

# CREATING A FEELING OF BELONGING Solidarity in Finnish Kink Communities

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## ABSTRACT

Kinky sexuality is often stigmatized in Finnish culture. Therefore, kink communities are vital for creating safe spaces for people who identify as kinky. In this article, I discuss the ways in which the sense of belonging is created in the Finnish kink communities, in particular in their kink events. In kink communities solidarity acts as an important aspect in creating a feeling of belonging. It manifests in shared experiences and knowledge, etiquette rules and consensuality, dressing up in fetish attire and volunteer work at associations. Through interviews, written kinky life stories and participant observation I have examined the experiences of individuals, myself included, to obtain an understanding of the kink phenomenon and the elements that contribute to the sense of belonging. For some people it is important to be able to attend kink events and have face-to-face encounters, whereas others are part of a community online. Yet, the mere existence of the kink community might be enough for an individual to achieve a feeling of belonging to a community.

When I tell people who identify as kinky that I study kink communities, I often receive cheerful encouragement and people offer to tell me their stories. Usually the stories are about how through being able to express their kinkiness they have been able to find peace of mind. Their tone is often celebratory and their stories aim to clear kinky sexuality of its dubious reputation, which is understandable. However, the kink community is not always as splendid as it may seem at first glance to a newcomer: there are problems as there are in any other community. Nevertheless, one of the most distinctive features of the kink community is the strong positive emotional response of a sense of belonging when introduced to and participating in the community.

Previous research has shown that belonging is an important factor for an individual's health and well-being (e.g. Kitchen, Williams and Chowhan 2012). Kimberly Hudson (2015) has studied belonging in queer, multiracial communities. These marginal communities are similar to the kink communities in Finland in that both create intentional spaces to build a sense of connectedness. To the queer community such spaces might be cafés or bars, for the kinky these physical spaces manifest as kink events.

In this article I explain how the sense of belonging is created in the kink communities with a special focus on kink events. To address the topic of belonging, I will first analyze how the feeling of belonging is created in the kink community based on the reports of different kink event participants; what are the contributing factors to the sense of belonging; and how the sense of solidarity makes the kink community special to its participants. I will examine this by discussing entering the kink community, organizing and attending kink events, and submitting to the rules of the community. Through these themes, I will discuss how solidarity acts as an important aspect in creating the feeling of belonging in kink communities.

## Kink and Finnish kink events

In my study about the kink phenomenon, I have chosen to use the term *kink* and its variations (e.g. kinky), as opposed to the often used concepts of *sadomasochism* or *BDSM* (e.g. Harviainen 2015a; Simula 2015). These concepts can be applied as umbrella terms for a very similar phenomenon I refer to when I use the concept of kinky. The literal definition of BDSM is bondage/discipline, Dominance/submission<sup>1</sup>, and sadism and masochism (Nordling 2009). When used as an umbrella concept BDSM usually stands for various practices that deal with domination, submission, pain, restraint and so forth in a consensual manner. However, Brandy L. Simula states that “kink is a much broader category than BDSM and includes sexual interests like fetishes, cross-dressing, strap-on sex, voyeurism, et cetera” (Simula 2015, 167). In much the same way, I prefer to use the broader concept of kink, as I do not wish to leave out, for instance, fetishists who do not show an interest in sadomasochistic play. In contrast, inside the kink community

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1 The word *Dominance* has capitalization on purpose as it is customary inside the community. The same often applies to names of the dominant roles in BDSM, such as *Master* or *Dom*.

*vanilla* is a term used to refer to someone who is not kinky, occasionally, yet not necessarily in a pejorative sense.

When discussing the kink phenomenon, I have chosen to use the singular *kinky sexuality*, even though there are multiple different kinks that can be studied and identified. In this paper I use the concept of kinky sexuality as an umbrella term for various forms of sexualities in the manner in which it is used within the kink community itself (e.g. Harrington and Williams 2012). Obviously, there is a broad spectrum of kinky sexualities, just as there are individual experiences.

When discussing *kink events* I refer to events in Finland that are usually called either fetish clubs, dress code parties, or just parties in general. A kink event may also be called, for instance, a fetish ball, a BDSM party, or a play<sup>2</sup> party. These events in Finland that are within the scope of my study are usually organized by the kink associations<sup>3</sup> active in most of the biggest towns in Finland, and they aim to provide a place where one can be openly kinky in a semi-public place. Both the organizations and their events are highly kink-inclusive and welcome a multitude of kinks, not just BDSM practitioners. The locations can vary from established erotic bars to old warehouses.

