

Latex and Lotus Blossoms: A Study on How Asian Women and Non-Binary People Navigate

Montreal's BDSM Scenes

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Abstract

This thesis explores the experiences of Asian women and non-binary people within BDSM spaces in Montreal, with particular attention to the impacts of racial fetishization, gender identity, body size, class, and sexual orientation. While BDSM is often framed as a site of liberation and healing, this research investigates how these same spaces can also reproduce structural oppression—particularly for those who have experienced gendered and racialized violence. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with participants and grounded in intersectionality, objectification theory, Orientalism, and the phenomenology of whiteness, this study examines how participants navigate visibility, safety, exclusion, and desirability within both mainstream and queer BDSM communities. The study reveals that while queer and trans BIPOC BDSM spaces can offer opportunities for gender affirmation, community-building, and healing as opposed to mainstream, cisnormative BDSM events, they are not always accessible, particularly for participants with limited social or economic capital. The study concludes by offering concrete recommendations for BDSM event organizers to create more affirming and inclusive spaces. This research contributes to the growing body of literature on sexuality, BDSM, and queer and racialized embodiment by centering the voices of Asian women and non-binary people in a Montreal context.

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DEDICATION

For queer Asians; Asians in sex work; Asians with complex family dynamics; kinky Asians; mixed Asians who struggle with feelings of belonging; Asians whose bodies have been used to service others; Asians who have been left out in discussions on what it means to be Asian; and Asians who carry their ancestors' war trauma.

In memory of Hyun Jung Grant, Suncha Kim, Soon Chung Park, Xiaojie Tan, Yong Ae Yue, Daoyou Feng, and Ashley Arzaga.

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Introduction

Bondage, Discipline, Sadism and Masochism (BDSM) is an erotic practice historically pathologized and labelled as sexually deviant behaviour (Nichols 2022). In recent years, the disciplines of psychology and sociology have begun to move BDSM out of the “deviant” category and toward “alternative sexuality,” recognizing its capacity for community-building, emotional well-being, and reclaiming power from trauma, particularly for marginalized groups (Cruz 2016; Chung and Yeung 2023; Ha 2019; Lindemann 2011).

From a therapeutic and psychological perspective, BDSM can function as a harm-reduction practice, offering an alternative or complementary form of healing for survivors of sexual and racialized violence (Hammers 2019; Levand et al. 2019; Liang 2022). On a sociological and anthropological level, BDSM communities are seen as subcultures with their own set of norms and structures, where those practicing can form community, connection, and a stronger sense of self (Carlström 2018).

Despite its potential for empowerment and healing, BDSM spaces are not immune to the very systems of oppression they claim to subvert. Racialized and gender-marginalized people may still experience exclusion, discomfort, and even violence within these spaces (Liang 2022; Martinez 2021). These exclusions are often informed by broader societal narratives that render certain bodies hypervisible, eroticized, or objectified.

In particular, representations of the Asian body informed by colonialism, Orientalism, and white supremacy play a significant role in how Asian women and non-binary people are perceived and treated in real-world settings. Media, film, and literature have long manufactured sexualized and submissive portrayals of Asian individuals, which have been contributing factors to their objectification and fetishization. These narratives are not only symbolic and abstract;

they have material consequences that have regained visibility in the last few years through the violences inflicted on Asian bodies. Since the onset of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an observable resurgence of anti-Asian hate, as seen throughout the 2021 Atlanta spa shootings and, more locally, the rise in violent street attacks targeting Asian individuals within the city of Montreal (*CBC News* 2021). The violences occurring were indicative of discourse that perpetuated stigma and responsabilization of Asian individuals for COVID-19, fueled by media and political institutions (Yu et al. 2020). These events reveal the ongoing dehumanization of Asian bodies within Western contexts and highlight the urgency of research that examines how this dehumanization presents itself in public and intimate settings.

This study seeks to specifically investigate how Asian women and Asian non-binary individuals experience and navigate BDSM spaces and events in Montreal, through the use of qualitative research methods. Through an intersectional lens, along with complementary theoretical frameworks, such as Orientalism, the phenomenology of whiteness, and objectification theory, this study explores how race, gender identity, body size, class, and sexual orientation shape the study participants' experiences within kink communities. It also examines how Orientalist constructions, rooted in colonial ideologies and reinforced by art and popular culture, have a significant impact on sexual stereotypes and shape participants' interactions in these spaces.

While BDSM is often portrayed as a liberatory practice, allowing people to process trauma, build community, and reclaim agency, this research asks the following questions: What happens when those same spaces become sites of re-traumatization through exclusion, racism, gender-based violence, or other intersecting forms of structural harm? In contrast, how might these spaces also serve as sources of joy, gender affirmation, and collective healing? Finally,

what are ways that we can improve BDSM events to make them safer spaces for those affected by intersecting oppressions?

Montreal was selected as the research site due to its rich cultural diversity and its reputation for its lively, hedonistic nightlife scene. Popular events such as *Montreal Fetish Weekend* and *Latex*, as well as the existence of specific fetish clothing stores reflect the existence and emergence of the city's BDSM subculture, making it an ideal location for exploring how power and desire intersect in BDSM contexts.

This thesis aims to contribute to a growing body of literature that analyzes racialized sexualities, kink practices, and structural violence by centring the experiences of Asian women and Asian non-binary people within Montreal's BDSM scene. My findings will be further supported by the following chapters: a review of existing literature revolving around BDSM and racialization, a results section analyzing the participants' experiences in Montreal BDSM spaces, and finally, a discussion and conclusion section that considers the contributions and limitations of this study.

Chapter 1: Review of the Literature

Background Information: What is BDSM?

BDSM is an acronym that stands for “bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, sadism and masochism”, and refers to various forms of alternate sexuality (Carlstrom 2018). It typically involves physical, psychological or sexual role play where an erotic, or sometimes non-erotic, exchange of power is present (De Neef et al. 2019). The three different forms of power exchanges typical to BDSM are as follows: dominant, submissive, and switch (Li 2024). BDSM can include practices such as choking, restraining, roleplay, and more, with varying intensities depending on the desires of its participants (Chung and Au-Yeung 2023). Despite BDSM being labelled a form of alternative “sexuality”, it is important to note that asexual people also actively participate in BDSM scenes and events, given that acts in themselves are not always sexual, and do not always necessarily involve the use of genitalia (Winter-Gray and Hayfield 2019).

BDSM: From “Deviant” To “Alternative” Sexuality

Existing literature demonstrates that immersing oneself in BDSM practices and kink communities can bring many positive experiences and benefits to a person’s quality of life. BDSM, and the “kinky” sexual practices associated with it, have been historically pathologized and medicalized; often being associated with mental health disorders and “unhealthy fixations on specific sexual behaviours” (Brown et al. 2019, 781; Chung and Au-Yeung 2023). Although the term “BDSM” in itself was never included in the DSM, sexual practices associated to it were (Andrieu et al. 2019). Despite this pre-existing stigmatization in the social sciences, the practice has undergone a shift over the last few years, especially within academic settings (Barker,

Iantaffi, and Gupta 2007; Stiles and Clark 2009; Wuyts 2022).

Although there is still a certain level of stigmatization that is attached to the practice within the general population due to a lack of knowledge (Stiles and Clark 2009), BDSM has transformed from a sexuality labelled as “deviant” to an alternative sexuality (Hansen-Brown and Jefferson 2023). Whether it reinforces one’s identity, a reclamation of sexual autonomy, or an ability to confront one’s own past experiences, BDSM is starting to be recognized as a practice with therapeutic potential (Chung and Au-Yeung 2023; Speciale and Khambatta 2020). Levand et al. (2017) explore how numerous survivors of sexual assault who are living with sexual trauma use BDSM as a way of regaining agency and power in their bodies and therefore view BDSM as an alternate or complementary form of sexual therapy. Lindemann’s (2011) study also highlights how BDSM, specifically in the context of dominant and submissive dynamics, can be used as a form of alternative therapy to work through various psychological issues outside of trauma related to sexual assault, such as abandonment trauma and anxieties stemming from the daily stressors of life. Although Lindemann (2011) highlights the therapeutic effects of BDSM, the study focuses more on the BDSM experiences of clients seeking dominatrices, rather than on people going to community events, where one individual is paid by the other. Therefore, given the transactional nature of the dynamic between a paid professional BDSM practitioner and a client, it is more difficult to determine if the same effects can be applied in a community setting where there are fewer professional boundaries involved, and where one person may have less of a say as to how an interaction can unfold.

The recent literature demonstrates important elements. To start, the presence of a societal shift in how BDSM practices and subcultures are currently perceived within the field of psychology, where BDSM practices were previously subjected to medicalization and

pathologization (Barker, Iantaffi, and Gupta 2007; Wuyts 2022). Secondly, the realization of how BDSM practices can be used as an accepted form of accessible, harm-reductive healing practices that can become an integral part of healthy intimacy and sexuality (Levand et al. 2017; Lindemann 2011; Speciale and Khambatta 2020; Wuyts 2022).

BDSM culture and safety protocols

Within the general principles of BDSM culture and discourse, there is typically a large emphasis put on safety, communication and the implementation of consent norms (Caruso et al. 2015; Dunkley and Brotto 2020; Williams 2006). According to research conducted by Caruso et al. (2015) examining the various BDSM codes of conduct and how they are implemented in the context of Montreal kink scenes, many rules are put into place to ensure that boundaries do not get crossed and that participants' consent becomes top priority. Caruso et al. (2015) also discuss dress codes in their article, along with the different rules surrounding them. Despite this, studies examining Montreal's BDSM culture about safety for marginalized people and the different rules implemented to ensure that their experiences are safer have not been further explored.

As mentioned previously, norms revolving around safety and consent are typical within BDSM communities (Williams 2006; Caruso et al. 2015; Dunkley and Brotto 2020). However, there is a lack of literature on kink spaces that may highlight specific rules around safety and consent that take an anti-oppressive lens; rules that clearly outline how racism, ableism, transphobia, etc. can present themselves within these spaces and further affect oppressed groups of people.

From an intersectional research article studying kink spaces in the context of spaces specific to the Netherlands, Liang (2022, 395) discusses how many Dutch fetish clubs do not have a great interest in implementing safety training that specifically revolves around racialized

and other marginalized individuals due to these clubs' so-called "loyalty to fun". This analysis is supported by various literature that highlights the colour-evasive, or more commonly referred to as "colourblind" approaches when it comes to racialization that are common to Europe and North America (Beaman and Petts 2020; Sijpenhoff 2019). Colour-evasiveness conveniently ignores racial inequalities, and therefore, allows for the upholding of white supremacy under the pretense that we are now living in a utopic, post-racial society where race categorization is no longer an issue (Beaman and Petts 2020). Although this study was conducted in a European city, it could provide context for how countries and cities that are predominantly white might understand racism in the context of BDSM events.

Even though there is a substantial amount of literature that states the different values around consent and safety in BDSM practices, there does not seem to be a large amount of literature on how certain BDSM cultures ensure safety for racialized and LGBTQIA+ groups of people (Caruso et al. 2012; Dunkley and Brotto 2020). Therefore, this research project seeks to address whether or not there are spaces in Montreal that enforce rules that align more precisely with principles of inclusion, anti-racism and anti-oppression in general, and how these rules and regulations are implemented within these events. In other words, how do Montreal BDSM spaces specifically create cultures of inclusion for racialized and other marginalized people, beyond the commonly discussed "safe, sane and consensual" rhetoric?

Racialization, Orientalism, and Sexuality

Literature exploring sexual racism and BDSM is emerging and intersectional, but it can still be further developed to explore different axes of identities (Davis et al. 2022; Erickson et al. 2022). Watkins-Hayes (2019) explores the racialized dimensions of sexual violence and how the bodies of racialized women were specifically more susceptible to these forms of violence due to

racial fetishization and socio-historical factors. However, in the context of BDSM studies, Sheff and Hammers (2011) demonstrate that there is still “inadequate attention paid to race” in the context of kink studies, and Liang (2022) confirms that literature on kink still predominantly centers on the experiences of people who are not racialized.

Despite the many claims of BDSM scenes being “safe spaces” for queer folks and people who were often categorized as being “sexually deviant”, recent studies suggest that these spaces are not always as welcoming when it comes to the inclusion, safety and well-being of racialized individuals (Erickson et al. 2022). Sheff and Hammers’ (2011) research suggests that participants in BDSM studies are still overwhelmingly white and highlights the different implications for racialized and people of lower socio-economic status when accessing BDSM spaces, as opposed to those who have more racial and economic privileges.

White supremacy and privilege

White supremacy exists on a structural and interpersonal level, and according to research conducted by Martinez (2021), kink and BDSM spaces are no exception to the oppressive forces of white supremacy and the naturalization of whiteness. Despite the scarcity of racialized voices in kink and BDSM studies, more and more research is now attempting to take the intersections of race and sexuality into consideration. Research by Erickson et al. (2022) that examines the relationship between race and kink notes that BIPOC “were 16 times more likely than non-people of colour to feel discriminated against at BDSM events and 17 times more likely to feel fetishized”, demonstrating obvious racial inequalities within BDSM spheres. Research by Speciale and Khambatta (2020) that looks into how LGBTQ+ folks experience BDSM spaces supports this and highlights how many of the racialized participants stated that the spaces were often still reflective of white supremacy and ableist structures. Black participants in the study

also noted that there was a dynamic of hypervisibility and invisibility. In other words, Black racialized participants felt that they were othered and profiled due to their racialization, yet somehow the harmful effects that they had suffered in those spaces due to their racialization were ignored or explained through colour evasive narratives that attempted to minimize their experiences.

Sarah Ahmed's (2007) theory of the phenomenology of whiteness describes how whiteness functions as a "habit, even a bad habit, which becomes background to social action", making it so that people who navigate the world as white often do not even realize their oppressive behaviours due to its deep internalization. Directly drawing upon Ahmed's (2007) phenomenology of whiteness, Martinez (2021) discusses how white bodies differ from racialized bodies when it comes to feelings of (dis)comfort in BDSM spaces, demonstrating that whiteness can allow for easier navigation in certain spaces, while the same cannot be said for racialized people. The literature on critical whiteness can help examine if this sentiment of "overwhelming whiteness" (Martinez 2021) is often experienced by participants within Montreal BDSM scenes. In addition, the phenomenology of whiteness can also help explain certain behaviours that are exhibited by the interactions that participants can have with white BDSM practitioners. Since Martinez's study (2021) addresses BDSM experiences for racialized women and men, the current study can provide additional information specifically relating to the Asian experience within a Montreal landscape, as well as the intersections with queerness, non-binary identity, and class. Furthermore, Martinez's study included interviews with participants who identified as men and women, but not non-binary individuals. Therefore, this study will also include the experiences of Asian racialized non-binary BDSM practitioners.

