RESEARCH PROPOSAL

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RESEARCH TITLE & AIM

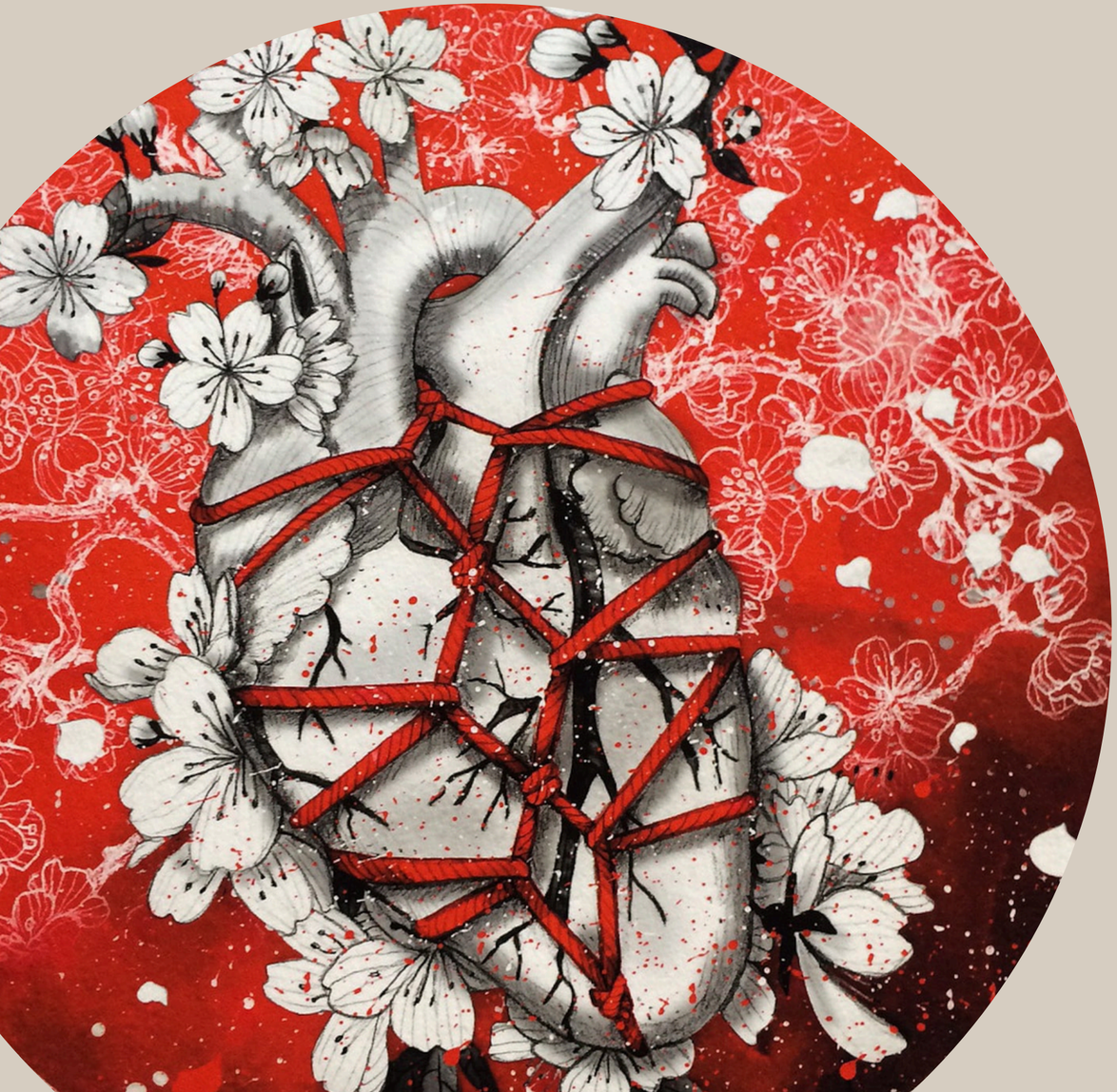
RESEARCH TITLE:

“Beyond Pathology: BDSM, Emotional Regulation, and Implications for Therapeutic Understanding”

RESEARCH AIM:

To explore how individuals experience BDSM as emotionally regulating or therapeutically meaningful, and consider implications for therapeutic understanding.

