

Effects of Usenet on Discussions of Sexual Assault in the BDSM Community in the 1990s

by Megan Lief, independent scholar

Abstract

Unequal roles in sexual and erotic practice are sometimes thought of as inherently abusive, especially to women. Although informed consent between adults is a mainstay of BDSM—bondage/discipline, dominance/submission and sadomasochism—its practitioners have had to fight accusations to the contrary. Though BDSM practices are generally consensual, assault undoubtedly occurs within the BDSM community. This paper focuses on how the idea of assault has been handled by BDSM community members; how survivors and perpetrators have been treated, how assault and consent have been defined, and how communities have approached preventing future assaults. In order to explore these issues, this paper historicizes the issue of rape in the BDSM community by examining academic and activist writing from BDSM focused community organizations and online forums throughout the 1990s. The growth in participation in online BDSM communities had a huge impact on social violence awareness within these communities. Community books, newsletters and conference materials from the 1980s suggest that prior to the existence of groups such as alt.sex.bondage on Usenet, nearly all conversations around rape and BDSM came from a subset of the feminist community (particularly kink organizations focused on queer women) interested in proving the consensual nature of BDSM practices. In the 1990s, for BDSM practitioners who were able to access the Internet, forums such as Usenet provided a new opportunity for anonymous and safer spaces in which to process and discuss assault within the community. Specifically, the alt.sex.bondage newsgroup was home to some of the first documented conversations about trigger warnings, BDSM specific anti-domestic violence resources, and community wide conversations about the existence of rape and abuse in BDSM. This paper will document the evolution of these conversations from the advent of BDSM specific newsgroups on Usenet through the late 1990s.

Well, without going into too much detail, it happened at his dorm room when they were beginning to experiment. He started to give her a back rub and she was falling asleep. He was a little more frisky. The next thing she knew, her hands were handcuffed and her face was in a pillow. She called the safeword but he ignored it. When he was nearly finished, he seemed to realize what was happening and stopped. However, he seems to have a memory block (according to her). Like I said earlier, I haven't had a chance to ask him about it yet. There was no physical harm but A LOT of emotional harm...

— Anonymous User, 5fi2querimit@vms.csd.mu.edu

You just described the worst nightmare of someone in the scene.

For a long time, I've had the notion that it's almost impossible for a person who's BDSM-aware to rape someone. We're too aware of consensuality, of communication, of safewords, to ever let it happen.

— M. Madeleine

— “Safewords and trust”, *alt.sex.bondage*, Google Groups, 22 August 1993

Why Rape and BDSM?

1 For decades, the U.S. BDSM community has struggled to define the idea they refer to as “What It Is That We Do” in contrast to rape and sexual violence. Historically, BDSM has been painted as inherently violent to women and tantamount to rape. In response, practitioners have heavily stressed the ways in which BDSM, when appropriately practiced, is safe and consensual. Amidst these debates, however, frank discussions about the reality of actual consent violations is often lost.

2 This misunderstanding has been compounded by a history of stigmatization from both mainstream and feminist commentators. Very recently, however, there has been an increase in analysis of BDSM coming from a feminist perspective (Deckha, Newmahr). Recent studies have specifically addressed, for example, the experiences of trans or disabled practitioners, whether kinksters can be feminist, and how class and race impact scene demographics (Bauer; Reynolds; Scheff and Hammers). In this spirit, this paper seeks to contextualize the BDSM community's response to rape and rape culture.

3 Historically, conversations around BDSM and sexual assault have been focused less on the behaviors and experiences of community members, and more on the perceptions of outsiders and the defenses community members construct in response to those perceptions. The idea that all BDSM activities may be inherently violent or akin to assault has been heavily explored by feminist and non-feminist writers.¹ There is a well-documented set of defenses against these

¹ Opinion among feminists about BDSM—among other issues, mostly pertaining to sexuality—divided feminist thought in what became known as the ‘Sex Wars’ (Duggan; Ferguson). This division was between a camp which saw BDSM as a reification of the exploitation of women (Dworkin; Jeffreys; Linden). Opposed by a faction which saw an absolute prohibition on particular forms of sexual expression to be infantilizing and opposed to a more complete concept of women's agency (Califia; English et. al.; Rubin; Rubin and Califia; Samois Collective).

accusations that have been developed by both activists within the BDSM community and sympathetic researchers. Still, the question of how genuine sexual assault is experienced within the BDSM community—and how participants understand these experiences in dialogue with each other—is massively under-explored.

4 An understanding of Usenet, a popular Internet forum in the 1990s, is integral to exploring the changing discourses concerning rape within the BDSM community. The alt.sex.bondage newsgroup (henceforth a.s.b) allowed users an anonymous, and therefore relatively safer space, in which to have some of the first documented conversations about trigger warnings, BDSM specific anti-domestic violence resources, and community wide conversations about the existence of rape and abuse in BDSM. This paper will document the shift in the BDSM community's narratives around sexual assault in order to provide a useful foundation for other researchers and anti-rape activists looking to understand the history of the BDSM community and to further engage in present-day activism.