The existing literature demonstrates that BDSM and kink spaces in many different areas

in North America and Europe are still predominantly white, and that many white people within these spaces do not often have to be conscious of their (lack of) racialization in the same ways as racialized people do (Martinez 2021). This demonstrates that navigating BDSM spaces for Black, Indigenous and other people of colour could be intimidating and act as a barrier to accessing these spaces, or continuing to access them.

This study will further fill the gaps in the literature specific to how the Montreal BDSM scene might differ or share similarities with other cities. This study can also illustrate how white supremacy operates within the Montreal BDSM subculture since literature specific to Asian experiences within a city as diverse as Montreal is still not as prominent within the field of sexuality studies.

Sexual racism and fetishization

Racial fetishization, a concept that will largely inform this research, is shown to have the capacity for great amounts of harm; this contradicts “personal preference” discourse that posits racial fetishization as a compliment rather than an actual form of symbolic and structural violence (Stacey and Forbes 2021). There is a substantial amount of literature demonstrating how racial fetishization can have violent and devastating consequences on racialized people.

According to research by Cho (1997) and Anandavalli (2022), the stereotypes that portray Asian women as docile and submissive contribute to their vulnerability to sexual harassment and assault. Furthermore, racial fetishization informs racist interactions in sexual and romantic encounters between racialized and white people and is used as a way of communicating racial inferiority to a marginalized racial group (Anadavalli 2022, hooks 2014; Silvestrini 2020). To support this, bell hooks’ (2014) essay *Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance* discusses the impacts of fetishization and how pleasure is sought out through the bodies of racialized

individuals by those in dominant racial groups. She adds that the bodies of racialized individuals become commodified and constituted as an “alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other.” This literature then demonstrates how fetishization and personal preference discourse become a sinister disguise for white supremacist domination, and it would be an integral part of the research to examine how fetishization may affect Asian women and nonbinary people’s comfort levels within Montreal kink scenes.

Art, literature, academia, and media play a role in the perpetuation of racial stereotypes that can contribute to harmful sexual scripts and fetishization around Asian women (Said 1979; Zheng 2016). Research on BDSM porn by Smith and Luykx (2017) aligns with this idea by discussing not only how race becomes eroticized in sexual, or kink contexts, but also, how fetishization enables objectification. Objectification theory posits that a person's body becomes instrumentalized for the desires of the objectifier, thereby leaving the objectified individual without agency or self-determination (Nussbaum 1995). This misogynistic objectification that often occurs to Asian women can be attributed to white sexual imperialism, as well as Orientalism (Said 1979; Woan 2008).

White sexual imperialism illustrates how the political and economic domination, as well as military occupation of developing nations, has contributed to the phenomenon of anti-Asian sexual racism and violence, both historically and currently (Woan 2008). This theory provides context for how interactions between Asian women and femme-presenting people and white people can pan out in BDSM spaces. White sexual imperialism contributes to racialized sexual stereotypes, pornographic representations of Asian women, the “visa dater” phenomenon, as well as other forms of violence impacting Asian women (Woan 2008). In complement to this

argument, Zhou and Paul's (2016) *Lotus Blossom or Dragon Lady: A Content Analysis of "Asian Women" Online Pornography* examines how the fetishization of Asian bodies is sustained by pornographic representations, which, as a result, inform sexual interactions between dominant and marginalized groups.

There are three referenced stereotypes of Asian women: The Lotus Blossom, The Dragoness, and the less commonly known, "Little Brown Fucking Machine Powered by Rice" (Hwang and Parrenas 2021; Woan 2008, 283; Zhou and Paul 2016). The "Lotus Blossom" stereotype portrays Asian women as docile, submissive, and somewhat forbidden (Hwang and Parrenas 2021; Zhou and Paul 2016); this stereotype contributes to the dehumanization of the Asian body. The dragon lady stereotype portrays Asian women as dangerous, aggressive and cold (Lee 2018). Finally, the "Little Brown Fucking Machine Powered by Rice" was a term used by U.S. soldiers to describe Filipinas during their occupation of the islands (Woan 2008). This dehumanization through sexual stereotypes not only affects Asian women's sexual autonomy and agency but it also facilitates other forms of racialized violence, as seen through the Atlanta spa shooting (Kim 2023).

This literature demonstrates that racial fetishization does lead to violence in the context of sexual relations and is specific to the Asian experience. This can perhaps provide us with an idea as to what interactions between Asian women and non-binary people and white people in the context of Montreal BDSM spaces can look like. It can lead to further questions on how the intersections of gender and race can contribute to sexual violence and sexual racism, and what that can often look like within kink spaces. Additionally, this violence that occurs may be subconscious and usually unintentional from the perspective of the person in a position of power. Therefore, identifying instances of these violences and what they can look like in practice can

provide guidelines on how to interact within BDSM spaces. This study can then fill the gaps by examining how white sexual imperialism and fetishization present themselves within Montreal BDSM scenes.

Racialized Experiences In BDSM

Even with the recent shift in perceptions of BDSM, there is a minimal but still existent amount of research on the positive psychological effects of BDSM on Asian people (Ha 2019). Chung and Au-Yeung (2023) examined the experiences of three Hong-Konger women practicing BDSM who and discovered how they cope with childhood trauma and abuse through BDSM. BDSM became a practice that allowed participants in the study to overcome self-esteem issues and enforce boundaries in ways that were not possible in their past experiences with abuse (Chung and Au-Yeung 2023).

Despite the lack of literature on safety protocols in place for people of colour, a minute body of existing research demonstrates that BDSM can also have therapeutic benefits for trauma caused by racism and racial fetishization. Racial trauma is an ignored form of trauma that stems from consistent microaggressions, violence and discrimination that Black, Indigenous, and other people of colour endure in contexts similar to North American ones (Cénat 2022). As a result of this form of trauma, many racialized people might seek BDSM as a form of empowerment and liberation as a response to this phenomenon (Liang 2022; Ha 2019). Liang's (2022) study examines how marginalized "kinksters" use BDSM for transformative purposes, and as a form of resistance to colonial power structures that attempt to place racialized individuals into positions of subordination. This provides us with an idea of how BDSM spaces have the potential for subversion for many marginalized people since they are given the opportunity to create their own communities and safer spaces without having to navigate the distress and discomfort of

predominantly white and/or cis-heterosexual spaces. While Liang (2022) focuses more broadly on racialized queer people's experiences within BDSM spaces, Ha (2019) focuses specifically on the Asian American experiences within BDSM. Ha's study (2019) more precisely highlights Asian Americans' experiences with racism and objectification within kink spaces, while also noting the positive experiences that come along with them, such as the capacity for community building and self-acceptance of sexual desires that may have been previously repressed and pathologized.

Even in the few studies that center Asian perspectives in BDSM (e.g., Ha 2019), non-binary Asian experiences remain greatly underexplored. Although these previous studies greatly contributed to Asian American identity and queer identity studies within BDSM spaces, they remain cisnormative. This erasure is reflective of broader patterns in sexuality studies, where whiteness and cisnormativity are often treated as default identity categories (Katz-Wise and Todd 2022). This study responds directly to that absence.

Kimberly Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality (1991) demonstrates that different axes of identity do not exist in isolation. Rather, our identities intersect and shape how we navigate the social world, reinforcing one another and creating unique experiences of privilege and oppression. (Crenshaw 1991). In this context, it can also be useful to fully investigate whether or not marginalized people reap the same benefits from kink therapy for use in healing sexual trauma, or if their marginalized identities can cause an impediment in their ability to feel safe using kink for these purposes. In addition, it can allow for further investigation as to whether or not kink spaces can become spaces for re-traumatization for those with intersecting marginalized identities.

Additionally, current studies on BDSM and Asian people are mostly reduced to East

Asian identities. This contributes to the erasure of other Asian identities that exist and that often become excluded in discussions revolving around Asian experiences. This project will fill the gap in the literature that does not include the voices of Asian identities outside of East and Southeast Asia.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Frameworks

In this chapter, I explore four theoretical frameworks that inform the foundation of this research. Intersectionality serves as the primary lens through which this study is conducted. This theoretical framework offers a comprehensive approach to understanding how multiple dimensions of identity intersect and influence participants' experiences within BDSM spaces. Alongside intersectionality, three additional frameworks will also be applied: Orientalism, the phenomenology of whiteness, and objectification theory. These frameworks will be used to provide a more detailed analysis of the specific ways in which race, gender, and sexuality impact the lived experiences of Asian women and Asian non-binary people in Montreal's BDSM communities.

These four theoretical frameworks are interconnected and complementary; each of them offers a different and enriched perspective on how systems of power, oppression, and even privilege can shape the experiences of racialized and marginalized bodies in BDSM contexts. Furthermore, they can provide us with both the causes and the consequences of the power dynamics involved in BDSM spaces.

The primary theoretical framework of this study is the theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991; Vamvaka-Tatsi 2021). Although intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), it is a theoretical framework that stems from Black feminist thinkers, such as the Combahee River Collective (1977). Intersectionality, as described by Collins and Bilge (quoted in Vamvaka-Tatsi 2021, 142), is “a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and human experiences. The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. Many factors generally shape them in diverse and mutually influencing ways.” In other words, intersectionality provides a

framework for examining how overlapping axes of identity, such as race, gender, sexuality, and class, simultaneously shape experiences of both oppression and privilege. By applying intersectionality, this study moves beyond single-axis analyses (e.g., focusing on race *or* gender alone) to better understand how participants experience BDSM spaces with regards to their intersecting identities such as race, class, gender identity and expression, and sexual orientation.

Intersectionality acknowledges how multiple, interconnected and inextricable social categories intersect to create unique lived realities. For instance, a person's experiences within BDSM spaces cannot simply be understood through their gender or racial identity in an isolated manner. The overlap of multiple identities, such as sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, as well as disability and class, can have a significant influence on how they engage with and are treated within these spaces, which is why intersectionality is a key theoretical framework for this research. In addition, intersectional theory can allow for an analysis of how certain intersecting identities may experience BDSM events differently from other intersecting identities. As an example, this theory can allow for an examination of how the intersectional dimensions of identity of a masculine-presenting non-binary Asian person differ from the experiences of a feminine-presenting non-binary Asian person when examining the negotiation of power dynamics and boundaries within these spaces.

This theoretical framework is particularly well-suited for my research topic given that the goal is to determine how different axes of identity such as race, gender, and sexual orientation, interact and, therefore, influence the experiences of Asian people living with overlapping marginalized (and sometimes even privileged) identities in BDSM spaces.

Through the application of intersectionality, we can better analyze how systems of oppression such as patriarchy, white supremacy, transphobia, ableism, fatphobia, colourism, and

queerphobia do not exist and operate in isolation, but interlock in complex and context-specific ways. These systems can shape who feels safe, desired, objectified, or excluded within BDSM spaces in Montreal.

For instance, patriarchal and cisheteronormative structures work together to privilege cisgender, heterosexual male participants, often making queer and femme-presenting individuals feel hypervisible or unsafe. Similarly, white supremacy and colourism shape beauty and desirability standards, positioning light-skinned, white bodies as the default or ideal, while racialized, darker-skinned, and/or fat participants may face rejection, fetishization, or both (Sharma 2021). Transphobia and cisnormativity often lead to the erasure or misrecognition of non-binary and trans identities. Meanwhile, ableism creates physical and social barriers for disabled kinksters, particularly when accessibility is not prioritized in event planning or scene negotiation. This can also be the case when it comes to classism and social capital. Questions of access arise when it comes to the costs associated to BDSM, and who has access to different events. How affordable is accessing BDSM community, really? In cases where the events themselves are inexpensive, what are the material costs associated when it comes to different gear and outfits required? And how accessible, even in cases where affordability is not an issue, are these events, and who does someone need to know to even become aware of the existence of these events? Intersectionality allows for a perspective of how these systems reinforce one another, creating unique experiences of power, visibility, and harm for participants depending on their identity. Within the BDSM scene, these dynamics influence not only who gets to participate but how consent is negotiated, whose safety is prioritized, and whose traumas are recognized or dismissed.

Although intersectionality is crucial towards understanding how overlapping identities shape the experiences of participants in the context of this research, other frameworks are necessary to fully comprehend specific experiences relating to Asian identity and interactions with dominant social groups, which is where the concept of Orientalism comes into play.

Edward Said's (1979) concept of Orientalism will be applied to this study as a way of analyzing the unique BDSM experiences revolving around Asian identity, specifically. Orientalism serves to explain the Western construction of the so-called "Orient" as a supposed exotic, submissive other (Burney 2012), and how this in turn affects and reproduces power dynamics and social interactions between dominant groups of people, and marginalized groups of people.

Orientalism is socially reproduced through various institutions such as academia and mass media. However, the institution of mass media, which includes film and pornography, is especially of interest in the context of this study, given the way that it can contribute to the construction and reproduction of sexual stereotypes, scripts and tropes that revolve around the Asian body (Said 1979; Zhou and Paul 2016).

By incorporating Edward Said's (1979) notion of Orientalism into this study, we can better understand the historical and cultural contexts that exist behind the experiences and interactions experienced by the participants. Furthermore, Orientalism can also serve to demonstrate how cultural and media representations of racialized bodies remain contributory to different kinds of interactions and inform sexual scripts within BDSM spaces.

For this research, orientalism is particularly of interest considering that it provides a framework for understanding how the North American and European constructions of the Asian body as exotic, sexualized, and subservient, perpetuate violence, fetishization, and other harmful

interactions in BDSM spaces. In these contexts, racialized individuals, and in this specific instance, Asian people, are often reduced to stereotypes that are adherent to white fantasies and desires, reinforcing colonial and white supremacist power dynamics in intimate settings. Said's (1979) concept helps to illustrate the ways in which these constructed racial identities persist in current-day interactions, shaping the experiences of marginalized groups within BDSM spaces by reinforcing both racial and sexual power imbalances. Furthermore, given that a component of this research is focused on trauma, the concept of Orientalism can help further explain how BDSM can at once be a site for healing and harm due to the reproduction of Orientalist fantasies.