RATIONALE & REFLEXIVITY



- Personal & academic interest in BDSM
- Awareness of stigma & pathologisation
- Exploration in emotional & therapeutic links
- Reflexive awareness of personal perspective and bias

CURRENT UNDERSTANDING OF BDSM

Shift away from historical pathologisation
(Wright, 2018)

BDSM does not mean mental illness
(Brink et al., 2020)

Wellbeing & identity
(Dahl et al., 2023; Wismeijer and Van Assen, 2013)

Consent & communication
inc. RACK & SSC
(Dunkley and Brotto, 2019)

Stigma and attitudes with increased visibility
(Walker and Kuperberg, 2022)

Psychologically meaningful
(Turley, 2022)



LITERATURE REVIEW

Therapist bias towards kink

(Herbitter, Vaughan and Pantalone, 2021)

- Limited training & competency evaluation
- Ongoing pathologisation within therapeutic models
- lack of client-centred perspectives

Client experiences of judgment

(New et al., 2021)

- Misunderstanding & subtle judgements
- Need for non-judgmental & affirming care
- Lack of therapist knowledge and kink-informed training

Barriers to disclosure

(Nevard, 2019)

- Clients report self-censorship to avoid stigma & judgement
- Fear of misrepresentation
- Perception of therapy as ‘unsafe’
- Lack of informed training & inclusivity

Emotional regualtion through kink

(Sprott and Randall, 2024)

- Linked to improved wellbeing (growth, autonomy)
- Emotional regulation & identity integration
- Negative outcomes linked to stigma, not BDSM
- Limited research into emotional regulation through kink

Trauma, control & Embodiment

(Cascalheira et al., 2021)

- Transform & reprocess trauma through kink
- Reclaiming control through consent, boundaries & power dynamics
- Embodied experiences create meaning-making (pain/sensation)
- Limited research on underlying processes

Emerging therapeutic framing

Sprott (2020)

- Kink aligns with Humanistic therapy values

Ferenchak (2022)

- Kink affirmative ACT model
- Focus on acceptance & values

Rahman (2025)

- Embodied healing focus
- Emerging therapeutic framework

THE 'GAP'



- Limited exploration of why people engage in BDSM/kink
- Limited research into lived experiences & meanings from BDSM engagement
- Psychological functions not fully understood (eg, regulation, control, healing)
- Lack of research into role-specific differences
- Limited integration of BDSM experiences within therapuetic practise & understanding

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

To explore participants' lived experiences of BDSM & roles within

To examine how individuals describe emotional regulation within BDSM contexts

To understand the meanings participants create/link to BDSM in relation to wellbeing

To explore whether and how BDSM is experienced as therapeutically meaningful

To consider the implications of these experiences for therapeutic practice, particularly within humanistic approaches

RESEARCH POSITIONING

Paradigm

- Interpretivism
- Subjective meaning & Lived experience

Approach

- Phenomenological
- Explores experience & meaning-making

Theoretical Positioning

- Humanistic/Person Centred approach
- Growth, self-acceptance, non-pathologising stance

METHOD

Recruitment

- Via online BDSM community (18+)
- Purposive, self-selecting sampling

Sample

- 4-8 BDSM practitioners
- Dom/sub/switch roles

Design

- Qualatitve
- Semi-structured interviews (online)

Analysis

- Thematic analysis with a phenomenological lens



ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS



- Informed consent & right to withdraw
- Confidentiality & anonymity
- Psychological safety & participant wellbeing
- Non-judgmental & kink-affirmative approach
- Clear safeguarding boundaries
- Researcher reflexivity
- Sensitive topic management

CONCLUSION



Literature Review

- BDSM is stigmatised within therapeutic settings
- More education around kink is needed
- BDSM can be used for emotional regulation, well-being, and to heal trauma

The Gap

- Limited research into ‘why’ individuals practise BDSM, their experiences & meaning-making
- Limited research exploring the differences experienced through BDSM roles

The study

- Exploring how people experience BDSM and whether it impacts emotional regulation and mental well-being
- How this understanding can be translated to therapy

THANKYOU

Any Questions?

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