A Brief Background on BDSM

5 BDSM is a “6 for 4” acronym; B/D is bondage/discipline, D/S (often written “D/s”²) is dominance and submission, and S/M is sadomasochism. The BDSM community (sometimes described as the ‘scene’, or a collection of regionally specific scenes; ie the ‘New York Scene’³) is a diverse series of networks of people who associate with some or all of the sexual kinks included within these acronyms, and have the social privilege and/or ability to organize around them. The kinky practices encompassed by BDSM are broad and varied; my descriptions here are by no means a definitive explanation.

6 For people participating in BDSM, a wide variety of behaviors not included in mainstream understandings of sexual activity are understood to be within the normal range of consensual practices. Because of the inherent risks to BDSM practices, and the surrounding

² Some members of the BDSM community imbue the case of names, titles and pronouns with significance; titles or names for the dominant partner will be capitalized, but not for the submissive partner. Thus they might write ‘dominance/submission’ as ‘D/s’. However, this is not uniform to the BDSM community, and some would argue that this is disrespectful to the submissive partner, or unnecessary. For this paper, all references to ‘dominance’ or ‘submission’ will be in matching cases.

³ For BDSM practitioners ‘the scene’ often refers to the understanding of the broader BDSM community. ‘A scene’ might be a local manifestation of this community, but in a slightly different context ‘a scene’ could also refer to a clearly defined and specific kinky encounter.

stigma, the community prides itself on the centrality of negotiated consent. Negotiations include questions of what activities will be engaged in, how long the scene will last and what props are acceptable, long before the scene starts. Additionally, it is standard practice in the BDSM world to use what are known as ‘safewords’. A safeword is any agreed upon code, phrase or signal that tells both partners to stop their activities and check-in with each other that they are both okay. Because roleplaying is commonly part of kinky encounters, it can be necessary to have a word that partners use to step outside of their defined roles. This allows partners to monitor, in real time, each other’s active consent. If either partner wants to stop an activity, they know they are free to use the safeword.

7 Kink identity also intersects with the variety of venues in which kink is practiced. The kinksters I am writing about in this paper—and that I am most familiar with—are people for whom kink is a part of their private social lives. But this does not represent everyone engaged in kinky practice. Internet-only practitioners, isolated players and sex-workers all have a stake in kinky activities. What they sometimes lack, however, is access to a semi-stable community, which for most BDSM practitioners requires some amount of disposable income and time. It is also important to note that many scenes have a majority of white, heterosexual and cisgender participants; lack of access to specifically queer and POC spaces often further marginalizes those involved in or adjacent to the BDSM community.

Methodology

8 In this paper, I am historicizing the issue of rape in the United States BDSM community in the 1990s. My primary source was the discussion threads in the alt.sex.bondage and soc.subculture.bondage-bdsm hierarchies on Usenet. I chose these newsgroups because they are the richest resources for uncensored discussions of S/M in the 90s—especially with regard to discussions around rape and social assault. I also reviewed research studies, academic articles, activist publications, erotic fiction and blogs, as well as informal historical collections of information about BDSM and kink on the Internet. Additionally, I visited the Sexual Minorities Archive in Northampton, Massachusetts where I was able to review a large collection of primary sources about the BDSM community in the 1980s and 1990s. My research is also informed by anecdotal information from personal participation in the BDSM community.

The 1990s, Overview

9 The early 1990s saw significant interactions between the kink community and government power. In 1989, the Corcoran Gallery acquiesced to pressure from Congress to cancel a controversial exhibit of sadomasochistic themed photography by Robert Mapplethorpe (Gamarekian). In the context of existing debates around censorship and pornography, this action angered many in both the art and the S/M worlds. Three years later, in 1992, representatives from several sections of the kink community met with members of the National Endowment of the Arts to strategize around this issue. Though activists in the leather⁴ community were not dealing directly with government power, they were acting in response to it, in alliance with more mainstream organizations. More positively, the 1990s also saw the removal of consensual S/M from the DSM in 1994. The 1990s also saw an increase in events, books, and resources for the BDSM community.

10 Germane to all of these public events was the 1989 formation of a.s.b on an Internet service called Usenet where issues relevant to the BDSM community both momentous and everyday could be discussed. This newsgroup⁵ represented one of the very first places that the BDSM community was able to gather online and it remained popular for relatively tech-savvy kinksters until 1997, when a new group, soc.subculture.bondage-bdsm was formed. Usenet communities presented an unprecedented opportunity to explore fears, fantasies and questions about BDSM in a truly safe and anonymous situation. For others who were not actively involved in a local scene, this was the first time they could meet and talk with other kinky people.

11 Outsiders writing about BDSM were very aware of the impact the Internet had on this community. In 1994 Richard Kadrey wrote an article for *Wired Magazine* simply entitled “Alt.Sex.Bondage”. In this article, Kadrey acknowledges that some readers may have a lurid fascination with a.s.b, and attempts to give a more realistic depiction of the group. In 1995, sociologists published a review of the kink community based entirely on observations from Usenet posts (Ernulf).

⁴ The Leather subculture is understood by many to be a subsection of the general BDSM subculture, though it is in many ways culturally distinctive and has its origins in gay leather subculture. Though participants in leather subculture will often wear leather in a conscious attempt to indicate they are part of this group, participants in leather generally have a far more nuanced and complex understanding of what leather culture and community means.