Moreover, the concept of Orientalism can further explain how certain behaviours from BDSM practitioners who are part of (socially) dominating groups, such as cisgender, heterosexual white men, stem from the internalization of Orientalist thought. Said's (1979) concept allows for a deeper examination of how cultural and media representations of Asian bodies contribute to these dynamics. Orientalist imagery has historically and currently been present and normalized throughout popular culture and pornography (Cho 1997; Zhou and Paul 2016). This phenomenon reinforces harmful stereotypes that can help explain interpersonal dynamics and the subjective experiences of the research participants within these spaces. These representations are not neutral; they stem from colonial histories and systemic inequalities that continue to define the lived realities of racialized individuals.

Said's (1979) notion of Orientalism provides a clear understanding of how history and cultural representations inform stereotypes specific to Asian identity. While this concept illustrates the impact of Orientalist fantasies on participants' BDSM experiences, Sarah Ahmed's (2007) phenomenology of whiteness acts as a complementary theoretical framework that further explains how BDSM spaces are shaped by racial power differences.

Sarah Ahmed's (2007) phenomenology of whiteness will also be incorporated into this study as a way of analyzing the ways that Asian women and non-binary people experience BDSM spaces, especially in situations where those said spaces are predominantly white. Ahmed's (2007) theory discusses how whiteness becomes normative, perpetuating feelings of social exclusion for racialized persons. She argues that whiteness is not a biological identity and that it not only functions as an individual racial identity, but as a structure. This structure shapes how bodies orient themselves within spaces, and determines who feels comfortable taking up space, and who tends to make themselves smaller within these settings.

Ahmed's (2007) theoretical framework on whiteness is well-suited to my research as a way of determining how this can lead to the hypervisibility and social differentiation of Asian bodies, and other racialized bodies in general, within BDSM spaces. As a result, these factors can contribute to feelings of "otherness", exoticization, and social exclusion for the study's participants.

Additionally, this theoretical framework connects to orientalism and intersectionality in order to better comprehend the ways in which Orientalist constructs of Asian bodies, alongside systems of oppression such as misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, become enforced and perpetuated within predominantly white, cis, and heteronormative spaces. The phenomenology of whiteness, along with Orientalism, allows for a deeper understanding of the racial dimension that exists within interactions between white practitioners and Asian practitioners.

By incorporating Ahmed's (2007) phenomenology of whiteness into this study, I aim to analyze the ways in which whiteness influences the interpersonal dynamics and subjective experiences of Asian women and non-binary individuals in BDSM spaces. Whiteness, here, does not refer to "white people" on an individual level, but more so an orienting structure that leads to

what Ahmed (2007) would describe, a “bad habit”. This “bad habit” is so deeply internalized that it shapes how certain bodies take up space, and who feels comfortable engaging in certain actions compared to others. In other words, it makes it so that white individuals can occupy spaces more freely as opposed to those marginalized based on race. This approach helps to reveal how systems of power and privilege present themselves within specific social contexts. As a result, this sheds light on the exclusionary practices that contribute to feelings of alienation and the reproduction of racial hierarchies within supposedly "liberatory" environments. The phenomenology of whiteness along with orientalism allows for a deeper understanding of the racialized dimension of this research, while intersectionality and objectification theory can address how race interacts with other dimensions, such as gender and sexual orientation.

In summary, while Ahmed’s theory illustrates how BDSM spaces can potentially be oriented towards the comfort of white people, which, as a result, can contribute to a lack of safety, social exclusion, or, on the other end of the spectrum, hypervisibility for racialized participants. In complement to Ahmed’s theoretical framework, objectification theory can further enrich this analysis by demonstrating some of the material consequences of navigating spaces structured by whiteness, Orientalist constructions, and intersecting forms of violence.

Objectification theory is the final theoretical framework that has been integrated into this research. It offers a lens for understanding the forms of sexualized violence and the feelings experienced by participants, particularly those that emerge from Orientalist constructs and intersecting systems of oppression. In other words, objectification theory helps us to better understand one of the material consequences that originate from Orientalist constructs and the experiences of those with intersecting marginalized identities. These marginalized identities are more specifically those based on race, gender, and sexual orientation.

The theoretical groundwork for how certain bodies come to be objectified can be further enriched by Sherry Ortner's (1974,12) argument that women and, by extension, other marginalized bodies are symbolically associated with "nature," whereas men are "identified with "culture." How humans act as authorities over nature, either through manipulation or destruction, parallels the objectification, commodification and sometimes brutalization of marginalized bodies, as is often seen through colonialism and orientalism. Although Ortner (1974) refers to men and women, this concept can also be extended to non-binary identities, as well as other marginalized identities that are in a position of subordination. This contributes to a logic of domination where bodies perceived as closer to "nature" are imagined as passive, irrational, and controllable, making them more susceptible to objectification and violence. In the context of this research, Ortner's work is especially relevant to understanding how Asian women and non-binary individuals are positioned within BDSM spaces—not only as objects of desire, but as subjects whose agency is often denied or constrained through Orientalist and gendered projections.

Nussbaum (as cited by Serpe et al. 2020) argues that the process of objectification implies the dehumanization of the person who is being objectified and assumes that the person involved has no ability or right to self-determination. This reduction can manifest itself in various forms, such as treating a person as a tool for the objectifier's purposes, denying the subjectivity of the object, and treating the "object" or treating their body as a commodity that exists solely for the pleasure or benefit of others (Nussbaum 1995). Essentially, the objectifier denies the object's capacity for agency.

In this study, agency refers to an individual's bodily autonomy and capacity to make decisions for themselves, where they "are not passive recipients, captives of dominant

discourses” (Parker and Dales 2014, 165). This includes their ability to consent to, or refuse, another person’s control over their body in the context of BDSM play. Defining agency, although sometimes challenging within the social sciences, is important in this study, given that participants’ agency within BDSM spaces can potentially become removed or contested (Davies 1991; Emirbayer and Mische 1998).

Objectification theory is well-suited for my research since it describes objectification as a direct result of intersecting marginalized identities, orientalist constructions, and the phenomenology of whiteness. It is particularly relevant to my research because it captures the nuanced and multifaceted ways in which objectification is experienced by intersecting marginalized identities. For example, individuals who are racialized and queer may often experience objectification that is deeply informed by orientalist constructions, as well as media-related representations of Asian and queer bodies. These constructions, stemming from historical contexts and colonial ideologies, exoticize and fetishize racialized bodies, reproducing harmful stereotypes and power imbalances.

Furthermore, to build on the angle of the trauma, sexual objectification theory can also explain the impact on the mental health and well-being of participants, given the toll that objectification can have on the mental health of those on the receiving end of it (Carr and Szymanski 2011). As shown through studies revolving around this phenomenon, sexual objectification is shown to contribute self-surveillance of the body in women, leading to anxiety and distress (Carr and Szymanski 2011). Therefore, this theoretical model can serve to further explain some of the potential repercussions of objectification and fetishization in BDSM spaces.

Objectification in this research is embedded into other forms of violence and fetishization and reproduces existing power dynamics between different groups. By applying objectification

theory to this research, I aim to critically analyze how these power differences manifest in the specific context of BDSM practices. These spaces, while often portrayed as being focused on consent (Dunkley and Brotto 2020) and liberation, can be complicit in reproducing the objectification of marginalized individuals, particularly when multiple dimensions of power dynamics remain unexamined and unaccounted for. In doing so, this theoretical lens will provide insight into how dehumanization processes intersect with embodied experiences of race, gender, and sexuality, shedding light on the complex ways objectification is negotiated and resisted within such contexts.

Chapter 3: Methodology

As mentioned prior, my research aims to address the following research questions: 1) How do Asian women and non-binary people experience BDSM spaces in Montreal? 2) How can BDSM spaces become sites for the reproduction of social inequalities and intersecting violences? 3) How can BDSM spaces also serve as sources of joy, gender affirmation, and collective healing? 4) What are ways that BDSM events become safer for those affected by intersecting oppressions? In order to answer these questions, I opted for qualitative research methods. This section will present participant recruitment strategies, data collection methods, and participant profiles.

Participant Recruitment

Much to my surprise, recruitment was not a highly challenging process during this research study. Given the “niche” and highly specific criteria required, I had anticipated great difficulties in finding participants willing to participate in this project. Thankfully, it seemed that the use of social media and participants’ word-of-mouth made the recruitment process somewhat simple, which led to the recruitment of 11 participants.

To diffuse the information about this project, I created a Canva poster listing the criteria needed to participate in the research study. Afterwards, I made a mass social media cross-posting on Instagram and Facebook. Unexpectedly, my poster got re-posted by multiple different groups and individuals on their own social media accounts. In addition, I posted my participant callout on a Discord group for an organization that aims to bring together queer Asian people within the city of Montreal, named Rainbow Noodles. This was especially helpful since there is also a channel in this group that is dedicated to different kinds of social events, including BDSM and

kink-related ones. After posting in this group and on social media, multiple potential participants had reached out to me and expressed their interest in participating in this study.

Snowball sampling, a method involving participant recruitment where participants help the researcher recruit other participants, was also employed as an additional method of recruitment (Johnson 2014). This method is commonly used in studies where populations are more “hidden” and have a greater likelihood of experiencing stigmatization, which is most often the case in the context of BDSM subcultures (Johnson 2014). Considering that people within small subcultures have many different connections within them, the snowball sampling method was quite useful in the context of this study. Although it was not initially planned nor asked for on my end, snowball sampling organically became another method of recruitment, given that some of my participants had informed people in their circles about this research project, who then enthusiastically reached out to me to participate in this study. The participants’ generous contribution in the recruitment process was highly valued and appreciated.

Positionality Statement

When I published the recruitment poster for this study, I made sure to include a positionality statement. As a bisexual, mixed Korean researcher, I shared many identities and lived experiences with the participants that I felt were important to divulge to demonstrate that I am not approaching this study from a purely outsider’s perspective. Due to my identity markers that are both relatable and unrelatable to participants, I saw myself as what Chhabra (2020) would describe as an “in-betweenner”, rather than an outsider or insider.

For instance, from a young age, I experienced fetishization and racism related to my Asian identity, which led to different forms of violence that have left a lasting impact throughout my life. Due to this, emotional reflexivity was important, which refers to the ability to reflect and

become aware of one's own emotions, and how they can have an impact on the research process (Mackenzie as cited by Tremblay 2021). When researching groups with shared marginalized identities, negative psychological effects can arise, further emphasizing the importance of emotional reflexivity (Kinitz 2022). In spite of the potential for negative feelings to arise, these shared facets of with participants could have contributed to a deeper level of trust between the participant and me, due to mutual understandings of our lived experiences. As a result, this level of trust and mutual understanding can have an impact on data collection, given that participants may feel more comfortable divulging certain kinds of information to me that they would not have if we did not have that shared identity marker (Dwyer and Buckle 2009).

On a different note, the fact that I do not specifically attend BDSM community events also placed me in the position of an outsider, which can also fuel distrust during the research process and have an impact on data collection. It was also important for me to mention the identities that may not be relatable to participants. Although I am a person with a Korean mother who was deeply immersed in Korean culture for the first five years of my life, I also acknowledge the privileges and opportunities I have in being a mixed-race person who was later solely raised by a white parent. Depending on the social environment I am in, I am aware that I can be racialized as Asian or mixed Asian, whereas in other contexts, I can be read as racially ambiguous or even white.

While I will not be centring my personal experiences in this study, I do share proximity to BDSM and kink subcultures, even though I do not personally attend BDSM community events. My proximity to the subculture lies in the fact that I have been an event organizer and performer in Montreal's queer nightlife scene for the past five years. This also contributed to developing a deeper rapport with my participants, given that many of us had already crossed

paths with each other, and due to the fact that we had a shared understanding of living with stigmatized identities, alongside our shared Asian and queer identities.

As an in-between, I also made a conscious effort to be aware of my positionality as a researcher working within the structures of academia and how this might influence the research process. Given the exploitive history of outsider research, I wanted to ensure that I would not contribute to the same forms of violence or “piggybacking” of marginalized voices that academia has been complicit in (Bridges 2001).

Ethics Approval

Before beginning my data collection, I obtained ethics approval and completed a TCPS Core certification. This certification is required before research on human participants as a way of raising awareness of the ethical issues and considerations that could arise during the research process. As for ethics approval, this process was done by submitting an SPF form detailing my study, the objectives, ethical considerations and other relevant information.

In order to minimize potential negative emotions from arising, before the interview, participants were reminded that they can skip any question that would make them uncomfortable, and that they can choose to end the interview at any moment. They were also informed of the risks that the questions can potentially bring up negative emotions. Finally, given the sensitive subject matter and the potential for the questions to trigger negative emotions, participants were also provided with a list of support resources that they could refer to if ever a situation were to arise where they required any kind of additional support after the interview. These resources included sexual assault support hotlines, as well as community groups for Queer Asian-identifying people.

Qualitative Research Methods

To properly address the research study's questions, qualitative methods in the form of semi-structured interviews were chosen for this study. Although there was a predetermined set of questions, participants had the opportunity to take different directions during the interview, and follow-up questions could be added depending on their responses. These interviews lasted anywhere between 30 and 60 minutes. Participants were sent the list of questions in advance in order to give them the chance to prepare themselves and to give them enough time to prepare their answers. Participants were asked some of the following questions: 1) How do you identify in terms of gender identity and presentation, sexual orientation and race? 2) Can you provide me with your life history? 3) How have your experiences in BDSM events interacted with your identities? 4) How does BDSM alter your quality of life? In order to protect their emotional well-being, participants were not obliged to answer any question they were not comfortable with.

Qualitative research methods were selected over quantitative methods to allow for more in-depth, detailed accounts of the experiences, subjectivity and emotions of the participants. As mentioned by Lewis-Beck et al. (2004, 3), semi-structured interviews, as opposed to structured interviews, "can be shaped by the interviewee's own understandings [...], and unexpected themes can emerge". In other words, this method allows for the reader to gain a deeper understanding and insight into how participants' psychological, sexual and physical experiences in BDSM and the way they interpret their interactions within these spaces. They also allow for the reader to understand how participants perceive fetishization according to their subjective experiences.

