were coded as men. Participants who selected the “other” category were able to fill in a textbox to better describe their identity, and they were placed in the corresponding group with gender expansive as the default. Ten participants selected the “other” category, and their open-ended responses include examples like “Maverick,” “Butch dyke,” “Sissy/Tranny,” “Demifemale,” and “Xenogender.”

Sexual orientation was coded in two ways. First, participants were grouped based on their gay/straight/bisexual identities. Second, participants were grouped based on their identity as asexual, aromantic, greysexual, or demisexual. Many of these identities overlapped (see supplemental materials for the full dataset).

BDSM role identification is complex. While someone who identifies as dominant may not necessarily be a top, for analysis purposes in this study, participants who identified exclusively as a top, sadist, master, dominant, or a combination of these were categorized as tops; participants who identified exclusively as a bottom, masochist, slave, submissive, or a combination of these were categorized as bottoms; and participants who identified as both top and bottom roles or who identified as switches were categorized as switches. Forty-one people were coded as tops, 71 were coded as bottoms, and 83 were coded as switches.

A significant relationship between gender and BDSM role emerged such that women were more likely to identify as bottoms, men were more likely to identify as tops, and gender expansive individuals were more likely to identify as switches, χ2(4, *N* = 195) = 50.14, *p* < .001 (see Table 2).

**Results**

Dependent samples *t*-tests were run to compare participants’ attitudes towards consent in pick-up play scenes and scenes in romantic relationships (see Table 3). Across items, results consistently supported the hypothesis that consent communication standards will be more stringent for pick-up play scenes compared to scenes in romantic relationships. More specifically, explicitly establishing a safeword was rated as significantly more important before a pick-up play scene than a scene in a romantic relationship, participants indicated that potential activities should be negotiated more extensively before a pick-up play scene than before a scene in a romantic relationship, it was considered significantly more acceptable to jump into a scene in a romantic relationship than a pick-up play scene, relying on nonverbal cues was considered significantly less adequate in a pick-up play scene than a scene in a romantic relationship, and participants reported that, if the bottom has a safeword, it is significantly more acceptable for a top to attempt activities that were not previously discussed in a scene in a romantic relationship than in a pick-up play scene (although it is worth noting that the means for the final pair of questions were relatively low, indicating that attempting activities that were not previously discussed is generally considered unacceptable).   
 A three-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the acceptability of renegotiating during a scene, comparing the acceptability of either a top or bottom either adding or removing activities in either a pick-up play scene or a scene in a romantic relationship (see Figure 1). Three significant main effects emerged: Removing activities during a scene was considered significantly more acceptable than adding activities, *F*(1, 200) = 192.20, *p* < .001, renegotiating during a scene was considered significantly more acceptable for bottoms than for tops, *F*(1, 200) = 20.70, *p* < .001, and renegotiating during a scene was considered more acceptable in romantic relationships than during pick-up play, *F*(1, 200) = 85.14, *p* < .001. These main effects were qualified by two significant two-way interactions: A significant role by add/remove interaction, *F*(1, 200) = 36.97, *p* < .001, and a significant relationship by add/remove interaction, *F*(1, 200) = 63.30, *p* < .001. As can be seen in Figure 1, removing activities was considered highly acceptable for bottoms and tops during both pick-up play and scenes in romantic relationships. In contrast, adding activities was considered more acceptable for bottoms than tops, as indicated by a significant simple effect of role, *F*(1, 200) = 39.03, *p* < .001, and adding activities was considered more acceptable during scenes in romantic relationship than during pick-up play, as indicated by a significant simple effect of relationship context, *F*(1, 200) = 102.01, *p* < .001. For adding activities, the simple role by relationship context interaction was non-significant, *F*(1, 200) = 0.52, *p* = .47. An exploratory moderation analysis found no effects of participants’ self-identified BDSM role category on renegotiation during a scene.