⁵ ‘Newsgroup’ is the word used to describe a subject based discussion thread on Usenet.

Early 1990s, Usenet Transforms Conversations Around Rape and BDSM

12 In December of 1990, roughly a year into the existence of a.s.b, William December Star started a thread entitled “Rethinking rape stories in a.s.b”. The conversation that followed was a discussion about how fantasy rape erotica should be treated by newsgroup participants. William states that while he⁶ had formerly opposed posting unlabeled rape-erotica to the group, he became persuaded that posts should not require warning labels. He ends his post by stating that:

As a general rule, I still don’t like to read rape stories -- or at least ones which glorify rape [...] but my own personal hang-ups should be just that -- my own.
 (“Rethinking” n.p.)

After his initial post, several posters responded to William, either supporting his viewpoint or pushing back against what they saw as a permissive attitude towards rape fantasy stories in a.s.b. One user, Mikki Barry, was emphatically in favor of labeling rape stories because of her belief that they might trigger painful emotions for women and rape survivors. Though Mikki goes out of her way to make clear that she does not support censorship in a.s.b, she asks why a.s.b posters are upset by the idea of requesting these labels. Reflecting common anxieties about mainstream perception, Mikki asked:

Aren’t we, as a group, trying to show the mainstream net that bondage is a consensual, fun activity? Don’t you think that rape and other non-consensual stories denigrate [sic] that goal? I don’t see why ASKING that those types of stories not be posted is a BAD thing. (“Rethinking” n.p.)

Ultimately, this thread did not reach any conclusions. Although labels about the content of erotic stories would eventually become standard in a.s.b (used at least sporadically starting in 1993), this would not take place for several years. But the issues at stake in this thread—the place of representation, fantasy and censorship, were common threads in early 90s conversations around rape within the scene. For those with regular Internet access, a.s.b represented a chance for

⁶ Some notes about names and pronouns of Usenet posters: The names for Usenet posters are all based on users’ chosen aliases. I will not make any attempt to distinguish here between pseudonyms or given names. Some posters to a.s.b posted through anonymizing services that obscured their email or username; in these cases I will refer to them as being anonymous users, unless they signed their messages with a nickname. Additionally, in places where posters posted with traditionally gendered names (ie, William, Stacy) or gendered titles (Lady, Master, etc) I reference them with the traditionally associated gendered pronouns unless they have indicated otherwise in their posts. I reference posters who did not post under traditionally gendered names, or through anonymizing services, with “they/them” pronouns, unless their posts clearly indicate a gender or pronoun. Often, gender is implied, but not clearly stated in Usenet posts. In these situations, I use “they/them” pronouns.

members from all corners of the community to discuss kink in a shared environment, and to do so with the freedom of anonymity. But that did not mean they could escape existing baggage.

13 Much of the early discussions of rape on alt.sex.bondage were fixated on controlling community representation, and many of these discussions concerned issues of censorship. For example, less than a year after a.s.b began, a System Administrator at the University of Toronto removed access to a.s.b at his university, citing concern about bad publicity that might result from circulating a fictional rape fantasy that had been posted (“Hugh” n.p.). One poster was so concerned by this censorship that they urged fellow users to provide an uncensored copy of Usenet to anyone who could not access it.

14 Despite the emphasis on fantasy and representation in early a.s.b threads about rape, frank discussion of actual sexual violence did exist in an unprecedented way on Usenet. In October of 1991, writing under the nickname ‘Confused’, a poster started a thread on a.s.b with the subject “If a safeword isn’t used, is it rape?” Confused wrote about feeling conflicted about a recent interaction with a sexual partner. They had a history of kinky play and one evening when fooling around, Confused’s partner had said ‘no’ but Confused ignored her—claiming this was because she still seemed turned on. Confused clarifies that they asked her if she wanted to stop and reminded her that she could use her safeword at any point. The partner did not use her safeword, and Confused continued the scene until their partner broke down sobbing. Confused ends the post by asking their fellow a.s.b readers:

Did I engage in Date Rape by doing this? Or was it a simple lack of communication?

I DID invite using the Safeword, and that request was declined. (“If a safeword” n.p.)

Conversations started by Internet posters like Confused mark some of the first times folks in the BDSM community showed an openness to public conversation about date rape and lack of consent. While there was a paucity of conversations about rape relative to the overall content of a.s.b, these interactions proved significant.

15 Conversations about potential violations of consent were at odds with the community conviction that BDSM practitioners were *specifically better at honoring consent than mainstream society*. For many kinksters, the only conversation they were ever exposed to about rape in a BDSM context centered on best practices for consent and these posts on Usenet were

eye-opening. As M. Madeleine opined many kinksters felt they were “too aware of consensuality, of communication, of safewords” to ever let rape happen (“Safewords” n.p.).