Semi-structured methods were also chosen over a structured interview approach given that structured interviews can have an impact on data, where the researcher's frameworks can impact participants' accounts and would not allow as much opportunity to ask follow-up

questions that can arise (Lewis-Beck et al. 2004). Hearing about different stories and experiences from first-hand accounts can also allow for a better understanding of what oppression, fetishization, and other forms of violence can be understood and interpreted within BDSM contexts, identify different harmful scenarios that can potentially occur, and inform ways that they can be prevented through participant feedback. Furthermore, hearing the detailed accounts of participants' subjective experiences and emotional affects within these spaces can allow for the reader to become more aware of what these intersectional violences can look like in practice, empathize with the participant and recognize when it can be happening to them, or even prevent themselves from engaging in harmful behaviours.

The participants were given the option to have the interview conducted through Zoom, or in person, their choice often depending on their accessibility needs and their personal preferences. Before the interview and as per ethics protocol, each participant received a consent form informing them of their options for opting out of the study. The interviews were recorded using an external recording device and the audio-recordings, and the transcripts were stored in an encrypted folder, as mentioned in the consent form.

To further protect participants' confidentiality, all participants were given pseudonyms. Additionally, for the participant who had requested that I do not specify what their country of origin was, I instead wrote a more generalized identifier, such as "South-East Asian" in order to further protect their confidentiality. Furthermore, given how small the subculture is, the names of certain underground events would also be changed in order to further protect the confidentiality of participants.

Participants' Profile

In order to meet the eligibility criteria for the research participation, participants had to have frequented a BDSM-themed event in Montreal within the last five years. In addition, due to the mature subject matter, participants had to be of at least 18 years of age. Finally, participants also had to identify as a woman and/or non-binary person, as well as identify as Asian, or mixed Asian.

I decided to make this a pan-Asian project since many Asian people who are not of East or South-East Asian origin often become excluded from discussions that revolve around “Asianness” and what it means to be Asian (Lee and Ramakrishnan 2019; Kuriya and Purkayastha 2024). This also allowed to analyze how belonging to different identities within the realm of Asian identity, beyond East and Southeast Asia, can impact experiences within BDSM scenes.

The participants consisted of 11 self-identifying Asian women and non-binary people who were over the age of 18. One participant is South Asian, one is South-West Asian, four are South-East Asian or mixed South-East Asian, and five are East Asian or mixed East Asian. In terms of sexual orientation, all participants also happened to coincidentally be of a marginalized sexual orientation, even if this was not necessary to participate in this study. Participants were also asked about how they identified in terms of gender expression/presentation, which refers to how one expresses themselves through clothing, makeup, and behaviour in a way that aligns with either masculinity, femininity, androgyny or gender fluidity. Their self-labelling of their gender expression included both their own perception and how they believed others perceived them. Five participants identified as having a feminine gender expression, three identified with more

masculine expression, and three identified as having a fluid expression that comprised of alternating between masculine and feminine expressions.

Data Collection and Analysis

For this study, 11 interviews were conducted with all of the participants. All interviews were transcribed in full into a Word document. After the transcription process, I engaged in inductive and deductive coding by closely reading through the interviews and highlighting significant passages. Given the fact that this topic contains many elements that are emerging, and that it seeks to fill certain gaps in the research, inductive coding was highly suited for this research (Chandra and Shang 2019). However, deductive coding was also suitable for this research, given that I had a pre-existing idea of a theme that would emerge, which was the theme of healing. This theme was informed by pre-existing literature surrounding BDSM and alternative forms of healing, as well as the research questions that guided this study. Inductive coding served as a way to allow participant experience to guide the analysis, and deductive coding served as way to engage with previous literature revolving around the subject.

As a way of effectively grouping recurring ideas, patterns and similarities in the transcripts, colour-coding was also utilized. This served as a way to generate themes, which corresponded to thematic analysis (Tremblay 2021). Following this process, I identified three major themes that have defined this qualitative research study: violence, healing, and liberatory possibilities.

Participants' profile table

| Pseudonym | Racial and/or Ethnic Identity | Sexual or Romantic Orientation | Gender Identity | Gender Expression |
|------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Adrienne | Chinese | Queer | Gender Queer | Feminine |
| Alexis | South-East Asian | Bisexual | Gender fluid | Fluid |
| Bo | Mixed Chinese | Homo-romantic | Non-binary | Masculine, Androgynous |
| Charlie | Thai | Queer | Gender fluid | Soft-masc, Androgynous |
| Em | Mixed Korean | Queer | Gender fluid | Fluid |
| Jasmine | Jamaican, Kashmiri and Filipino | Queer | Non-Binary | Feminine |
| Jin Ae | Korean | Queer | Gender fluid | Fluid |
| Xian | Chinese | Pansexual | Cis Woman | Feminine |
| Max | Filipino | Queer | Non-binary | Masculine |
| Roxanne | Iranian American | Queer Bisexual | Woman | Feminine |
| Ruethé | Bangladeshi | Queer | Woman | Feminine |

Chapter 4: Results

As will be shown through participant accounts, Montreal's BDSM subculture is highly complex. While it can have considerable potential to be liberatory and therapeutic, it can also become a site for the reproduction of harm, violence, and exclusion. These intricacies and nuances will be analyzed by applying the theoretical frameworks of intersectionality, orientalism, the phenomenology of whiteness, and objectification theory. In addition, this section will highlight how participants interpret and understand the main themes of violence, healing, and liberatory possibilities for Asian women and non-binary people in Montreal BDSM spaces.

4.1 Violence

In this study, violence will be referred to as undiscussed, non-negotiated violence that breaches BDSM's foundational components of consent. Additionally, as mentioned prior, BDSM practices will sometimes involve physical acts such as hitting, choking, or bruising, all of which are consensual forms of physical 'violence' within that context. It is also important to note that when referring to violence in this study, especially given that it is based on BDSM, this does not apply to the consensual forms of physical and verbal violence mentioned above that participants agree to with other practitioners, given that consensual physical violence was a fundamental aspect of BDSM that many participants mentioned engaging in and enjoying.

On a theoretical level, violence, in the context of this study, refers not only to non-consensual physical or sexual violence but also to a broader form of symbolic and structural violence that reinforces power dynamics between dominant and marginalized groups of people (Bourdieu as cited by Chakraborty 2021). This form of violence stems from broader social

structures such as heteronormativity, white supremacy, Orientalism, patriarchy, and cisnormativity. Although structural and symbolic violence will not always lead to physical harm for participants of this study, physical harm can most definitely be an outcome, along with other forms of harm such as stigmatization and psychological distress (Burton et al. 2021; Chakraborty 2021; Farmer 2004; Galtung 1969). Almost every single one of the participants in this study has mentioned being exposed to at least one form of violence throughout their time navigating BDSM spaces.

Participants' experiences of symbolic and structural violence often demonstrates itself through racial and sexual fetishization, objectification, microaggressions, stereotyping, as well as social exclusion. In this study, these forms of violence are considered structural despite the fact that they occur on a "micro" level, due to the fact that they result from and reproduce systems of inequality and oppression (Burton et al. 2021; Galtung 1969).

From a perspective of intersectionality, these different experiences of harm are produced at the intersection of multiple forms of violence and structures, which may include white supremacy, sexism, fatphobia, and ableism. As demonstrated through the theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991), violence cannot be understood through a singular lens and is often experienced through a system of interlocking oppressions. Although many participants share commonalities in terms of these violences related to their shared Asian and marginalized gender identities, their specific overlapping identities outside of these axes of identity lead to unique experiences of oppression, as will be portrayed through their accounts. It is also crucial to note that violence is never experienced because of the identities of marginalized individuals, but because of the systems of oppression that specifically target these identities. I wish to clarify this

point in order not to responsabilize participants for their experiences of violence, but rather, to responsabilize the broader social structures that contribute to these different forms of violence.

This theme will be explored through participants' experiences of the following: perceived fetishization based on race, gender and sexual orientation, non-consensual physical and psychological violence, sexual coercion and assault, and exclusion.

4.1.1 Fetishization And Objectification

“As Fanon’s work shows, after all, bodies are shaped by histories of colonialism, which makes the world ‘white’, a world that is inherited, or which is already given before the point of an individual’s arrival.”
-Sarah Ahmed (2007)

Although evidently, different forms of fetishes can be an integral component of BDSM, the fetishization that will be referred to in this study relates to non-consensual, unnegotiated interactions, oftentimes tied to structural violences such as racism, biphobia, and misogyny. The conceptualizations of fetishism and fetishization vary and are heavily contested within the realm of social sciences, which can make defining fetishization quite tricky, at times (Anzani et al. 2021). Regardless, in this study, the term fetishization will refer to the reductive sexualization or dehumanization of an individual, trait or characteristic. In this study, those “traits” will most often become tied to race, gender identity, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

Nearly every single participant (with the exception of one) in this study stated that they have been subjected to at least one form of fetishization while participating in BDSM events. These forms of fetishization were primarily linked to race and non-monosexual identity categories. They also most often occurred in BDSM events that were largely catered to a cis-heterosexual audience or cis-queer communities, rather than in queer *and* trans events. Within queer settings, spaces where these forms of violence were most often reproduced were typically spaces reserved for cis, gay men. In general, participants noted that events specifically created by

and for queer and trans audiences had safer space guidelines that were grounded in intersectional awareness by addressing multiple forms of violence, such as transphobia and racism.

4.1.2 Racial fetishization

Amongst the different forms of fetishization, the most recurring form of fetishization that participants mentioned experiencing was not related to their gender identity or sexual orientation, but rather, their racialization. In some instances, participants also mentioned experiencing intersecting forms of fetishization based on their Asian. This allows for a closer observation of how racial fetishization functions within these spaces.

Racial fetishization, as defined by Stacey and Forbes (2021, 373), refers to a “race-based fixation on a bodily part or characteristic that involves both idolization and demonization of racial difference.” This “seduction of difference”, as bell hooks (2014, 367) would describe in her essay *Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance*, reduces racialized people to resources to be consumed for pleasure by groups of people who belong to dominant groups within society.

Fetishization based on race will be further elucidated through participants’ perceptions and experiences in interactions where they felt that other practitioners overly emphasized their racial identity and bodily features associated with their identity. These fixations and experiences caused them to feel othered and socially differentiated. For many, they thought that they were solely desired due to their racial identity, furthering their feelings of dehumanization and objectification.

Branches of online discourse may attempt to defend racial fetishization by promoting the idea that this phenomenon is simply about “personal preference” and taste (Stacey and Forbes 2021). However, this discourse does not critically engage with how racial fetishization, or any form of fetishization of identities, is often indicative of a reinforcement of power hierarchies that

exist between racial groups, as well as Orientalist thought (Said 1979). Personal preference discourse tends to ignore the socio-historical contexts, as well as gender and racial stereotypes that inform racial fetishization (Stacey and Forbes 2021; Banks et al. 2024). Finally, ideologies claiming that fetishization is merely a question of preference discount or minimize the material harms and pain that it causes to racialized people (Lopez 2018).

As mentioned previously, all (except one) participants interviewed for this study have stated that they have been subject to a certain degree of racial fetishization. For participants, racial fetishization was understood as situations that would present themselves in an explicit or implicit manner. On an explicit level, other practitioners would directly mention having a strong preference for Asian bodies (e.g., a situation where a man told a participant that he had a “bad case of yellow fever”). On a more implicit level, white participants would enforce specific roles onto Asian participants associated with stereotypes based on how they looked or directly engage with or fixate on certain bodily parts that created a sense of othering and hypervisibility. In other “implicit” cases of racial fetishization, participants made mention of how other practitioners would bring up elements related to their culture, even if the participants never brought those elements or their own culture up in the first place. Another common instance of perceived fetishization by participants would be when other practitioners would impose a submissive role on them, even if it were not discussed beforehand.

In addition, without regard to whether the participant identified as East Asian, South Asian, Southeast Asian, or West Asian, they nearly all still experienced similar types of racial fetishization. Although some of the participants made mention of the “Dragon Lady” stereotype being expected of them by other BDSM practitioners, nearly all participants have experienced the “Lotus Blossom” stereotype being imposed on them.

Bo (they/them), a non-binary, masculine-presenting participant of mixed Chinese descent, mentioned the following when asked about their experiences with racial fetishization within BDSM spaces:

You get two extremes when it comes to people at BDSM events where either they think that because I'm Chinese, I'm going to be either super, super submissive to them and like, "Oh yes, thank you, thank you" okay, or they really, really want to get stepped on kind of deal. Like they're like, "oh yeah, dom me baby." [...] I mean, if folks can realize that racism and fetishization is not a kink, that would be great

Bo's experiences are of particular interest given that Bo is the only participant in this study who frequents events that are catered to (mostly) cis-gay men. Fung, as cited by Gill (2021,44), states that even within queer communities, gay Asian masculine bodies are often reduced to "passive receptors for Orientalist desires and domination by white men". Bo's experience is one of the few where, even within queer BDSM circles, there is a presence of explicit racialized violence. In some cases, because of their experiences with fetishization and hypervisibility, they attempt to enter BDSM spaces in disguise, as a way of avoiding racialization:

So, my drag character is primarily a white-faced character. And I do wear colored contacts as well. So like sometimes I go as myself to these events and that's when I feel like the most, like racialized and like horrible, right? And then it's like sometimes I go as my drag character, and my skin tone is like white, white, white. But it's clown white. And then I do a bunch of different colours on my face so you can't see anything. And then, because of the way I do my eyeliner, you can't tell if my eyes are actually slanted, because they are, but you can't tell if they're actually almond-shaped or if it's just the way I do my cat eye. And I do find I get treated better when I look like that than when I don't look like that.

As illustrated through Bo's experience, clown makeup becomes a shield that protects them from racialized violence, given the racialized ambiguity it provides them. This demonstrates that other practitioners' perception of Bo's racial identity has a direct impact on the violence and fetishization that will be inflicted on them. When Bo is perceived as Asian, they

experience a greater amount of violence. However, when Bo's racial identity is ambiguous or perceived as white while they're in disguise, they experience greater feelings of safety.

One of the participants, named Charlie (they/them), also happens to be one of the few participants who does not identify as a feminine-presenting person. Regarding their gender expression, Charlie identifies as a "soft masc", which is oftentimes described as an overall masculine presentation with some elements that can be perceived as traditionally feminine. Despite a more masculine presentation in comparison to other participants, they mention the following regarding their BDSM experiences and imposed labels:

I got so much, like, people asking me if I would be their sub. They assume I'm going to be their little bottom.