A two-way ANOVA was conducted to examine attitudes about whether an individual can consent to top or bottom for a pick-up play scene or a scene in a romantic relationship while impaired by recreational drugs or alcohol (see Figure 2). The ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of relationship context such that consenting while impaired by recreational drugs or alcohol was significantly more acceptable for partners in a romantic relationship than for a pick-up play scene, *F*(1, 201) = 86.51, *p* < .001. There was no significant effect of role, *F*(1, 201) = 0.08, *p* = .77, nor was there a significant role by relationship context interaction, *F*(1, 201) = 3.32, *p* = .07.

Support was also found for the second hypothesis that consent communication standards will be more stringent in new relationships compared to ongoing romantic relationships. Participants were asked “How often do you have a mutually agreed upon safeword with a [new or existing] partner?” A paired-sample *t*-test found that participants were significantly more likely to have a mutually agreed upon safeword with a new partner (*M* = 4.46, *SD* = 1.00) than an existing partner (*M* = 4.02, *SD* = 1.30), *t*(198) = 5.88, *p* < .001. The effect, measured by Cohen’s *d*, was relatively small, *d* = .42 Additionally, participants were asked, on a five-point scale from sober to blacked out, how intoxicated a person can be and still responsibly consent to [a BDSM scene or vanilla sex] with a [new or existing] partner. A two-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the effects of the context of either a new or existing relationship and the context of either a BDSM scene or non-BDSM sex on how intoxicated a person could be and still be considered able to consent (see Figure 3). A significantly higher level of intoxication was considered acceptable in an existing relationship than in a new relationship, *F*(1, 198) = 249.51, *p* < .001. Additionally, a significantly higher level of intoxication was considered acceptable while consenting to non-BDSM sex than to a BDSM scene, *F*(1, 198) = 83.89, *p* < .001. Finally, while acceptable intoxication levels were generally low, a small but significant interaction emerged indicating that the greater acceptability of intoxication in existing relationships versus new relationships was slightly larger in magnitude for non-BDSM sex than for BDSM scenes, *F*(1, 198) = 4.32, *p* = .039.

**Exploratory Analyses**

In addition to examining the main hypotheses for this study, several exploratory analyses were conducted. Participants were asked whether explicit negotiations matter more for non-kink activities or kink activities (with response options ranging from 1 = “Much more for vanilla [non-kink] activities”, 4 = “Equal between vanilla and kink activities”, and 7 = “Much more for kink activities”). A one-sample *t*-test comparing the mean to the scale midpoint showed that participants considered explicit negotiations more important for kink activities than non-kink activities (*M* = 5.37, *SD* = 1.21), *t*(198) = 15.87, *p* < .001. Participants were then asked whether explicit negotiations matter more for non-risky or risky activities. A one sample *t*-test showed that participants considered explicit negotiations more important for riskier activities (*M* = 6.26*, SD* = 6.26), *t*(198) = 28.22, *p* < .001. These results suggest that additional factors beyond relationship context are considered when determining the extent of required consent communication.

Another exploratory analysis was conducted to assess the effects of consent education on consent communication. 66.7% of participants reported receiving formal consent education in a kink setting. The variables of acceptability of removing activities during a scene, jumping into a scene without working out the details first, relying on nonverbal cues for communication, playing while intoxicated, and attempting activities that were not discussed were reverse coded, standardized, and combined with standardized measures of the acceptable extent of negotiations, and the importance of establishing a safeword during a scene to create an aggregate measure of stringency of consent attitudes. Participants who received consent education in a kink setting had more stringent consent norms, *t*(196) = -2.44, *p* = .02. Additionally, participants who had consent education in a kink setting reported having a mutually agreed upon safeword more often than participants who did not report consent education in a kink setting, *t*(196) = -3.65, *p* < .001.

Finally, a McNemar’s test was conducted to compare reported violations of limits in a BDSM context (“Have you ever had a pre-negotiated limit violated in a BDSM scene?” with response options “yes” “no” “unsure” and “not applicable”) with violated boundaries in a non-BDSM context (“Have you ever had a negotiated boundary violated in a vanilla sexual encounter?” with response options “yes” “no” “unsure” and “not applicable”). Of the participants who answered “yes” or “no” to both questions (and could, therefore, be included in the McNemar’s test), a significantly higher proportion reported violations in a non-BDSM sexual encounter (98/166, 59.0%) compared to a BDSM scene (84/166, 50.6%), χ2(1, *N* = 166) = 4.08, *p* = .04.