There are roughly two different types of kink events: those that have a dress code and those that do not. This division is made by the organizing associations and thus arises from within the community. *Dress code* usually stands for kinky attire: an outfit that you would not wear to a regular night

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- 2 Playing with regards to kink events means sadomasochistic play, or play sessions that usually involve a dominant and a subordinate who engage in consensual sadomasochistic play.
  - 3 In this paper I use the concepts of organization and association synonymous for the same phenomenon: a legally registered association with such attributes as board members, board meetings, and a membership fee.

club. This means that attendees are encouraged to attend a kink event in, for example, PVC, or latex garments, corsets and high heels, in a uniform or even in the nude. Kink events with a dress code prohibit entry if the person is in violation of the chosen dress code, that is, wearing casual clothes like a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, whereas a non-dress code party is made more easily accessible by omitting the strict dress code. I use the term kink events as I discuss these different sorts of events in general.

### Doing ethnography on the kink community

In this study I have used ethnographic methods to collect and analyze my data. I use participant observation in addition to interviews and query answers. To expand on my data I will also bring into discussion other research done on this topic. This research partially arises from my own background, yet it is not autoethnographic per se. I became acquainted with the kink community as a student in my 20s. I attended kink events and later joined the local kink association and even became a board member, which meant actively participating in organizing and planning the events and other activities. In the process I also became interested in the kink community as a phenomenon and as a subject of study. Today, nearly a decade later, I have no affiliations with any organizations, and I attend kink events irregularly and have as a result somewhat distanced myself from the community.

Despite the changes in my position within the kink community, it is relevant to the research to discuss how the researcher's identity and life experiences shape the stances taken in their research; a topic explored by for example Sherryl Kleinman and Martha A. Copp (1993). Kleinman describes how in her previous study she had neglected to take certain factors into consideration because of her personal beliefs. Thus, the researcher needs to be conscious of the interplay between their private

self and their professional self as a researcher (Kleinman and Copp 1993, 10–13). A researcher needs to acknowledge that it is not possible to fully distance themselves from their topic of research, especially when studying a familiar phenomenon.

In the research field I have a dual role: that of an event participant and a community member, in addition to that of a researcher (Vakimo 2010). However, Billy Ehn and Orvar Löfgren (2012, 59) state that even though the research field is familiar, the ethnographic observation is guided by the research questions. Even though the two roles overlap and it is never possible to fully separate the roles of an event participant and a researcher, the active point of view of the researcher and the research questions guide the research process in the field.

Besides participating in the various kink organizations' activities for close to a decade, the research material for my Ph.D. study also consists of interviews. The interviews focus on kink events and mainly concern events organized in Turku. I have already interviewed five people on the topic of kink events for my Bachelor's thesis in 2009. The interviewees were aged between 20 and 30 years. During the interview process I did not systematically gather information on their gender, sexual orientation or other background information, so I am not able to use such data in my later research. The interviewees were of the unanimous opinion that kink events are a valuable thing in various ways which I shall explore later in this paper. All the interviews were conducted in Finnish and the translations are mine.

In addition to my personal experiences and the interviews, I conducted a query in 2011 on two Finnish BDSM online discussion forums (Tuntematon maa and Turun Baletti) and sent it to three Finnish BDSM<sup>4</sup>

4 In Finland BDSM organizations cater for and welcome fetishists as well, i.e., they are highly kink-inclusive.

organizations' mailing lists (Bizarre Club in Jyväskylä, Rsyke in Tampere and Turun Baletti in Turku) to obtain more everyday experiences on kinky sexuality. Jari Eskola and Juha Suoranta (2000, 63) discuss how in qualitative research the aim is not necessarily to make generalizations about the phenomenon, but rather to obtain an understanding of individuals' experiences and thoughts and how they express them. In much the same way, I am able to obtain an understanding of the kink phenomenon through the experiences of individuals.

For the query, I received 12 responses from people between 20–56 years of age, who identified as women (seven), men (four) and other (one). All the query responses were in Finnish and the translations provided here are mine. Despite not formally asking the respondents about their background, from the answers I was able to conclude that, based on the stories about their childhood and growing up, most of the respondents were Finnish and situated all over Finland. Many of the writings were lengthy sexual autobiographies (kinky life stories), while some were more straightforward answers to the questions I had set as an alternative method for responding.

Most of the respondents gave me elaborate accounts of their sexual history about their kink lives going as far back as childhood or youth. According to Ken Plummer, people from sexual or gender minorities may have the need to scan “the past life for clues to one's sexual being” because of catharsis or clarification (Plummer 1995, 33). The autobiographical writings I received do exactly this: they start with childhood memories of finding particular scenes from movies exciting, such as being tied up with ropes, a fondness for Cat Woman in Batman, or not finding the same things exciting as other teenagers (for instance girls with big breasts, a stereotypical interest for heterosexual men), and then proceed to the realisation of the existence of the kink community. The community is often first found online and the sensations related to this discovery are often rather intense.