Although Charlie mentions experiences of being imposed a submissive label, which aligns with Orientalist constructs, they also make mention of the fact that they tend to feel less desirable than one of their partners, who is a woman. This difference in desirability and visibility becomes apparent whenever they enter BDSM events as a couple:

One of my partners is trans, but she's very femme-presenting. And like, right off the bat, like... You know, when you walk into the room, you feel the energy shift. All eyes are kind of on her. When a very femme-presenting person and I walk into a sex club [...] I don't know why there's suddenly a ranking of desirability. I suddenly became a chaperone for some reason?

Charlie's experience with their partner illustrates how ambiguous or masculine gender presentations intersect with Asian identities and can contribute to differences in terms of feelings of desirability and hypervisibility. Although not immune to racial fetishization, Asian men and masculine-presenting people have frequently documented this sentiment of undesirability (Chong and Kim 2021). This experience speaks to a long history of the European and North American manufacturing of Asian masculinity, which constructs images of Asian men as weak,

asexual, and effeminate (Atkins 2005). These depictions are rooted in Orientalist constructs and media representation (Said 1979).

Although Bo also has a more masculine-expressing presentation, their experiences reflect the opposite of Charlie's, where they feel overtly fetishized. Despite their opposing experiences with hypervisibility and undesirability, both of their experiences can be attributed to Orientalist and media portrayals of masculinity that produce depictions of the masculine Asian body as effeminate, asexual, and passive. This represents a dichotomy of sexual racism where those marginalized on the basis of race navigate experiences of both racial exclusion, or racial fetishization.

In addition, Charlie's experience with their partner further demonstrates how feminine-presenting women and feminine-presenting people become hyper-visible and objectified in these spaces. This speaks to an ongoing objectification of women's and femme-presenting people's bodies, as well as racialized ones, which helps to explain further how the experiences of a feminine-presenting Asian person can differ from the experiences of a masculine-presenting Asian person (Keller 2021).

Max, one of the other few participants with a masculine presentation, did not mention any experience of racial fetishization. In fact, they considered their experiences in BDSM to be quite positive, overall. Interestingly, out of all the study's participants, Max is the only person who did not highlight fetishization or the feeling of being hyper-visible, even when they attend predominantly white spaces. When asked about how their gender, sexual, and racial identities shape their experience in BDSM spaces, they said the following:

I mean, I haven't had any negative experiences, especially in terms of like my queerness or anything like that. I just feel that, it's it's noticeable when it's not, I think a BIPOC space.

Max, Bo and Charlie's experiences are worth noting because we can further analyze fetishization through the perspective of participants who present in a more ambiguous or masculine manner. Despite a presentation that does not align with traditional ideals of femininity or hegemonic masculinity, masculine presenting participants can still become subjected to racial stereotyping and sexual scripts that many of the feminine-presenting participants are subjected to. This demonstrates that intersecting non-binary, Asian, masculine and/or ambiguously expressing identities are also subject to racial fetishization that corresponds to Lotus Blossom and Dragon Lady constructs. However, as portrayed through Charlie and Max's experiences, their more masculine gender presentation may have played a role in making them less hyper-visible in comparison to the other participants who identify as feminine-presenting.

Roxanne (she/her), an Iranian-American woman who participated in this study, also stated her own distinct experiences regarding racial fetishization. She makes mention of times where people have focused on different parts of her body, such as her nose, as a way of further racializing and othering her. To Roxanne, her nose is one of the primary features that she associates with her racialization. She attributes many of these types of behaviours to the internalization of Orientalist constructs.

"I can kind of see it in their face and how they talk to me, what parts of my body they like. A lot of people have come up to me or like, interacted with me and like stroked my nose... I understand I have a beautiful nose, but I... especially when it's a white person, I'm just like you... You were doing a thing."

Roxanne's experience reflects racial fetishization and Orientalist tropes, as she is reduced to a singular bodily feature associated with her racialized identity. In addition, drawing on Ahmed's (2007) phenomenology of whiteness, we can observe that whiteness functions through a norm where one can freely touch and manipulate the bodies of Asian participants without discussion of consent, and further create a sense of othering a hypervisibility for participants

such as Roxanne. This furthers the notion of whiteness acting as a “bad habit” that assumes that consent is already a given, and that makes it so that white individuals can comfortably engage in fetishizing behaviours without critical thought (Ahmed 2007, 165).

As illustrated through the participants’ perceptions in these scenes, the role of a submissive was often assumed or enforced on them, rather than a role that was agreed upon. These situations once again highlight racialized assumptions and can be tied to Ahmed’s phenomenology of whiteness, demonstrating how whiteness orients bodies, expectations, and movement within spaces. This perception is further illustrated through Ruethe and Em’s experiences. During the interview, Ruethe mentioned the following regarding these imposed roles:

I try to dress up as like very “leather queen”. Kind of a dom-like outfit. But even then, they would assume, like, “Oh, I can just bend you into submission” or something like that by other disgusting men.

Similarly to Ruethe, Em mentioned the following regarding her BDSM experiences of having roles pushed onto her:

There's a difference between someone flirting with you and having a conversation with you, and then it just may not be anything that they say that's especially explicitly racialized against you, but there is like a sense that they're treating you in a submissive way, which I think is very funny considering I'm wearing full leather kink gear and a whip.

Despite many of the participants wanting to occupy more dominant roles, and despite efforts to directly symbolize and represent dominance through their attire, this was often ignored by white practitioners. This once again demonstrates how whiteness can structure BDSM spaces, determining who gets to occupy specific roles (Ahmed 2007; Martinez 2020). Although participants mentioned that the fetishization was not always explicit, they interpreted the imposition of submissiveness as being a product of Orientalist constructs. As portrayed

previously, this was often expressed through forceful or patronizing behaviours that mostly came from white participants.

Alexis, one of the participants, stated that within these predominantly white and cis-centred BDSM events, cisgender white men were more often a lot more “shameless” and upfront when it comes to their sexual racism, indicating that there is a certain level of comfort or lack of consciousness that they possess in expressing their oppressive tendencies. In queer and/or trans spaces, however, white participants will not display the same amount of comfort with their fetishization, given the anti-oppressive structure that is most often imposed within those spaces. Although some of the research participants have highlighted slight suspicions that some of the white practitioners in these spaces might implicitly have internalized fetishizing tendencies; they did not feel the same level of hypervigilance as they did in cis-heterosexual events due to the guidelines that considered intersecting forms of violence.

Participants' experiences in this study demonstrate the Lotus Blossom/Dragon Lady dichotomy that has been internalized and imposed onto them (Hwang and Parrenas 2021; Woan 2008, 283; Zhou and Paul 2016). The internalization of these tropes by white practitioners contributes to the study participants' objectification and dehumanization. This is shown by the fact that their sexual agency and autonomy were frequently denied or contested throughout their interactions (Serpe et al. 2020). As illustrated through the participants' accounts, their bodies were viewed as tools and resources for the pleasure of white participants due to their Asian identities, as well as the way Asian identity intersects with queer identity and marginalized gender.

Additionally, the phenomenology of whiteness can also be applied to this section, given that this study's participants mention the way white participants exhibit sexual racism within

these spaces in a way that is almost “natural”, and unchallenged to them. This is apparent through their ease and sentiments of entitlement while communicating and interacting with participants (Ahmed 2007; Martinez 2021). Furthermore, Ahmed’s (2007, 149) theory is also applicable due to the argument that whiteness acts as a structure that orients bodies and affects how bodies “take up space and what they can do”, which is demonstrated through how Asian participants feel hypervisible. On the other hand, participants' accounts show that white participants’ bodies are oriented in a way that allows them to cross boundaries and reinforce a sentiment of othering without questioning or critical reflection on the violence attached to their actions.

After a thorough review of the data, it can be noted that racialized fetishization grounded in Orientalist thought occurred regardless of whether participants identified as feminine-presenting, androgynous-presenting, or masculine-presenting. However, this was done to varying degrees depending on the participants' gender presentation. For participants with a more feminine gender expression, fetishization was more often reported than in participants with a more androgynous and masculine presentation. For one participant who was masculine-presenting, fetishization was a non-issue, and for the other, who is more masculine, an issue that occurred less frequently compared to other participants.

4.1.3 Mixed-race and ambiguous identity experience

Taking into account that four of the participants were of mixed Asian background, three of whom with one white parent, I was curious to examine whether their mixed race identity would translate into different BDSM experiences from the rest of the participants in regards to their racialization. Due to factors revolving around cultural appropriation and white supremacy, mixed-race people will often be subjected to a different form of racial fetishization (Harris 2022;

Lefebvre Jean 2023). This was especially of interest for the participants with a white parent, because mixed race individuals who have one white parent often live with very complex experiences regarding their racialization. Oftentimes, mixed-race individuals find themselves floating between dynamics of racialized privilege and oppression, depending on the context of their social environment (Bettez 2012; Lefebvre Jean 2023; Waring 2023). The degree to which they were white-presenting or asian-presenting also factored into how these participants were treated within these spaces.

Despite their mixed-race backgrounds, Em (she/her), Roxanne (she/her), Bo (they/them), and Jasmine (they/them) discussed that they were rarely ever perceived as white while participating in these events, based on their interactions. As Roxanne had mentioned prior, she felt that other participants would typically lean into Orientalism when interacting with her, hinting that her mixed-race identity was not necessarily considered, or that she did not interpret it as something that other practitioners recognized. For all three participants who have a white parent, their experiences with their racial identity did not correspond to potential experiences of white privilege due to their experiences of being racialized and exoticized while navigating these events and spaces.

Jasmine, a feminine-presenting non-binary participant who is mixed Asian and Black, and also the only mixed-race participant with two racialized parents, made mention of how they will more frequently be perceived as either Asian or Black by other BDSM practitioners, but on some occasions, they do identify with the mixed-race experience:

Yeah. Like it really depends because I'm mixed like. So some people will be like, oh, like you're just black and other people be like, you're obviously Asian. But it really depends. And also like also depends on people's fetishes too, you know, like what they're looking at. But usually it's always a confusion, because of, like, my skin tone and my eyes and nose. They're like, I can pick you, but at the same time, because it's so mysterious, they like it even more, you know, it's like, "oh, this sounds a challenge", you know?

As illustrated through their experience, Jasmine states that when other BDSM practitioners engage with them, the way that they treat them is always dependent on whether the other practitioners profile them as Asian or Black. Although Jasmine deals with fetishization, the fetishization is not always based on their mixed-race fetishization in itself. Instead, their experiences of sexual racism are more often based on which fixed racial category other participants will place them in.

Jasmine adds that when other practitioners view them as a Black person, they will often make assumptions that they are hypersexual and dominant. In addition, Jasmine mentions that they assume that they can take more pain and that they will be more aggressive. These stereotypes revolving around Black women and femme folks' sexuality and pain tolerance can also be traced Black to socio-historical factors, as well as anti-Black imagery that originates from colonial narratives portraying Black women's sexuality as deviant. (Holmes 2016; Rosenthal and Lobel 2016). On the other end of the spectrum, when the practitioners racialize Jasmine as Asian, they will attempt to take more control of them and will most often treat them as if they are submissive, once again demonstrating an adherence to Orientalist narratives of the Asian body. Jasmine's experience also demonstrates that regardless of how they are racialized, they will be subject to objectification due to the dehumanizing sexual stereotypes revolving around both Asian and Black feminine-presenting people and women that contribute to the instrumentalization of their bodies. Although Jasmine personally identifies as a *switch*, a term used for people who are comfortable switching between dominant and submissive roles, many practitioners will ignore this while interacting with them (Bennett 2024).

Jasmine's interactions demonstrate that their intersecting identities, which are those of a Black and Asian non-binary person, influence their experiences of racialization in these spaces.

Their intersecting mixed-race identity does factor in, given that their unique experience of objectification is linked to their two racialized identities. How Jasmine is racialized by other practitioners will often determine the different forms of sexual stereotypes that they will be attached to. The added dimension of their identity as a Black feminine-presenting person subjects them to different forms of harmful stereotypes that other participants in this study did not experience, as she mentions:

They'll say things like, I can probably take control of you because you're Asian versus, like, if I'm black, it's like, oh, like, you're probably gonna have an attitude and you kind of want to like, fight me a bit and like, I can take that, you know?

To conclude, aside from Jasmine, mixed-race participants did not explicitly experience fetishization based on their mixed identity, but more so based on their racialized identity, since this was how they were often perceived through the gaze of white participants. As a result, it is unclear whether their mixed identity had an impact on their experiences with racial fetishization, or if it lessened the degree to which they experienced fetishization, because they were often assigned to one racial category by other practitioners. However, Jasmine's two racialized identities put them at a different level of vulnerability. As a result, they were subjected to different forms of sexual scripts and stereotypes based on both Black and Asian identities.

As shown previously through participants' accounts, it becomes clear that racialization put them at a certain level of vulnerability to violence when frequenting certain BDSM spaces. Participants made a direct and clear link between their racial identity, and the violence that they face in BDSM spaces, which ranges from verbal sexual racism, to physical harm that can potentially injure the participants or does not respect their agency. In addition to their racial identity, their LGBTQIA+ identity intersected to create unique experiences of oppression while navigating these spaces and events.

4.1.4 LGBTQIA+ experiences

Trans and non-binary perspectives

As discussed with multiple participants from this study, many of the city's more visible, mainstream BDSM venues and events, along with their attendees, still view gender through a highly binary and cisnormative lens. According to participants, these more popularized events and spaces often do not consider implementing safer spaces measures for trans people, such as enforcing rules on respecting pronouns and gender identity. Oftentimes, this is experienced through either the imposition of gender identities onto participants or blatant transphobia expressed through exclusion from accessing spaces. For instance, even within the realm of queer events, trans men or transmasculine people would often be excluded from cis-gay spaces that were supposedly for men. One of the participants, Bo, as an example, mentioned that their partner was refused access to an event solely for being a trans man, even though the event was catered to gay masculine folks:

It's like if the if the organizer and like, their friends are predominantly cis men, and I show and I roll up like as a trans non- binary person with my trans partner, they're going to be like, sorry, we don't want your genitalia here.

In addition to this exclusion, Bo also highlighted being frequently misgendered when they would attend BDSM parties in predominantly cis-gay settings:

Okay. So. Personally. I mean, obviously I get the people who call me he/him constantly, and if I ask them to refer to me by my pronouns, there's pushback on it. Where it's like I'm ruining the fantasy for them, right?