**Discussion**

The present study was designed to examine the nuances of consent communication within a community with long-standing norms of affirmative consent: the BDSM community. Results demonstrated that BDSM practitioners uphold a strong standard of affirmative consent, but that consent communication practices become more flexible when partners know each other better. For example, behaviors like relying on nonverbal cues for consent and attempting activities that had not been explicitly discussed were seen as more acceptable when playing with a romantic partner than a pick-up play partner. These findings support both hypotheses, demonstrating that consent communication standards are significantly more stringent in pick-up play than in scenes in romantic relationships as well as more stringent in new relationships than in existing relationships.

These findings are consistent with prior research within the BDSM community (Bauer, 2020;Beres & MacDonald, 2015; NCSF, 2012**)** and some from outside the BDSM community (Humphreys, 2007; Schumlich & Fischer, 2018). The findings differ, however, from other findings from outside the BDSM community, which have shown people having less stringent consent practices with newer partners (Willis et al., 2018; Willis & Jozkowski, 2018). We suspect that these differences stem from the BDSM community’s long-standing norms of consent communication, which likely mitigate the awkwardness that some individuals outside the community feel regarding explicit consent communication, particularly with new sexual partners. Additionally, many BDSM clubs have consent safety resources like dungeon monitors, which normalize consent communication and add protection against consent violations (Holt, 2016).

Although relationship context emerged as a robust factor in predicting stringency of consent communication, we believe it would be an error to interpret these findings as suggesting that consent is less important in romantic relationships; for many of the questions, clear and strong patterns of acceptable consent behaviors emerged. For example, attempting activities that were not discussed prior to a scene was generally considered unacceptable across both pick-up play and romantic relationships, but was considered slightly but significantly more acceptable within a romantic relationship than within pick-up play. We interpret the greater flexibility regarding consent communication in romantic relationships compared to pick-up play as stemming from the greater knowledge and experience that romantic partners share, with this greater knowledge and experience mitigating the risk that would otherwise accompany less explicit, a priori consent communication.

Most college students believe that they, and their friends, can consent to sexual activity even when they show signs of impairment from alcohol (Jozkowski et al., 2023). However, Willis et al. (2021) found that college students have lower feelings of internal consent, safety, and comfort when they are intoxicated. The present study suggests that BDSM practitioners acknowledge the possibility of consenting while intoxicated, but that they consider the activities (BDSM vs. non-BDSM sex) and relationship context when determining the acceptability of consenting in an impaired state. Consenting to BDSM play while intoxicated as a top or bottom was relatively unacceptable, but it was relatively more acceptable in the context of a romantic relationship than in a pick-up play scene. Likewise, consenting to non-BDSM sex while intoxicated was relatively unacceptable but was more acceptable in an existing relationship than in a new relationship. Overall, for both BDSM play and non-BDSM sex, consenting while intoxicated was fairly unacceptable, but consenting was more acceptable in more established relationships.

One factor that might underlie differences in the necessity for stringent consent communication is perceived risk. In exploratory analyses, participants considered explicit negotiations more important for kink activities than non-BDSM sex and more important for riskier activities than for less risky activities. Likewise, our results could stem from participants considering playing with pick-up play or newer partners to be riskier than playing with romantic partners, as well as considering kink activities to be riskier than non-BDSM sex. Thus, the driving factor in decision-making about consent communication for people in the BDSM community may be the perception of risk, with greater caution being required for riskier activities.