16 As the posters on a.s.b struggled to determine how to respond to rape and sexual violence in their community, several themes emerged. a.s.b posters would often debate among themselves the appropriate community response to assault survivors—with both supportive and dismissive commentaries being posted. They also concerned themselves with what they viewed as uniquely grey areas around assault, because of the nature of BDSM. And they were very invested in separating what in later years would be referred to as “WIITWD” (what it is that we do) from genuine rape and assault.⁷

17 An example of this tension between dismissal and support can be seen in some threads from 1993. A poster describes outlining to their partner unwanted behaviors—which were so triggering they would be unable to respond or protest; in spite of their insistence these behaviors were unacceptable to them, their partner violated these boundaries leaving them feeling violated and betrayed (“Safewording n.p.”). Several commenters sympathized with the poster, and expressed a belief that they had been raped. One said:

Yes. Your ‘partner’ is a danger. After your expressly forbidding them to do something, they went ahead and did it anyway, knowing full well that what they were about to do would squick you, and that’s what they wanted. They were rude, they were inconsiderate, they were dangerous. (ibid.)

Not all responses were this supportive, however. In the same year, one poster created a post accusing a frequent a.s.b poster called Averti of sexual assault. Rather than receiving supportive feedback, most posters were dismissive, with one saying:

I [don’t] understand why this was posted here. I don’t expect anyone [sic] to be held responsible, or to act as the Posting Police just because someone posts in this newsgroup. (“An Assault” n.p.)

18 By and large, however, the most frequent conversations going on around assault in the kink community centered on the idea of “WIITWD” being fundamentally different from assault. Though these conversations were heavily represented in Usenet forums, they also existed offline.

⁷ An example of the complex nature of their struggle for community response standards can be seen in some posts that went up in the early years of a.s.b. In 1991 there was a series of long and tense posts, about whether or not men could be raped, particularly by women. Though these conversations were not strictly tied to discussions of BDSM practice, many posters expressed distress over the idea that posters in the community did not understand the basic concept that anyone, including men, could be sexually assaulted (“A New(?) Question”).

For example, in 1993, the Eulenspiegel Society,⁸ published “S&M Safety vs. Abuse” with a sidebar including an official statement from the National Leather Association (NLA) calling upon the “Leather/SM/Fetish” community to “hold batterers accountable for being violent” and emphasizing types of violence that do not fall in the rubric of consensual S/M (Ward). This document reinforces the idea that kinksters were attempting to define what they did to combat assault, both on and offline.

Mid 1990s, Public Conversations About Domestic Abuse and Rape in the BDSM Community

19 Dialogues around rape and assault tied to BDSM increased significantly in the mid 90s, both online and offline. A significant number of publications about domestic violence in S/M came out during this time, in conference materials, journals and magazines targeted at many segments of the S/M community. Unlike posts on Usenet in the early 90s, these articles did not generally address rape specifically. Rather, they focused on the existence of domestic violence within the scene—both uncovering examples of it, and providing tips and resources to scene members to help empower them against this abuse.

20 One of the most interesting print documents during this time was entitled “Domestic Violence in the S/M Community”. It was originally published in 1994, as part of the conference materials for the International S/M-Leather-Fetish Celebration, but spread quickly in BDSM publications, and online.⁹ In the original document put out by the International S/M-Leather-Fetish Celebration, there is a header before the article, causing the title to actually appear as “The Celebration Wants You to Know About...Domestic Violence in the S/M Community”. Although this would probably seem tame to members of the present day kink scene, in 1994 it was groundbreaking. The National Leather Association had previously issued statements addressing domestic violence, but none had been this direct about the need for community recognition of this problem.

21 The impact of this document, and the narratives it encouraged, can be seen in other literature on domestic violence available at this time. Both “The Leather Journal” (which

⁸ The Eulenspiegel Society is one of the oldest and largest organizations in the United States for members of the BDSM community. It was formed in 1971, and is based in New York City.

⁹ As evidence of the document’s importance: whole sections of it were utilized for the FAQ for soc.subculture.bondage-bdsm

targeted the broader S/M community and especially the heterosexual/pansexual scenes), and a magazine called “CUIR” (targeting the gay male community) published articles in 1994 about domestic violence within their communities (Morgan, Silverowl). Each article mixes more formal educational content, similar to the Celebration document, with personal anecdotes about abuse from the lives of the authors.

22 The popular press also sought to elucidate the difference between BDSM and domestic abuse; in Richard Kadrey’s article on a.s.b for *Wired Magazine*, he sought to dispel some of the negative rumors about the a.s.b community. Kadrey specifically addresses the issue of non-consensual fantasy erotica. He acknowledges that many “casual” readers of a.s.b were horrified by stories such as the “Diane” series about non-consensual sex slavery. But Kadrey also goes out of his way to make clear that the BDSM community does not support coercion, and that S/M is based on consent.

23 A year later, sociologists Kurt Ernulf and Sune Innala published “Sexual Bondage: A Review and Unobtrusive Investigation”.¹⁰ Directly addressing the potential for outsiders to conflate BDSM with abuse, Ernulf and Innala note that S/M practitioners are aroused by the consensual nature of their activities. They note that while an “unobservant or intoxicated top can be directly hazardous to the bottom’s life” (Ernulf 644); their research “indicate[s] that many dominant-initiators can only be aroused if the submissive-recipient enjoys the experience” (647).

24 These conversations about S/M and abuse happening offline—both within and outside of the community—were also reflected in a.s.b discussions around rape. In March, 1995, a poster using the name ‘The Reverend F-Squared’ wrote in response to the question “Where does one draw the line between BDSM and abuse?”:

For quite awhile [sic], I thought that this very Q could be difficult to answer. But in the past coupla’ months, The Eulenspiegel Society (TES) has been handing out flyers at every meeting entitled (I beleive [sic]) “Abuse and the S/M Commuity [sic]”.