These spaces created potential for triggered gender dysphoria in participants and created reluctance towards attending events that were not specifically labelled as being queer *and* trans. Erasure of identity was largely cited throughout this study, and this is especially the case in spaces that are typically cisnormative. Although certain participants in this study identify as non-binary, they have stated that cisgender men in more mainstream BDSM spaces will tend to

directly assume that the feminine-presenting participants identify as women, or that more masculine or androgynous participants identify as men. This creates another gendered dimension to their experiences.

In addition to the distress caused by power differences between men and those marginalized based on gender, this misgendering creates an additional layer of distress for the participants in these spaces. Considering that their gender identity is completely dismissed and a gender (most often “woman”) is ultimately imposed onto them, this aggravates feelings of gender dysphoria for non-binary participants when they attend predominantly white, or cisnormative queer BDSM events. Gender dysphoria is described as a disconnect between a person’s assigned gender, and their gender identity. Dysphoria can occur at varying levels, but it can often present itself as stress, anxiety, and depression (Cooper et al. 2020). When participants become labelled as “men” or “women”, they do not feel affirmed in their non-binary identity.

Intersectionality then allows for an explanation of how intersecting non-binary and trans identities, alongside Asian identity, contribute to an additional layer of vulnerability for BDSM participants with those identities, given the risks of exclusion as well as the erasure and dismissal of their gender identity. Therefore, non-binary and trans participants not only experienced distress due to sexual racism and patriarchal violence, but they also experienced distress stemming from systems of oppression such as cisnormativity and transphobia. This creates an additional layer of oppression and discomfort that they have to endure while frequenting these spaces.

Fetishization of non-monosexual sexualities

In addition to distress from gender dysphoria, sexual orientation was another overlapping factor that impacted participants' experiences in BDSM spaces. Multiple participants in this

research have discussed another layer of fetishization that they experience in addition to the fetishization of their race: the fetishization and objectification of their non-monosexual sexualities. In the context of this research, non-monosexual sexuality refers to either bisexuality, pansexuality, or queer identity, and all participants in this study happen to not identify with heterosexual identity.

When discussing different barriers to accessing BDSM spaces, Jasmine, one of the participants, mentioned couples, most often heterosexual ones, as engaging in her fetishization due to her sexual orientation and racial identity. According to the participants, heterosexual couples often seek out bisexual, pansexual, or queer women and feminine-expressing folks to engage in sexual activity with, reducing them to fantasies and sexual objects. Jasmine highlighted couples as being a significant barrier to accessing these BDSM events due to the power dynamics at play and the feelings of discomfort that they can cause. As a result, they do not feel as secure in certain spaces. Rueth also echoed the sentiment of couples being overwhelmingly present in BDSM spaces, often lacking awareness of the discomfort and their positions of power when occupying these spaces. For non-monosexual participants, there was an added power dynamic due to the fact that they would be approached by two people rather than one, which adds an added layer of complexity when it comes to notions of consent. Jasmine made mention of feeling cornered by these couples “looking for a third” and viewed them as a barrier to accessing BDSM events:

Then there’s the barrier of couples. Especially when they’re looking for someone so specific too. They’re like, “hey, you fit like me and my girl or me and my wife’s like thing”. [...] I’m scared to get into these interactions because they have happened before, where people kind of corner me and start talking to me and try to touch me. And I’m like, what is happening right now? Like, where is the consent? Where is the communication? Like, hi, nice to meet you too!

Xian and Alexis also mentioned couples engaging in objectifying behaviour upon finding out their sexual orientation. During the interviews, both Alexis and Xian mentioned how cis-heterosexual couples will often use the woman of the couple to be a gateway by attempting to lure participants into uncomfortable dynamics with the couple. Participants reported that they would be speaking to a woman who approached them on her own, only for them to later find out that the woman is actually accompanied by a man who wants to fulfill his fantasies of having sexual relationships with his partner and a third person. This demonstrates a form of sexual violence and objectification, because the bisexual and pansexual participants were not being provided informed consent by these couples due to the concealing of intentions, and were viewed as instruments for their pleasure rather than autonomous agents.

Additionally, these interactions demonstrate the couples' assumption about the sexual availability of participants with intersecting Asian, feminine-presenting, and non-monosexual identity, which oftentimes led to feelings of entrapment and unsafety.

According to literature on bisexuality (Pond and Farvid 2017; Serpe et al. 2020), those who identify with non-monosexual sexualities are often prone to stigmatization and sexualization as a result of sexual stereotyping. The stereotypes surrounding bisexual, pansexual, and other non-monosexual people, largely stemming from cultural and media representations, typically revolve around hypersexuality and lack of responsibility (Pond and Farvid 2017; Serpe et al. 2020). The experiences of Alexis, Jasmine, Ruethe and Xian demonstrate the internalization, objectification, and hypersexualization of non-monosexual identities that many of these couples have. Furthermore, it demonstrates that the intersecting identity of non-monosexual identity contributes to additional experiences of fetishization for queer, bisexual, or pansexual BDSM participants, who already have to deal with fetishization based on race.

From the participants' perspective, fetishization is not a benign phenomenon, nor is it considered to be a compliment when one is on the receiving end of it. As stated previously, physical and sexual violence in intimate relations are some of the material consequences of fetishization, white sexual imperialism and orientalist construction (Gervais, DiLillo, and McChargue 2014; Sáenz and Haslam 2024). This manifestation of physical violence as a result of fetishization was illustrated through Xian's experience with another practitioner during a rope-play session:

Nothing was done out of consent. But it is not a good consent because I didn't even know what I was consenting to. It's what you would call "old school BDSM," where instead of opt-ins, it's opt-out. You say what you don't want to do, but what is in the zone of "I don't know", it's all up to the top to do. And that guy was problematic because he did rope-play in a very painful tie. He did not ask anything about if I had like body damage and did not tell me anything about potential nerve damage. He just tied. And so that made me actually terrified of ropes for like, so long after, cus' I thought it was just supposed to be painful, but it's not.

Xian's experience with this older man represents more than a lack of enthusiastic consent. It highlights how her body was reduced to an instrument used strictly for the dominant practitioner's sexual gratification, in a way where her pain and safety were not taken into consideration. The lack of communication, informed consent, and regard for Xian's well-being was not a neutral occurrence. Rather, this disregard for her safety was reflective of a deep internalization of Orientalist constructs that dehumanize Asian bodies and assume compliance and passivity.

On a similar note, Em also described an instance where someone had adulterated her beverage during a BDSM party:

Every time that I do go out, I usually am in drag. So I look super feminine... like hyper feminine. I have been accosted on several occasions. Unfortunately, in my experience with videos, like ballroom events, has not been very great, especially leather kink. The boundaries seem to not be as great as I'd appreciate it to be. I was actually roofied, at a party, and I think part of it was because I appeared very hyper feminine, so... yeah.

Thank God I did a lot of drugs back then. So I knew what was happening, and the dose was very small, so, but if it was anyone else. Yikes.

This incident illustrates a direct violation of Em's bodily integrity and sexual autonomy. Em attributed this experience to the intersection of patriarchal and racialized violence due to her hyper-feminine gender expression at the time and her racial identity. Em's experience can also be tied to objectification theory, since the contamination of her drink revealed an instrumentalization of her body and a direct assault on her autonomy; both of which are key components of objectification theory, given the blatant rejection of her personhood (Nussbaum 1995).

Importantly, it is worth noting that now that Em presents herself in a way that is considered less traditionally feminine, she feels that her experience within BDSM spaces would be different, and that she would not be subject to the same level of violence if she were to frequent these spaces. Her experience illustrates that feminine-presenting Asian bodies are thought to be passive and available—ideas rooted in Orientalist thought (Said 1979).

These instances of blatant physical violence occurred to participants who identify as Asian and with a feminine-expressing gender presentation, which can also be attributed to the fetishization and objectification of Asian and women's and/or feminine-expressing bodies. Both Em and Xian's accounts demonstrate how their bodies, through violent means, were used to satisfy the sexual needs of other participants in ways that violated the safety norms of BDSM. These instances do not exist in a vacuum. They represent how intersecting oppressions put certain bodies in a position of susceptibility (Crenshaw 1991). Intersectionality then becomes especially important in analyzing how feminine-presenting Asian bodies are perceived and treated within BDSM spaces.

This led participants to wonder if BDSM, despite its fundamental grounding in the principles of “safe, sane and consensual” discourse, was used as a shield by white, cis participants as a way of enforcing patriarchal, heteronormative and/or racialized violence in a way that can be more easily disguised without fear of repercussions. In other words, were BDSM spaces being weaponized to facilitate violent behaviour, or make it easier for other participants to enforce harm on this study’s participants under the guise of BDSM, even if this would not at all align with the core principles and values of the practice?

On the other end of hypervisibility, which was commonly reported amongst all participants, is the experience of exclusion and the feeling of undesirability. Hypervisibility refers to participants’ feelings of being overly observed, exoticized, and Othered in this study. Undesirability refers to the opposite, where participants felt ignored, rejected, and undesirable. Although all participants experienced hypervisibility at times, not all participants had experienced or mentioned feeling undesirable. Three of the participants, specifically Roxanne, Charlie, and Ruethe, all mentioned feelings of undesirability due to different intersecting identities they possess. Charlie, as mentioned above, stated that their masculine presentation made, as they describe, the “ranking of desirability” much more apparent when they walked into BDSM events with their hyper-feminine partner.

Roxanne, who self-identifies as a fat woman, mentions that she often gets rejected in BDSM spaces due to her size. Although Roxanne also deals with fetishization, her intersecting identities make it so that she experiences not only hypervisibility, but also undesirability and rejection. This can be attributed to a long history of systemic fatphobia rooted in Western culture that deems fatness as being incompatible with traditional standards of femininity imposed by the patriarchy as opposed to thinness (Mohr, Jamie and Hockin-Boyers 2025; Sharma 2021). Due to

these systemic factors and violence, thin bodies will often receive more societal privileges and recognition in comparison to fat bodies, which will often be subject to moralizing discourse, shame and marginalization (Bacon, O'Reilly and Aphramor 2016).

On a similar note, Ruethe mentions that in spaces where there are many white women, white women will often become more sought after in those spaces, especially by racialized (and more specifically Asian) cis men, demonstrating another ranking of desirability. Ruethe, out of all participants, is one of the only South Asian participants and has a darker complexion than most of this study's participants. Ruethe's experience can be attributed to the internalization of white supremacist beauty constructs and colorism by other practitioners. Beauty standards, especially those constructed in the West, place more value on thinness, fairpale skin and Eurocentric features (Sharma 2021). However, it is interesting to note that Ruethe also mentioned that she was often rejected by racialized men and noticed their favouring of white women, which also speaks to colourism, which is not only deeply present in the West, but in Asia as well (Nambiar 2023).

The experiences of undesirability that are faced by Charlie, Roxanne, and Ruethe demonstrate how intersecting systems of oppression such as transphobia, fatphobia, and internalized racism, shape their BDSM experiences. In comparison to participants with lighter skin, feminine presentation and thinner bodies, Charlie, Roxanne and Ruethe experienced more invisibility and exclusion in contrast to other participants due to these different aspects of their identities. Regardless of whether the participant is facing fetishization or exclusion, these two seemingly different experiences still stem from the same systems of oppression that attempt to place racialized people in a position of subordination.

Despite the numerous experiences of fetishization, violence and barriers that have caused feelings of harm and discomfort, many of the participants have stated that the benefits of healing and reclamation have trumped the negative aspects of BDSM and have been a motivating factor for continuing to practice.

4.2 Healing And Reclamation

Although there are numerous challenges in navigating BDSM events, many participants emphasized the healing and liberatory potential of BDSM that outweighs the instances of harm experienced. For them, this practice offered opportunities for emotional reclamation, self-expression, liberation and empowerment, as reiterated by Roxanne:

BDSM is a really... I mean, obviously sometimes really fucked up space, but when you are in control of your BDSM experience, it's a really powerful place to be critically engaged and to decolonize our relationships with our bodies.”

Roxanne’s account reveals how, under the right conditions, BDSM can serve as a space to counter systems of oppression, such as colonialism, patriarchy, and other intersecting violences that shape the social experiences of participants marginalized based on race, gender, and other identity axes.

4.2.1 Overcoming histories of abuse through BDSM

Throughout the interviews, a significant portion of the participants mentioned living through different forms of abuse in their childhood to early adulthood. These experiences include but are not limited to intimate partner violence, domestic violence (often from a parent), and sexual violence. Various North American studies demonstrate that LGBTQIA+ women, non-binary and trans people, and racialized women are particularly affected by these kinds of violence (Statistics Canada 2021, Tsong and Ullman 2018). These forms of violence can once again be attributed to various systems of domination, such as the patriarchy and white

supremacy. The home, the institution of the family, and the intimate become spaces that are reflective of these structures; spaces where these violences are further reproduced (hooks 2014; Kaufman 2023; Montesanti and Thurston 2015).

Practicing BDSM served as a way for many of these participants to cope with histories of domestic, intimate, and family violence. “Coping” with these histories held a different meaning to each participant. For instance, for some, it can involve rejecting the objectification that they faced throughout their lives by taking on dominant roles in BDSM contexts. As a result, BDSM serves as a tool for counteracting the objectification that occurs towards racialized and gender-marginalized bodies, resisting against the instrumentalization by regaining control and agency over their own bodies. For others, BDSM provided a space where they could re-enact past traumatic events. Jin Ae (she/they), who grew up in a household with an abusive father, felt that BDSM practices have given her the space to re-enact their family dynamics. Objectification theory can be linked to domestic violence, given that it requires an instrumentalization and dehumanization of the person impacted by it ((Nussbaum 1995). As they recounted this story, Jin Ae stated the following:

Perhaps the screaming is too much, but the violence feels so therapeutic and I think, like, in a weird way [...] the consensual space to enact violence against me. It has been this weird way of maybe wishing that my dad had been able to do it with my permission [...] because I know where his trauma comes from. He never hit us, but he broke everything around us. And sometimes those things broke around our bodies. Like, my leg got cut open one time when he broke the desk I was sitting at [...] I think that the other hard limit I have is around like blindfolds, because his anger was just so explosive and such a surprise all the time that I need to be aware of my surroundings and my environment. I'm like in threat assessment.