**Implications for BDSM**

These findings further our understanding of how BDSM practitioners understand and implement consent communication in their interactions with pick-up play partners and romantic partners, and they highlight the priority that the BDSM community places on consent. Out of the five women interviewed by Beres and MacDonald (2015), four reported consent violations in a vanilla, or non-BDSM related, context, but none reported consent violations in a BDSM context. In an NCSF survey (2020), 23.9% of respondents reported being touched without consent within an alt-sex context, while 57.5% reported being touched without consent outside an alt-sex context. These results highlight the BDSM community’s norms and commitment to consent, although they also demonstrate that consent violations still occur. One explanation could be that newer BDSM practitioners come into the community with less exposure to the consent practices and ideals within the community. Newer practitioners may also be more likely to observe and misinterpret flexible consent behaviors between existing partners as normal, despite the community standards, similarly to how unprotected sex between existing partners can be misinterpreted in public sex environments (Frank, 2019). Additionally, people who have been in the community for longer may have had more opportunities to undergo consent education in a kink context. Because kink consent education is associated with more stringent consent attitudes and behaviors such as a greater likelihood of having a mutually agreed upon safeword, this education may reduce the risk of violations. Further research should explore the relationship between consent education and consent violations. Additionally, future research should explore the diversity of consent education both inside and outside of the BDSM community.

**Implications for Non-BDSM**

In addition to deepening our understanding of consent communication within the BDSM community, the present findings hold important implications for consent education outside of the BDSM community. Consent communication is highly complex and content-dependent both inside and outside the BDSM community. Harris (2018) called for a greater understanding of how consent is actually practiced, rather than assuming how consent should be practiced and then asserting those assumed standards through educational programs. The present findings demonstrate that while the culture of affirmative consent within the BDSM community is strong, consent practices in the BDSM community consider contextual factors. These lessons can be translated into general sex education, especially as discussing BDSM can be used as a tool to teach better consent and relationship skills (Sand, 2019). Because consent is seen as the distinction between BDSM and interpersonal violence, including sex positive BDSM is important for consent education, especially among gender and sexual minority youth (Brewer et al., 2024). Additionally, a deeper understanding of consent culture within the BDSM community can better equip psychologists and lawmakers to evaluate cases involving BDSM activities or individuals (Dunkley & Brotto, 2020). Finally, these findings reinforce the importance of context for consent, underscoring that consent cannot be defined by a simple “yes” or “no” and that a nuanced understanding of consent will require further inquiry into how consent is conceptualized and practiced (Beres, 2007).

**Limitations and Future Directions**

Because the sample was collected from the Science of BDSM Research Team newsletter, it may not be representative of the kink population as a whole as our newsletter subscribers may systematically differ from other BDSM practitioners. Additionally, the within-subjects nature of the study, while increasing our statistical power, means that participants could have guessed what we were looking for and this might have impacted their answers. It is also important to recognize the potential effects of social desirability bias since questions explicitly assessed participant attitudes. Furthermore, many BDSM relationships may fall outside the categories presented here. For example, a kink relationship could be long and intense but not romantic, and people in a romantic relationship may incorporate kink after their relationship is established. Future research should look into the different manifestations of relationships in kink contexts and whether those relationship contexts affect consent communication. Additionally, since the exact nature of the play was not specified in the questions, participants may have assumed different types of play based on relationship context. We expect that riskier play would be assumed in a romantic or ongoing relationship than in pickup play, which would work against our hypotheses, but this assumption should be tested in future research. Similarly, future research should examine whether play context affects consent communication, for example if consent communication varies between scenes involving bondage versus impact, or if sex, consensual non-consent, or power exchange are involved. Testing whether consent communication varies when participants in a scene are playing outside of their normal role, for example a person who usually tops bottoming for a scene, would also be informative. Assessing the ease of consent communication, specifically examining if these conversations are awkward or easy for the individuals, could be a valuable future direction for research. Additionally, this study considered renegotiating during a BDSM scene, but little research exists describing the nature of these renegotiations. Future research should examine what is considered renegotiation during a scene, how often and why renegotiation occurs, as well as the outcome of these renegotiations.