I picked it up and read it. As I was reading the “Are you...?”, “Have you...?” Qs I was thinking, “Yeah, right! I see this as part of a BDSM relationship and *I* don’t consider this abusive”.

And then I read a Q that squicked me: “Do you have a problem knowing when a scene begins or ends?”.

¹⁰ An article which is singularly interesting for being among the first—if not the first—to utilize a.s.b as a source of information about the BDSM community.

Personally, I think that's a cool place to draw a line. ("Meaning" n.p.)¹¹

This concession to the final definition of abuse is interesting and significant; by allowing their mind to be changed by The Eulenspiegel Society's handout, 'The Reverend F-Squared' demonstrates the potential impact anti-domestic violence education was having within the community.

25 The 90s represented a sea change in a.s.b as questions about how the public understood BDSM gave way to vexing questions about community interaction and were to draw the lines between consent and abuse. One example of these trends can be seen in a thread posted in November of 1994 ("Scening" n.p.). a.s.b posters had been discussing hypothetical situations surrounding the use of alcohol during scenes. Many posters felt uneasy about involving drugs or alcohol in kinky behavior—with one poster adamantly insisting that substance use in kink is always wrong and that there is no scenario when a non-sober person can truly give consent.¹² But one poster pushed back:

Scening with me drunk may not be wise, it may have risks, but to imply it is the moral and legal equivalent of rape is just way over the goddamned line! I have experienced non-consensual sexual activity. I *know* what *that* feels like. This isn't it. (ibid.)

These conversations reflect a growing concern within a.s.b to define what constitutes rape and abuse in a kinky context.

26 During this period, a.s.b posters also became increasingly concerned with distancing themselves from criminal behavior which they worried would be associated with the BDSM community. The threat of legal prosecution was a significant concern given the high media profile of the Operation Spanner arrests.¹³ Posters on a.s.b—and the community at large—were

¹¹ The references flyer is likely a version of the widely circulated "Domestic Violence in the S/M Community" document mentioned earlier in this chapter.

¹² Because there is no single standard of consent—let alone what constitutes impairment—this topic could be debated endlessly especially when the sex in question is of potentially dubious legality (RAINN).

¹³ A brief summary of Operation Spanner: In 1987 police in Manchester, UK received a gay male S/M video, which they claimed to believe depicted acts of genuine torture, and subsequently raided multiple properties. Though the 'victims' came forward to explain that this was a consensually made S/M video and confirm they had been willing participants, police insisted on pressing charges, and in all 16 men were arrested and charged with assault. The defendants pled guilty, and sought appeal. The legal process lasted a decade, ultimately landing in the European Court of Human Rights, who ruled against overturning the convictions. In the US, Spanner escalated fears of legal persecution amongst BDSM practitioners despite there being no comparable case law in the US *and* Spanner fundamentally being more about the persecution of gay men than BDSM practitioners. (Similar questions of BDSM in the UK, with heterosexual couples, have been ruled legal.)

not only concerned with developing a set of best practices but to ensure their practices adhered to the law. Relevant to these concerns, a.s.b took interest in the investigation surrounding a sexual assault and torture accusation against a Columbia University graduate student (“More On”). In response, a representative from *Conversio Virium*, “a peer support group for folks interested in BDSM at Columbia University”, posted:

Let me just state for the public record here, that as spokesperson for *Conversio Virium* [...] that this monster never attended and certainly was never a [sic] member of CV.

We have gotten no reaction on campus directed toward us – don’t necessarily think we will because we are very open on campus about what CV is doing and supporting. (n.p.)

This is just one of many posts dedicated to distinguishing WIITWD from reports of criminal behavior. Reflective of changes in the perception of kink, focus shifted from arguing that kink is not implicitly assault to articulating an ethos of WIITWD differentiated from highly publicized sex crimes.

27 Alongside increased focus on distinguishing WIITWD from sensational crimes—Usenet posters continued to discuss actual incidents of domestic violence within the scene, attempting to discern a clear articulation of what constituted abuse. A moving example of this sort of dialogue can be seen in the conversation following a post by “LitLSubbie”:

My master crossed the line last weekend. I thought [sic] it was because he loved me but the more I thought about it, it was because of his lack of security [sic]. I don’t know what provoked him to beat the living shit out of me but he did. I used my yellow safe word and he told me to take the pain..What should I have done. I love him and am very devoted..should I walk away? Please help... (“Subs” n.p.)

Posters responded to LitLSubbie with overwhelming support and advice. Though not all agreed with how LitLSubbie should respond, they all were clear about their master’s behavior being unacceptable. One poster wrote in response:

I believe you're in a very difficult situation right now. We talk about safe, sane and consensual, but until it comes down to it, there's little talk about what to do after one of these boundaries are crossed. My advice is to talk to your dom, explain to him the problem. If he doesn't believe it's a problem and decides that you're the one with the problem, I would have to assume you are serving an abuser rather than a dom (there IS a difference)... (ibid.)