As mentioned by Jin Ae, even though BDSM provides the chance for her to re-enact certain dynamics of her past, it also allows them to implement specific rules and to follow a particular structure in order to regain control of the situation. This allows her to enforce certain boundaries to avoid crossing any kind of line that might trigger negative emotions from Jin Ae's

past as a way of ensuring safety in her experiences. This re-enactment also has a therapeutic component for many people who practice BDSM. Through re-enactment, participants get to re-explore traumatic events rather than suppress them in a way that is empowering and healing (Levand et al. 2017; Lindfors 2009; Speciale and Khombatta 2020)

Additionally, even participants who preferred to engage in submissive roles had a similar feeling of empowerment, under the condition that their submission was enacted within a controlled setting. Xian had also stated that getting to have control over sensations, such as pain, has also been therapeutic for them. For participants, the ability to *choose* to be submissive (as opposed to being imposed submission) and to let go of any feelings of needing control in a context where they were with a trusted partner also provided them with greater feelings of agency; feelings that were not always accessible to them.

4.2.2 The Subversive Nature of BDSM

While the therapeutic potential of BDSM provides a controlled environment for healing and reclamation of agency, it also serves as a space for subversion. Subversion, in the context of this research, refers to a challenging or reversal of dominant orders and social norms, often reflected in participants' experiences (Bloom and White 2016; Boyers 2000). A large portion of the participants mentioned the nature of BDSM spaces being highly empowering for them. Audre Lorde's (1978) *Uses of the Erotic* argues that the erotic can become a site for empowerment and a greater connection to the self, much of which was illustrated through participant experience. In this study, this subversion most often referred to a reversal of a dominant, white, patriarchal order that places cisgender, heterosexual white men in a position of power and racialized people marginalized based on gender in a position of submission.

Participants not only re-enacted personal histories of violence through BDSM but also challenged the status quo and established racial and sexual hierarchies through various scenes.

Several of the participants, such as Charlie, mentioned experiencing pleasure when consensually inflicting pain on men within negotiated BDSM settings after living through different forms of abuse at the hands of men in their lives. This can be interpreted as a direct reversal of an order that places women and people marginalized on the basis of gender in a position of submission or passiveness (Ortner 1974). Throughout experiences such as these, participants had the opportunity to regain agency and transform experiences related to intersecting violences in a way that they interpreted as healing and liberatory.

For instance, many participants highlighted that being able to be in positions where they were in a position of dominance, especially over men, gave them a greater sense of power and control in a society run by patriarchal forces and norms. Bo, for instance, expressed the following statement, which also happened to be echoed by other participants, by claiming the following: “I like to see men in pain. Oh, you know, let's call it, like, reparations for the gender diverse.”

As illustrated through Bo’s quote, BDSM provided many participants with a space to overcome different forms of trauma that stem from past experiences of patriarchal violence. The opportunity to (consensually) inflict pain on men, for participants, was cathartic. Even if they may not have necessarily been the perpetrators of such patriarchal violence, the men within these spaces became representations, or symbols even, of the patriarchy. For many participants who got to dominate them, this was therapeutic given that they had lived multiple forms of violence at the hands of cisgender men.

Additionally, BDSM served as a practice for everyday life, outside of the dungeons and parties. For participants, BDSM gave them transferable skills that they were able to utilize outside of the BDSM realm, whether in the context of the workplace or in terms of relieving emotional suffering that affected participants throughout their lives. These skills in question included negotiations, boundary maintenance, and stress management. Some discussed how BDSM practices have provided them with tools to more easily navigate the white supremacist patriarchy they live in, through the reinforcement of boundaries and the reclamation of power.

For instance, Ruethe, who works in the tech industry as a computer engineer, a field still dominated by men in a Canadian context (Ivus and Watson 2022), discussed how BDSM has taught her how to regain her power and her assertiveness within her often white, male-dominated workspaces:

I didn't have a voice before. My voice was taken by other people who made the assumption of who I am, whereas in my queer [BDSM] spaces, I was able to explore that and learn about communication and negotiation. And I can use that in the real world for, let's say, if I wanted to get my salary increased, or if I want to assert my boundaries.

As Ruethe demonstrates, BDSM serves as a tool of empowerment for people with intersecting marginalized identities, and in this case, racialized women. Whether it be due to underrepresentation, undervaluing, exploitation, or blatant misogyny, for many women, and especially those experiencing racialization, navigating the tech world can be an intimidating place due to the oppressive structures surrounding it (Williams, Korn and Ghani 2022). Therefore, as evidenced by Ruethe, BDSM can serve as a liberatory practice to confront intersecting forms of violence impacting women of colour and to challenge the dominant patriarchal and white supremacist structures they live in. In addition, BDSM is shown to help improve overall communication and negotiation skills, which can contribute to participants

feeling well-equipped while navigating the oppressive systems they live in, and feel more self-affirming within structures that want to keep them subdued (Melavc, Jug and Gomboc 2024).

Furthermore, BDSM, for many of the participants, has also helped participants cope with racialized trauma, despite the racism that can sometimes present itself within those spaces. Em, for instance, grew up in a small, predominantly white town as one of the very few Asian people living in it. During her interview, she discussed experiencing racism frequently throughout her youth, contributing to different wounds revolving around her racialization:

Living in a small town while being Asian is very complicated, especially when they want to give you the pass for being literally every race on the planet. So they can say anything that they want to say. I was harassed a lot as a child because of that.

As a response to this violence, Em expressed that she often had to “act white” and tone her Korean heritage down as a form of self-preservation and survival. Em’s experience demonstrates Ahmed’s (2007) phenomenology of whiteness, arguing that racialized bodies can be (dis)oriented in predominantly white spaces, further explaining Em’s willingness to act in a way that corresponds to traits that she would personally associate to whiteness. Despite this suppression of her racialized identity during her childhood, Em had the chance to counter this later on in her adulthood. Through BDSM, she did not feel that same need to “act white” and used these spaces to further embrace her identity as an Asian person; an identity she often felt the need to suppress. She mentions the following regarding the role she plays in BDSM spaces:

I really do lean into the, like, hot, sexy Asian lady [archetype], but it's MY hot, sexy Asian lady, and I use that as a method of my own control.

As Em mentioned, even in situations where she does feel that she is adhering to some form of stereotype surrounding the “hot, sexy Asian lady” persona, there is a key distinction between her enactment of the stereotype and when it is pushed onto her. The underlying difference between this and the images imposed on her is that in her case, she is taking control of

her own narrative, in direct opposition to the Orientalist narratives that have shaped the experiences of Asian people. Although this may seem counterintuitive, by reclaiming this narrative on her own terms, Em is contributing to the subversion and rejection of Orientalist constructs and sexual stereotypes that attempt to define what it means to be an Asian woman. Furthermore, by doing so, she rejects objectification by reclaiming her sexual agency and bodily autonomy. In other words, Em is rewriting the sexual scripts that can be oppressive to her. Finally, she feels that these spaces allow her to express the racialized aspect of her identity that she often repressed, allowing her to live more authentically and in touch with her Korean heritage.

In addition to the subversive aspects of BDSM spaces, many of the participants also highlighted that another healing aspect that contributed to their participating in these events was the ability to create community with other people with shared identities, especially when those spaces were specifically designated and historically exclusive to queer and trans people.

4.3 Liberatory Possibilities in Queer and Trans BDSM Spaces

The participants in this study have been through numerous discomforts and intersecting violences while attending more popular and well-known BDSM events and spaces in Montreal, most often at the hands of cisgender, heterosexual white men and occasionally, their women partners. Despite these occurrences, many of the participants have stated that 2LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC-only BDSM events have often provided them with the ability to practice BDSM with less hypervigilance and worry about the potential forms of violence they can encounter. In addition, getting the opportunity to build community with other queer and trans and racialized people vastly improved their quality of life. For participants, having the ability to be cared for and care for others in a BDSM setting greatly improved their social lives and reduced feelings of

isolation that they may have had previously regarding their different identities. Contrary to predominantly white and cis-centred BDSM events, queer and BIPOC-specific spaces, for the participants, have provided them with greater feelings of emotional and physical safety that they did not experience elsewhere.

In this study, “liberatory” will be understood as the capacity to resist the constraints stemming from various systems of oppression, all while decentring the colonial and patriarchal gaze. Evidently, it would be unreasonable to believe that any space in any context can ever exist without any form of violence or internalization of systems of oppression. However, the difference between a liberatory and non-liberatory space lies in how these forms of violence are addressed.

4.3.1 Queer and Trans BDSM Spaces

One of the main defining factors that participants have noticed in queer and/or racialized spaces versus heterosexual spaces is a greater sense of accountability, security and applied intersectionality. Participants have mentioned that within these spaces, there are often more safety procedures and mandatory training involved to minimize the potential for harm. When discussing queer and trans BDSM spaces in contrast to cis-centred, white spaces, Ruethe mentioned the following:

Everyone's got your back. Not everyone. But like, they will take accountability for any actions they do. And if they make any mistake, they're like, “oh, shoot”. Like they will actually take tenderness and care in getting that resolved. Whereas in the straight fetish community or kink community, not at all. Like they'll say, “yeah, yeah, we'll do it”. But I've never seen any accountability for their actions.

As stated by Ruethe, there is a greater culture of accountability within queer and trans BDSM spaces, where there is the confidence that even if someone does contribute to harm, there will be steps taken to ensure repair and community care.

Adrienne, a participant and BDSM event organizer, mentions some of the procedures that new participants have to follow in order to access their events:

We have like a little bit of first-timers to this party. We have a little workshop that goes over like consent, basic practices and like general and like the rules of our party and dungeon etiquette. So, people who are new to our parties have to go to these.

When asked about whether they found differences between mainstream BDSM events, and queer and trans BDSM events, Adrienne discussed a key distinction:

I think for queer oriented spaces, these are sort of always like, no matter where I've been, like queer oriented parties have had some version of this, like, we say, "don't make assumptions about identities, experiences, pronouns, HIV status, bodies, genitals. Like ask them out what words they use for someone's junk before you interact with them. We do not tolerate racism and transphobia. Come talk to us. We will deal with this." I like? I don't think I'd ever have a sex like queer sex party that did not specify any of this.

Even within events that are not specifically for racialized participants, participants noted that there will often be a clearly highlighted and well-defined zero-tolerance policy regarding racism and other forms of oppression within queer and trans spaces. These events contribute to the denaturalization of whiteness through the implementation of anti-racism rules and norms that challenge the "bad habits" of spaces structured by whiteness (Ahmed 2007).

Participants who wish to attend these events must follow these trainings beforehand. Although Adrienne mentions that queer and trans spaces are not exempt from the issues of racial fetishization, they notice that there is less of a culture of acceptance and normalization for climates of sexual racism and other forms of oppression, making these types of situations less frequent in queer and/or trans spaces in comparison to predominantly white and cis-centred BDSM events. Furthermore, as illustrated through Adrienne's experience, consent discourse and dungeon etiquette in queer and trans spaces apply principles of intersectionality, given that they address intersecting marginalized identities, including HIV status as well. These spaces recognize how intersecting systems of oppression can shape experiences of participants, as

illustrated by intersectional theory (Crenshaw 1991), and aim to create consent cultures that are reflective of these systems.

As mentioned previously, one of the common complaints regarding the city's dominant mainstream BDSM scene is that its events, and their attendees, still have the tendency to adopt a cisnormative perspective on gender. This is often shown through their use of gendered language and gender identities being imposed on the participants. On the other hand, within queer and trans BDSM events, participants are explicitly reminded not to make assumptions about people's gender identities and pronouns. This safety rule was not present in mainstream BDSM events, which may not consider this.

In contrast, queer and/or trans events were spaces for gender affirmation to non-binary and other queer participants who often felt forced into performing specific roles and confined to strict sexual and gender categories while frequenting cis-heterosexual spaces. As Adrienne mentions, queer and trans-oriented events allowed them to have the weight of cisnormativity lifted off their shoulders since they provided a space where their gender identity and expression did not have to become a source of stress for them:

I think that's what feels liberating about queer and trans-oriented kink spaces. I don't really think about it that hard. I don't think like, "Am I performing gender?"

This sentiment was echoed by other participants, who described these spaces as more liberating and secure precisely because they were not required to constantly educate others about their identities, nor did they feel the need to fit in strict, gendered cisnormative categories. Jasmine also made mention of how queer and trans spaces were more affirming, given that there is a more of a culture that discourages making gendered assumptions. When asked about moments that have stood out to them during their BDSM experience, they mentioned the following about a queer and trans event:

To me, that's memorable is that someone actually asked me, like, what are my pronouns? And like, what role do I take, and what my interests are. I'm like, okay, like instead of just like kind of profiling me instantly and just assuming.

Jasmine's experience in this event contrasted with their experience in more cis-heteronormative events, where other participants would make assumptions tied to Jasmine's femininity and impose submissive roles onto them. However, this was different in queer and trans spaces, given that there was a culture of consent that considered cisnormativity.

In terms of sexual orientation, Roxanne also mentioned that BDSM events can be liberating due to a disengagement with strict sexual categories:

I guess just like. Fluidity is really important for me as, like, a mixed person. As a queer person, as a bisexual person and as a BDSM whatever... I think the fluidity of... The possibilities that BDSM allows for really help to affirm all the different areas of my life where I experience fluidity, and just kind of like another layer of recognizing that, there are no binaries, and most things are an illusion, and we're allowed to like, kind of control and create however we want, to live our lives.

Roxanne's experience demonstrates BDSM spaces allowed for a challenging of rigid structures that attempt to fit individuals into fixed categories when it comes to race, gender, and sexuality (Butler 1990; Hertlein, Hartwell and Munns 2016; Lefebvre Jean 2023). BDSM spaces allowed Roxanne to feel affirmed in her intersecting fluid identities, given the possibilities of embracing fluidity that BDSM offers.

Additionally, rather than being drained by the emotional labour of explaining their identities, non-binary participants and queer participants could instead embrace the fluidity of their gender, without feeling pressured to conform to the gender binary or remain confined to a fixed gender identity and the social roles associated with them. Queer and trans BDSM spaces relieved them of the pressures and distress that are often imposed in broader, cisnormative social contexts.