While this study focused on consent norms, future research should explore how these norms are applied to consent practice and potential disparity in personal practice and expectations for others’ behavior. The present study briefly addressed consent violations, replicating the NCSF (2020) finding that violations were more common outside of a BDSM context than within. However, the present survey did not assess frequency, nature, or context of these violations. In addition, NCSF (2015) collected a sample that included individuals that had practiced BDSM between 0 to 64 years, with an average of 13.8 years. Future research should examine consent violations in greater depth, and assess the relationships between kink context, tenure in the community, consent education, consent communication, intoxication, violation frequency, and the nature of consent violations. Because many scenes are negotiated and even enacted online, other risk factors, such as modality of communication, should also be explored.

In this study, consent education was assessed in a very general manner, but in practice, consent education, both within and outside the BDSM community, varies greatly. Further research should explore the varied nature of consent education and seek to identify key elements that predict positive outcomes. Finally, despite the expanding knowledge of BDSM consent practices, little is known about the differences in consent practices between BDSM and non-BDSM practicing individuals. Future comparisons with non-BDSM samples would be helpful for generalization.

**Declarations**

**Funding**

No funding was received for conducting this study.

**Conflicts of interest**

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial conflicts of interest to disclose.

**Availability of data and material**

An anonymized dataset will be made available when the paper is published.

**Code availability**

RScript will be made available when the paper is published.

**Compliance with ethical standards**

Institutional Review Board approval was obtained. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

**Authors’ contributions**

The first and third authors contributed to study design, material preparation, data collection, and analyses. The first draft of the manuscript was written by [the first author], and [the third author] reviewed and edited subsequent versions of the manuscript. The [second author] contributed substantially to the revised manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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**Table 1**

*Demographics*

|  | n | % |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Gender Identity** |  | |
| Woman | 89 | 44.1 |
| Man | 64 | 31.7 |
| Gender Expansive | 49 | 24.3 |
| **BDSM Role** |  |  |
| Top | 41 | 21 |
| Bottom | 71 | 36.4 |
| Switch | 83 | 42.6 |
| **Sexual Orientation**\* |  | |
| Straight or Heteroflexible | 64 | 31.7 |
| Gay/Lesbian or Homoflexible | 21 | 10.4 |
| Bisexual or Pansexual | 97 | 48 |
| Asexual, Demisexual, Aromantic, or Graysexual | 27 | 13.4 |
| **Race** |  | |
| Biracial | 19 | 9.7 |
| Native American | 1 | 0.5 |
| Asian | 5 | 2.6 |
| Black | 3 | 1.5 |
| Hispanic | 7 | 3.6 |
| White | 160 | 82.1 |

*Note*. \* Because participants could select more than one sexual orientation, some participants were coded as Asexual and also as Straight, Gay/Lesbian, or Bisexual. As a result, percentages for sexual orientation sum to more than 100%.

**Table 2**

*Distribution of Gender by BDSM Role*

|  | **Top** | **Bottom** | **Switch** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Man** | 30 | 10 | 24 |
| **Woman** | 5 | 47 | 33 |
| **Gender Expansive** | 6 | 14 | 26 |

*Note*. The reduced sample size in Table 2 (195 participants from a total sample size of 202) is due to some participants not answering all the questions.

**Table 3**

*Comparison of Consent Attitudes in Pick-up Play Scenes Versus Scenes in Romantic Relationships*