Another emphatic commenter called Leona Joy replied:

I know that the feelings of submission and loyalty can be quite compelling, almost overwhelmingly so. Please know that you deserve better, and are not obligated, required, nor expected to go back and put yourself in harms' way again. No matter **what** he says ...

... I know this is tough, but from what you've said, my advice to you as a sistersub is to **RUN** to the nearest exit. Or are you willing to allow his lack of security to cost you more, maybe your life? (ibid.)

28 The ability for LitlSubbie to get advice from community members like Leona Joy was totally unprecedented in the kink community prior to the existence of a.s.b. Though it is not possible to know what discussion had been happening in private homes and gatherings, in the late 80s, LitlSubbie would have had no central location to go to and expect this kind of support. If there was not local support, then likely there would have been none at all. But by the mid 1990s, these dialogues were relatively common. Even when a.s.b posters did not agree on how to handle abuse, by and large, they agreed that abuse was wrong and were invested in helping their fellow community members live safe, sane and consensual lives.

29 The ability to utilize Usenet forums for support and information was not unique to members of the kink community. A variety of people were able to connect with individuals they would have never met otherwise over shared interests both pedestrian and fringe (Hauben). Of particular importance for the development of later communities was the development of the alt hierarchy—of which a.s.b was just one component. On the principle of free speech, the alt hierarchy allowed *anyone* with computer access to create and maintain a forum—the only limitation was the interest of others in participating (Reid). This was an immense freedom which connected previously isolated individuals to discuss their fringe interests without inhibition and build a nascent community, in line with current internet subcultures.

1997-1999, The Discussion Moves to the Local Level

30 By the late 1990s, the BDSM community was becoming more comfortable discussing the possibility of rape and assault within the scene. Where a decade previously this dialogue had stalled in response to external crises, now the community was relatively stable. It was able to support the publication of a myriad of journals dedicated to BDSM and leather themes for all sexual orientations; yearly pseudo-beauty pageant style leather competitions; dozens of books with safety advice, relationship tips and play techniques; a national chapter-based organization

(the NLA); and beginning in 1997, the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom, an extant education and advocacy group dedicated to advancing the rights of “BDSM-Leather-Fetish, Swing, and Polyamory Communities”. This should not suggest a linear narrative of progress. Contemporary members of the BDSM community still express dissatisfaction with the extent to which rape in the community is addressed. However, these narratives are present because of the continuous negotiation concerning consent in the BDSM community.

31 While the long-standing conflation between BDSM and sexual crime failed to vanish, the community itself began negotiating a more active role in excluding those who violated boundaries—posting about criminal and non-consensual behavior involving community members. While previous discussions included attempts to define rape and sexual assault—even querying other posters opinions on whether or not personal experiences constituted rape—an increasingly active stance was taken towards *excluding* individuals for violations of consent. But in 1998 one poster on the soc.subculture.bondage-bdsm newsgroup (s.s.bb)¹⁴ wrote:

... at one such gathering a a [sic] newcomer arrived, and was apparently running a “fet party”. the members of the group attended [...]The problem arose soon after. It came to light that this person had been accused of, been convicted in a court of law for, and done time for, sexual assault. [...] Consentuality [sic] being as important as it was, [...] A vote was held and the decision amoungst [sic] the 20 some people attending was unanimous, they wanted the person banned from the events. He was told so (“Negativity” n.p.)

These conversations reflect the shift from simply differentiating kink from crime—the preoccupation even five years before this post in defining WIITWD—to actively defining the boundaries of permissible behavior *within the community itself*, further articulating the difference between kink and criminal assault.

32 Further policing of community boundaries is reflected in discussions about abuse and safety at local kink gatherings. Posters would often start threads seeking advice on how to deal with inappropriate behavior at their local gatherings, or query others.s.bb community members about what allowed them to feel safe at play parties. For example, in April of 1997, a poster using the name Leigh wrote:

I’ll cut to the chase: How does your local bdsm group handle unsafe “members”? Two women have come forward after being beat up by a “dom” who does not honor safewords. These (seemingly intelligent and genuine) women are afraid

¹⁴ s.s.bb replaced a.s.b when the later was overrun with spam

that someone will get killed. Our group will be gathering this Thursday to discuss what to do -- for this *and* less extreme cases (“ASB” n.p.)

The responses to Leigh’s request for advice were not uniform. One poster suggests that her group wait for “proof” before taking any action. In response, another poster, Joy Hilbert, pushed back asking, “what do you call ‘proof?’”, and demanding to know:

How many damaged slaves are required before “proof” is obtained? I’ve noticed this before - on asb and irl [e.g. ‘in real life’] - we say we want a safe community, but whenever anyone points the finger at an abuser we say can you prove it, or why are you mentioning it here, or are you sure you're not biased (ibid.)

Joy’s observation that there is a disconnect between the rhetoric of consent in the BDSM community and what actually happens is one of the major shifts in the late 90s. Eventually, analysis like this led to an extended discussion of rape culture in the BDSM scene in the 2000s (Pervocracy 2012a, 2012b; stein; Stryker, Thomas). But in 1997, this was one of the first public spaces where this idea was so clearly articulated.