4.4 The Complexity of BDSM Spaces

4.4.1 Barriers in Access

Although many participants were able to reap numerous healing benefits and explore liberatory possibilities from practicing BDSM, and more specifically queer and/or trans BDSM events, other participants felt that they were not able to due to different barriers in accessing these spaces. When we apply an intersectional lens (Crenshaw 1991), it becomes clear that access to these affirming spaces is not equally available to all. Participants who were also navigating class-based exclusion, limited social capital, or racialized marginalization often found themselves unable to *consistently* attend queer and trans kink events. Financial constraints, such as the high cost of outfits or event tickets, were named as key barriers to consistent BDSM event attendance. During our interview, Alexis mentioned some of these specific financial barriers:

They do kind of have like a dress code, which I get it, because it's kind of it sucks if someone just shows up in like plain t-shirt and jeans, but at the same time, it's fucking expensive to have, like the gears to fit in. And that's like kind of problematic. And you have to have the money. When I went to like some parties that are queer, like they kind of like you to put some effort into looking hot, but they don't tell you how you need to look, you know.

Xian also echoed Alexis' statements regarding the expensive nature of BDSM events and the materials and courses surrounding them:

Yeah, events are expensive. It's like an expensive hobby, like all the impact tools. The lingerie. Why the fuck are garters stocking 20 bucks? I don't understand. Like these things are gonna rip tonight after, you know... So those expensive events are expensive. The tools and materials; if you're doing rope, rope classes are fricking expensive. And there's also classes on impact, too. So those are so expensive. And another thing that is, for me personally, a barrier is how late a lot of events are. But like, it makes sense. You know, I don't think anyone wants to get freaky at 10 a.m.

In addition, the informal, underground nature of many queer BDSM events meant that those without access to the “right” social networks were excluded because of structural inaccessibility. These networks, although not intentionally exclusionary, are typically more “hidden” as a way to preserve safety and become exclusionary given that access often depends

on word-of-mouth and private invitations. Participants with less social capital experienced greater difficulty gaining access to safer and inclusive queer, trans underground events, given that they were not publicly posted across social media platforms. Although they would often know of these events, they would not have any further information in order to be able to attend them, or would only find out about specific events after they had happened. Because of this, participants who did not want to attend mainstream events anymore, due to the reasons stated previously, were no longer going to BDSM events since they simply did not know where to go or who to contact.

For others, the barriers were a bit more sinister and related to structural violence, such as ableism, a form of discrimination and violence based on a person's disability. Although none of the participants lived with reduced mobility, some participants pointed to the fact that most BDSM events required the use of stairs and were inaccessible to wheelchair users, demonstrating that Montreal BDSM nightlife still has a way to go in terms of addressing disability needs. Furthermore, we could also ask ourselves if the lack of representation of disabled people in this study in itself serves as an indicator of the inaccessibility of BDSM spaces, given that accessibility issues are prominent throughout Montreal's general infrastructure (Goldberg 2025). It is important to note that there are wheelchair-accessible BDSM spaces; however, it has been noted that within queer and trans spaces, physical accessibility is often a little bit more scarce due to limited financial resources. Moreover, there are many misconceptions revolving around the sexuality of disabled people, often assuming that disabled people are asexual or lack sexual agency (Yau 2023). This further marginalizes physically disabled people from accessing BDSM spaces. These ideas are rooted in heteronormative views on what sexuality should resemble, as well as an overall stigma on disabled people's sexuality (Esmail 2010). Although BDSM spaces

can be liberatory and disengage with specific systems of oppression, it is important to consider whether spaces can truly reach their full liberatory potential if they are inaccessible. Future studies that aim to explore BDSM spaces in Montreal should further consider questions around accessibility.

Another structural barrier was related to a specific BDSM subculture. Bo, for instance, mentioned a controversial and heavily contested event in the gay community that contributed to their reluctance to go to BDSM parties. The event in question was a Nazi-themed event where participants would often dress as SS guards and other outfits related to the Holocaust. Although this was not a historical event directly related to Asian identity, this (for obvious reasons) created great feelings of unsafety for people within the community. Bo mentioned the following while discussing the event and attitudes revolving around it within the community:

A few months back in the queer leather community, there was a big conversation happening about a lot of the older white men wearing like, Nazi uniforms or Nazi symbolism as part of their leather-like outfits, and people saying that that's problematic and like... whatever. And them just being like, "oh, well, it's just part of the fantasy." I'm like, "why are you fantasizing about being a Nazi, though?"

Drawing once again on Ahmed's (2007) phenomenology of whiteness, this situation demonstrates how whiteness becomes naturalized and unchallenged. Similarly to Liang (2022, 395)'s description of Dutch BDSM clubs' "loyalty to fun", which comes at the expense of racialized and other marginalized people's safety and well-being. In this setting, genocide and the traumatic events surrounding the Holocaust became normalized and hypersexualized, completely dismissing the experiences of those affected by it. This experience was a structural barrier for Bo, who felt that BDSM parties were no longer safe for them, given the trivialization of these historic events.

4.4.2 An Overview of Participant Experiences

The intersecting identities of participants significantly shaped how they experienced BDSM events and spaces. All participants reported instances of objectification, hypervisibility, unsafety, and racial fetishization due to their Asian identity. This was regardless of other aspects of their identity. However, those with non-monosexual orientations, such as those identifying as queer, bisexual, or pansexual, faced additional layers of fetishization, particularly when interacting with cis-heterosexual couples, where existing power dynamics were further complicated by preconceived notions of bisexuality.

At the other end of the visibility spectrum, participants with more masculine gender presentations, darker skin, or fat bodies reported that they were either fetishized due to their Asian identity, or outright excluded due to fatphobia, colorism, white privilege and cisnormativity. It is also interesting to note that participants with feminine presentation, smaller bodies, and lighter skin had never made mention of undesirability during the interview, although this does not mean that rejection or undesirability was never experienced.

For many non-binary participants, mainstream BDSM events aggravated their gender dysphoria, as these spaces often reinforced cisnormative norms and assumptions. Despite these instances, as participants explained, queer and trans-oriented BDSM events created spaces of gender affirmation, where they could engage in kink without having to explain or defend their identities. Furthermore, even within queer and trans events that were not specifically BIPOC, participants felt that there was a greater sense of accountability and lower tolerance for racist discourse and actions.

As illustrated through participants' accounts, BDSM spaces are complex and contradictory. While mainstream BDSM scenes can reproduce systems of oppression—such as

white supremacy, cisnormativity, and sexual racism—more community-based queer and trans spaces have the potential to be liberatory, offering safety, affirmation, and relational accountability. This research underscores that the potential for healing through BDSM is not universal, but rather highly contingent on the social dynamics, norms, and structures that shape who gets to play, who gets to belong, and who gets to feel safe.

The findings of this research highlight how participants' experiences within BDSM spaces were shaped by intersecting structures of power such as white supremacy, patriarchy, cisnormativity, fatphobia, and classism. All participants reported experiencing racial fetishization within mainstream BDSM scenes, though those with intersecting identities such as masculine gender presentation, darker skin, and fat bodies faced compounded forms of exclusion; this included rejection and invisibility. While queer and trans-oriented BDSM events offered more intentional safety protocols and created conditions for gender affirmation, therapeutic effects and emotional connection, these spaces were not always accessible to everyone. Financial constraints due to evolving economic conditions and limited social capital prevented some participants from regularly accessing the very spaces where they might otherwise offer them the affirmation and community that they need. Therefore, we can see that the intersecting identity of socio-economic class status had an impact on whether participants could reap benefits from practicing BDSM.

Despite these barriers, for those who were able to access them, queer and trans and BIPOC-centered BDSM events played a crucial role in community building, healing from trauma, and reclaiming agency, particularly in response to previous experiences of patriarchal and white supremacist violence. These findings illustrate the complex duality of BDSM spaces as sites of both potential harm and powerful liberation, shaped deeply by intersecting systems of privilege and oppression. Participants' perspective demonstrated that they felt that many white

BDSM practitioners were using BDSM as a discursive shield for their sexual racism. The findings indicate that BDSM, despite its core “safe, sane and consensual” tenets, can often become reflective of structural violences that shape our society and negatively impact the well-being of racialized people.

Ultimately, despite the alternative nature of the subculture, BDSM spaces can be a microcosm of the broader society they exist within and require critical restructuring to ensure that they adhere to the liberatory principles they claim to uphold. However, this reality does not negate the empowerment and healing it has provided for queer, trans, and Asian participants in this study.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

Key Findings

The objective of this research was to analyze the experiences of Asian women and Asian non-binary people in BDSM spaces in Montreal, with a particular focus on how race, gender identity and expression, class and body size intersect to shape experiences of both harm and liberation. Through the use of semi-structured interviews, this study aimed to understand the complexity of BDSM experiences for Asian women and non-binary people in a Montreal context.

This research project demonstrates that BDSM can be a site of both liberation and harm for Asian women and non-binary individuals. While many participants described moments of healing, community, and empowerment, their experiences also revealed how BDSM spaces can become sites for the reproduction of structural and symbolic violence, particularly through racial fetishization, cisnormativity, fatphobia, and class exclusion. The findings of this study support a small, but growing body of literature that analyzes the experiences of queer and racialized people in BDSM spaces, as well as the therapeutic potentials of BDSM (Ha 2019; Wuyts 2022; Chung and Au-Yeung 2023; Lindemann 2011; Melavc et al. 2024; Martinez 2021; Speciale and Khambatta 2020). In addition, the experiences of the participants within BDSM spaces demonstrated how different intersecting identities can shape unique experiences of oppression, demonstrating that the experiences of participants cannot solely be understood through one identity category (Crenshaw 1991; Vamvaka-Tatsi 2021; Erickson et al. 2021).

This study revealed multiple key findings in response to my initial questions. First, racial fetishization was a universal experience amongst participants. These instances of fetishization seemed to be mostly informed by Orientalist tropes portraying the Asian body as docile and

submissive. In this case, the Lotus Blossom stereotype was more often imposed onto participants than the Dragon Lady stereotype, although many participants also experienced the Dragon Lady stereotype being imposed onto them, as well.

Second, in terms of the notion of agency and consent, most of the principles of consent and safety that were visible in mainstream events often did not consider structural power differences and how they can present themselves within BDSM contexts. In other words, discussions around systems of oppression, such as racism and transphobia, were not highlighted within mainstream events. Consent discourse in mainstream events was quite reductive.

Third, queer and trans BDSM events typically offered safer, more inclusive, and more liberating spaces for practitioners. However, for many, these events were limited by financial barriers, a lack of social networks. In addition, participants noted an absence of physical accessibility, which also explains why none of this study's participants identified as having reduced mobility.

Fourth, gender presentation and expression played a significant role in the violence, objectification, and hypervisibility experienced by feminine-presenting participants, even if their gender identity was non-binary or gender non-conforming.

Finally, mixed-race participants in this study navigated unique forms of racialization, which were often dependent on how their racial identity was perceived by other practitioners.

Theoretical frameworks

Through the use of intersectionality, alongside Orientalism, objectification theory and the phenomenology of whiteness, this thesis highlights how BDSM spaces do not exist outside of society, but often become microcosms of the society it inhabits. Despite the therapeutic and

liberatory potential of BDSM spaces, they can often become embedded in structural violence without proper care.

Intersectionality allowed for an understanding of how race, gender identity and expression, body size, sexual orientation, and class shaped the experiences of the participants in a unique manner. Whether it was hypervisibility or invisibility, physical or emotional violence, participants were all impacted by the same interlocking systems of oppression, although with varying outcomes. Orientalism and the phenomenology of whiteness allowed to further expand on the racialized component of their experiences, to both understand how Orientalist constructions impacted their experiences with sexual racism, and to further understand how whiteness operates as a structure that shapes the way they experience the spaces and the interactions they had within white spaces. Objectification theory allowed for a clear portrait of the material consequences of these structures, and to see how objectification is experienced by participants as a result of Orientalism, the phenomenology of whiteness, and intersecting oppressions.

How Can BDSM Spaces Reach Their Full Liberatory Potential?

A central objective of this research was not only to document participants' lived experiences but also to provide concrete, participant-informed recommendations for BDSM event organizers within the city. Participants offered valuable insights on how organizers can create safer and more inclusive environments for marginalized communities, which will also further reduce barriers to participation. To begin, mandatory workshops or orientation sessions could be implemented by organizers for new attendees. These sessions should go beyond dungeon etiquette and consent basics to include discussions on structural power dynamics, such as racism, gender identity, and classism within BDSM spaces. To ensure the safety and

affirmation of LGBTQIA+ participants, attendees should receive training on gender inclusivity, including the correct use of pronouns and the importance of not making assumptions about others' identities.

For bisexual and pansexual participants, especially those approached by couples, organizers may consider offering more focused content on informed consent and the power imbalances that arise when couples engage with single participants of marginalized identities.

Likewise, addressing racial fetishization must be a priority. Organizers should clearly define what racial fetishization looks like in BDSM contexts and provide examples of how it can present itself within various interactions. Finally, rather than solely relying on vague references to “safe, sane, and consensual” rules, organizers are encouraged to also adopt explicit zero-tolerance policies for racism, transphobia, and other forms of oppression.

Limitations

All things considered, it is important to note that this study is not without limitations. For one, it does not include the perspectives of trans Asian women who do not identify as non-binary, and only minimally captures the experiences of participants from South or Southwest Asian backgrounds. In addition, it does not fully capture the experiences of asexual or even heterosexual Asian individuals who practice BDSM either. While queer experiences were centred in this study, using heterosexual Asian experiences as a point of comparison can further enrich these types of studies, as a way to further compare and contrast how intersecting identities experience these types of events. Moreover, although some participants did identify as disabled in terms of chronic pain conditions and other health conditions, there were no participants in this research who experienced reduced mobility, which could have enriched the data and further captured more experiences that intersect with Asian identity.

To fully analyze the diversity of Asian diasporic experiences in Montreal BDSM spaces, future research should engage with a wider range of Asian identities and regional origins, particularly in contexts outside of East and Southeast Asia.

Concluding remarks

Importantly, this study does not aim to further stigmatize BDSM practices or to treat BDSM as a symptom of a mental health disorder, as it historically was treated. Rather, it recognizes what it brings to queer, trans, and racialized people and seeks to critically examine how BDSM events can be restructured to better serve marginalized individuals, given their potential to support trauma recovery, foster queer joy, and subvert dominant narratives surrounding the Asian body. Although BDSM research is slowly beginning to highlight and represent more marginalized identities, there is still a lack of research that was specific to non-binary identities, and even less in terms of non-binary Asian identities. In addition, despite Montreal's growing and popularized BDSM scene, sexuality research specific to the city is also lacking, which is where this study has aimed to fill the gaps in the literature.

By centering the voices of queer Asian women and non-binary participants in Montreal, this research contributes to both BDSM studies and the broader field of sexuality and racialized embodiment.

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