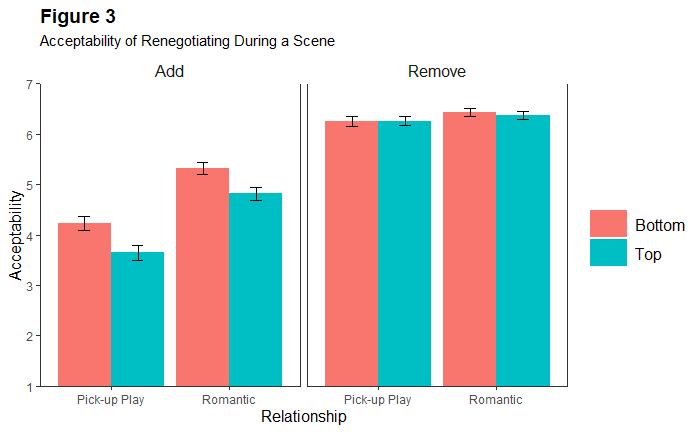
|  | **Pick-Up Play** | **Romantic Relationship** |  | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Question text** | **M (SD)** | **M (SD)** | **df** | ***t*-stat** | ***d*** |
| How important is it to explicitly establish a safeword before a **pick-up play** scene? (1: Not at all, 5: Extremely) | 4.69 (0.75) | 3.85 (1.19) | 186 | 10.81\*\*\* | 0.79 |
| To what extent should potential activities be negotiated before a **pick-up play** scene? (1: Not at all, 5: Extremely) | 4.52 (0.72) | 3.70 (0.99) | 186 | 11.48\*\*\* | 0.84 |
| How acceptable is it to jump into a **pick-up play** scene without working out the details first? (1: Totally unacceptable, 7: Totally acceptable) | 2.36 (1.46) | 4.5 (1.96) | 186 | -13.71\*\*\* | -1.00 |
| How adequate is relying on nonverbal cues to communicate during a **pick-up play** scene? (1: Extremely inadequate, 7: Extremely adequate) | 3.19 (1.98) | 5.38 (1.50) | 186 | -15.80\*\*\* | -1.16 |
| If the bottom has a safeword, it is okay for the top to attempt activities that were not discussed prior to the **pick-up play** scene. (1: Strongly disagree, 7: Strongly agree) | 2.13 (1.64) | 3.83 (2.17) | 186 | -11.68\*\*\* | -0.85 |

*Note*. For questions regarding scenes in romantic relations, “a pick-up play scene” was replaced with “a scene in a romantic relationship.”

\**p* < .05, *\*\*\* p* < .001

**Figure 1**

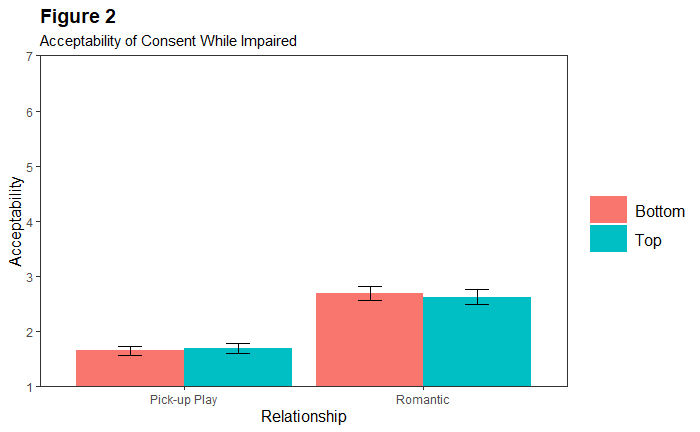
*Acceptability of Renegotiation During a Scene to Add or Remove Activities*



*Note*. Error bars show standard error.

**Figure 2**

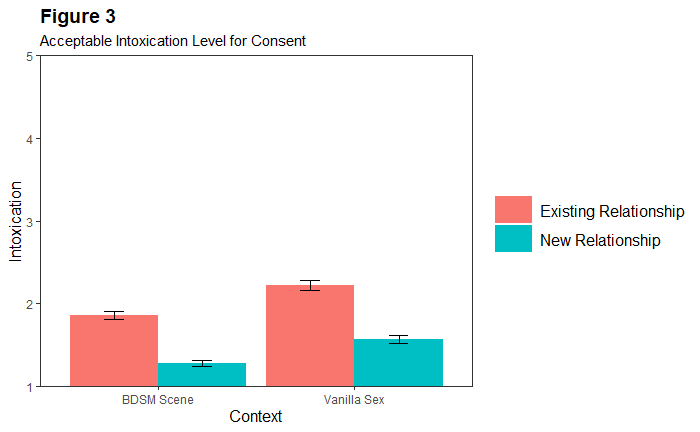
*Acceptability of Consenting to a BDSM Scene While Impaired by Drugs or Alcohol*



*Note*. Error bars show standard error.

**Figure 3**

*Acceptable Level of Intoxication While Consenting to a BDSM Scene or to Non-BDSM Sex*



*Note*. Error bars show standard error.