33 The end of the 1990s also saw shifts in the offline literature around rape and assault. A section in *A Professional’s Guide to Understanding Gay and Lesbian Domestic Violence*, published in 1999, entitled “Kinky Sexuality and Sexual Assault” signaled substantive changes in how those outside the community understood rape in the BDSM community (McClennen 1999). It is one of the very first rational and non-accusatory articles written about rape and BDSM intended for an outside audience. It is also among the very first academic studies of the issue of rape in the BDSM community. This increased respect from professional sources should be read in light of the work to increase safeguards in the BDSM community, especially noting the contributions of LGBTQ kinksters. Sources cited authoritatively include the work of Pat Califia, the NLA, and the widely circulated “Domestic Violence in the S/M Community” article. The authors also note the paucity of safe spaces and resources for BDSM practitioners who have been sexually assaulted. Two vignettes about kinky individuals who have been sexually assaulted are included, with the admonition that “a clinician must be familiar with the language and meanings [of] BDSM”. As the authors warn:

Sexual assault is a taboo subject with the BDSM community, as kinky sexuality is a taboo subject within the sexual assault and domestic violence fields. As long as rape advocates are uneducated about BDSM sexuality, victims of sexual assault who do kinky sex will not feel safe seeking services (McClennen and Gunther 53).

Conclusion

34 In the 1990s, conversations around abuse and sexual violence in the BDSM community transitioned from being severely constrained by a need to defend against external adversaries to a period of increased communication. This transition was facilitated by the decline in popular opinion—reflected in academic and popular literature—that BDSM was simply abuse. For those in the BDSM community who were able to access the Internet, Usenet was an incredible resource. The uncensored, anonymous and safe space it provided for BDSM community members—as well as those who wished to learn more about the scene—was unprecedented. The a.s.b newsgroup permanently changed how kinksters were able to communicate with each other, and how they understood themselves as a community including the articulating of a code of conduct related to consent: WIITWD.

35 The development of this community ethos does not indicate that it was uniformly accepted or interpreted homogeneously. Even into the late 90s, Usenet had its share of rape apologists—a problem compounded because anyone could join Usenet and opine on any subject without much oversight. As the number of posters on Usenet increased and the avenues of communication became more open, more posts started to center on local groups, and similar trends became apparent at the local level. There are threads suggesting assault victims should negotiate with their abusers, that local communities should demand excessive proof before removing suspected consent violators, that all play parties are inherently unsafe or, that all play parties are completely safe and that folks new to the scene have no reasons to worry. These same trends all existed—and continue to exist—outside of the BDSM community as well.

36 Today, many members of the BDSM community still may not be aware or interested in the analysis of rape culture being written primarily by concerned members of the community. But if they change their mind, this analysis exists. It is something they can Google. They can hire presenters to give workshops about it in their local communities. In our present moment, many of the productive conversations about rape in the BDSM scene exist at the intersection of a sex-positive feminism and the kinky blogging community. Yet, many of the bloggers tackling these issues are only tangentially aware of the full history contained within this paper—as there is a paucity of interest in providing a robust history of how rape has been handled in the BDSM scene. Through this paper I hope to begin filling the gap in academic research on this important

issue. Hopefully further research will continue to address the rich archive presented by Usenet for researching the BDSM community and research into other marginalized communities will follow suit.

Acknowledgements:

This paper would not have been possible without the support of many people. Specifically, I would like to thank Laura Briggs for her thoughtful guidance as my advisor when I first undertook this research in my undergraduate thesis. Jodi Schneider for helping me prepare it for submission to *Gender Forum*. And most especially Stephen Linhart and Fiona Maeve Geist, both of whom are amazing friends as well as editors. Without their help, it's unlikely this paper would have been successfully revised for final submission.

Works Cited

- “An Assault by Averti.” *alt.sex.bondage*, Google Groups, 25 November 1993, tinyurl.com/yampnp5y
- “A New(?) Question.” *alt.sex.bondage*, Google Groups, 3 March 1991, tinyurl.com/yblp3zej
- “ASB: Info PDQ Please Re Local Group Rules.” *alt.sex.bondage*, Google Groups, 14 April 1997, tinyurl.com/ybdk76qs
- Bauer, Robin. “Playgrounds and New Territories—The Potential of BDSM Practices to Queer Genders.” *Safe, Sane and Consensual: Contemporary Perspectives on Sadomasochism*. Edited by Darren Langdrige and Meg Barker. Palgrave, 2007, pp 177-94.
- Califia, Pat. “Feminism and Sadomasochism.” *Heresies*, vol. 12, no. 3, 1981, pp. 30-4.
- Deckha, Maneesha. “Pain as Culture: A Postcolonial Feminist Approach to S/M and Women’s Agency.” *Sexualities*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2011, pp. 129-150
- Duggan, Lisa and Nan D. Hunter. *Sex Wars: Essays on Sexual Dissent and American Politics*. Routledge, 1995
- Dworkin, Andrea. *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, Perigee Books, 1981.
- English, Deirdre, Amber Hollibaugh, and Gayle Rubin. “Talking Sex: A Conversation on Sexuality and Feminism.” *Feminist Review*, vol. 11, 1982, pp. 40-52
- Ernulf, Kurt E., and Sune M. Innala. “Sexual Bondage: A Review and Unobtrusive Investigation.” *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, vol. 24, no. 6, 1995, pp. 631-54.
- Ferguson, Ann. “Sex War: The Debate between Radical and Libertarian Feminists.” *Signs*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1984, pp. 106-12.
- France, Marie. “Sadomasochism and Feminism.” *Feminist Review*, vol. 16, 1984, pp. 35-42.
- Gamarekian, Barbara. “Corcoran, to Foil Dispute, Drops Mapplethorpe Show.” *The New York Times*, 14 June 1989
- “Hugh D. Gamble @ Phaedra V’s Amiga 2500.” *alt.sex.bondage*, Google Groups, 30 January 1990, tinyurl.com/ybxzwoga
- Hauben, Michael and Ronda Hauben. *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet*, Wiley, 1997
- “If a Safeword Isn’t Used, Is It Rape?” *alt.sex.bondage*, Google Groups, 20 October 1991, tinyurl.com/y8ksxw6h

- Jeffreys, Sheila. *The Lesbian Heresy: A Feminist Perspective on the Lesbian Sexual Revolution*. Spinifex, 1993.
- Kadrey, Richard. "Alt.Sex.Bondage." *Wired Magazine*, June 1994.
- Linden, Robin Ruth. *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis*. Frog in the Well, 1982.
- "Meaning, Abuse, D/s." *alt.sex.bondage*, Google Groups, 1 February 1995, tinyurl.com/yaopxcqe
- McClenen, Joan C. and John Joseph Gunther. *A Professional's Guide to Understanding Gay and Lesbian Domestic Violence: Understanding Practice Interventions*. Edwin Mellen, 1999.
- "More on the NYC Incident." *alt.sex.bondage*, Google Groups, 9 December 1996, tinyurl.com/ya9o8z64
- Morgan, Kirk. "Anger and Domestic Violence." *CUIR*, vol. 8, 1994, p. 32.
- "Negativity -- Cooling My Jets." *soc.subculture.bondage-bdsm*, Google Groups, 14 August 1998, tinyurl.com/ybljwdon
- Newmahr, Staci. *Playing on the Edge: Sadomasochism, Risk & Intimacy*, Indiana UP, 2011
- Pervocracy, Cliff. "The Missing Stair." *The Pervocracy*, 22 June. 2012a, pervocracy.blogspot.com/2012/06/missing-stair.html
- . "The Scene is Not Safe." *The Pervocracy*, 20 April 2012b, pervocracy.blogspot.com/2012/04/scene-is-not-safe.html
- RAINN. "Legal Role of Consent." *Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network*, <https://www.rainn.org/articles/legal-role-consent>
- Reid, Brian. "Alt Hierarchy History." *Living Internet*, http://www.livinginternet.com/u/ui_alt.htm
- "Rethinking Rape Stories in A.S.B." *alt.sex.bondage*, Google Groups. 5 December 1990, tinyurl.com/yyp4b3f9
- Reynolds, Dawn. "Disability and BDSM: Bob Flanagan and the Case for Sexual Rights." *Sexuality Research & Social Policy*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2007, pp. 40-52.
- Rubin, Gayle, and Pat Califia. "Sadomasochism: Fears, Facts, Fantasies." *Gay Community News*, vol. 9, no. 7, 1981.

- Rubin, Gayle. "Misguided Dangerous and Wrong: An Analysis of Anti-Pornography Politics." *Bad Girls and Dirty Pictures: The Challenge to Reclaim Feminism*. Edited by Alison Assiter and Carol Avedon. London: Pluto, 1993.
- "Safewording before the Fact?" *alt.sex.bondage*, Google Groups, 8 April 1993, tinyurl.com/y89kytwc
- "Safewords and trust." *alt.sex.bondage*, Google Groups, 22 August 1993, tinyurl.com/yamrcfz7
- Samois Collective. *Coming to Power: Writing and Graphics on Lesbian S/M*. 3rd ed. Boston: Alyson, 1987.
- "Scening Drunk." *alt.sex.bondage*, Google Groups, 18 November 1994, tinyurl.com/y87n8be8
- Sheff, Elisabeth, and Corie Hammers. "The Privilege of Perversities: Race, Class and Education among Polyamorists and Kinksters." *Psychology & Sexuality*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2011, pp. 198-223.
- Silverowl, Artemis. "Internal Injuries: Domestic Violence within the SM/Leather Community." *The Leather Journal*, 1994, p. 36.
- stein, david. "'Safe, Sane, Consensual' The Making of a Shibboleth." *New Leather Association - Oklahoma City Chapter*, 2002, www.boybear.us/ssc.pdf
- Stryker, Kitty. "Safe/Ward: I Never Called It Rape." *Kitty Stryker*, 8 July 2011, kittystryker.com/blog/posts/safeward-i-never-called-it-rape/
- "Subs: Being Taken Advantage of." *alt.sex.bondage*, Google Groups, 11 September 1996, tinyurl.com/yakzbt7g
- Thomas. "One In Three Kinksters Reports A Consent Violation." *Yes Means Yes Blog*, 22 January 2013, yesmeansyesblog.wordpress.com/2013/01/22/one-in-three-kinksters-reports-a-consent-violations
- Ward, Robin. "S & M Safety Vs Abuse (Soapbox)." *The Eulenspiegel Society*, 1993, p. 16.