I asked how kinky sexuality shows in the everyday lives of my respondents and what it means for them personally to have found and now be part of the kink community. One of my respondents wrote:

It is really important to have people around who share my experiences, and to know that there are many of us. Even if I don't meet these people in real life, I feel like I get so much from them. I feel like I'm part of this subculture and this community on a psychological level. (--) If this contact with others didn't exist I'd probably feel like an isolated freak, too lonely. (T11)

Not all identified with the community in the same way: to some it was an abstract thing that existed outside their realm of experience, whereas to others it was an important physical community, where it was possible to meet others with similar interests face-to-face and to get support. However, the existence of the community in some form or another was deemed important by all the participants.

The tones expressed by my interviewees and respondents were often rather celebratory. This is understandable as kinky sexuality is so strongly stigmatized in our society. Now that the members of kink communities have been given a voice and a chance to speak it is only natural that they would want to clear its reputation. This can understandably lead the researcher to receive biased understandings of the phenomenon. According to John Van Maanen (1983), the researcher can be misled due to various reasons. He mentions, for example, the evading of certain topics, which might be why my respondents did not address violations to the etiquette at kink events, even though they do occur and are a serious issue for the associations. Van Maanen also mentions that the respondents themselves might be wrong, misled or unaware of certain issues. In my study this can be seen in respondents who had only recently entered the kink community and were experiencing the honeymoon phase, and thus

glorifying the community in a celebratory tone. In addition, J. Tuomas Harviainen (2015a) states, “people tend to be unreliable informants on matters pertaining to their own sexuality”, and therefore, triangulation of other sources is also needed. For these reasons this study takes personal bias into consideration when assessing and discussing the data.

## Finding the kink community

It is not too hard to see why the kink community is necessary for people whose kink lives are usually kept hidden from outsiders. There is a strong social stigma associated with kinky sexuality “due to its association with non-standard sex and (wrongly) with violence” (Harviainen 2015b). For instance, in the media, kinky sexuality may be presented as a pathology, a joke, as violence, or remain entirely invisible. My respondents established that kinky sexuality is closeted and it was argued whether it should even be out of that closet: there were opinions for and against bringing kinky sexuality into the mainstream. Nonetheless, a heightened understanding and acceptance towards kinky sexuality was called for (for example, T1, T9). Sanna Karkulehto discusses the concept of the *closet* as a well-known metaphor for hiding and ignoring non-normative sexualities (Karkulehto 2011, 160–161). None of my respondents reported being entirely out of the closet. Some of my respondents stated that kinky sexuality should be out of the said closet: to be mainstream and easily available for all (for example, T2). Then again, a certain secretiveness may even be necessary to maintain its fascination (T6). Even though my respondents and interviewees had their separate stories and different relationships with the kinky identity and being closeted, most of them had experience or at least thoughts about being stigmatized or needing to hide their sexuality. These experiences bring people together in the sense that the community is indeed needed to create a safe space where there is no fear of stigma and where one can be open about their kinkiness.

My respondents refer to such a safe space as a singular reality of a kink community. This singularity might be due to the formulation of the questions I had set in the query, but since they did not express strong disagreement with the idea of “A Community”, I discuss the kink community here as one entity as well. However, it is possible to distinguish two layers of the community. Firstly, there is the imagined kink community that is usually accessed online and which is both vast and global, and also functions on the emotional level as knowledge of not being alone. Secondly, there is the physical presence of other individuals that manifests in face-to-face contact and is often a more local one in nature.

The global kink community exists on multiple platforms around the globe and is mainly an imagined community, which according to Benedict Anderson is any community that is so large that people cannot personally know every member of that community (Anderson 1991). One of my respondents pointed out that he certainly feels like he belongs to the kink community, however, he continues that “the kink community of the living people is alien to me” (T6). Similarly, another respondent wrote how important it is to share her experiences with other like-minded people in the online communities, yet she does not take part in the face-to-face community (T11). Here the writers clearly separate the imagined and the face-to-face communities as separate layers of the general kink community.

In any case, people get to know each other on the discussion forums and other social media websites. The imagined and vast global communities may even be a route to the activities of local kink organizations and events as people who have made acquaintances online travel to the events from various parts of the country (H1, H2, H3). The bonds of belonging are tightened and the event is made more accessible when people feel that they already know each other beforehand (see e.g., Wiseman 1996, Appendix II; Harrington and Williams 2012, 127–133). Even though events are seen as

the center of kink communities in many ways, the internet is also essential to maintaining the sense of an imagined community.

Despite the possible separation of the online and physical kink communities and an individual's relation to them, there are similarities between the two layers of community as well. For instance, the narratives of finding home were prevalent in many writings. When a person enters the kink scene for the first time, whether online or at a face-to-face event, there may be a strong sensation of finding home, of being among one's kind (Harviainen 2015a; Newmahr 2011). My respondents described the feeling of finding the kink community as ecstatic: "it was so fantastic to find myself" (T11) and "it's a little like coming home" (H3).

These narratives of finding oneself or finding home highlight how important it is to finally feel that you belong. It has even been pointed out that a sense of belonging has a significant relationship to an individual's mental and physical health and well-being (Hudson 2015). Such positive findings are also supported in my data, for instance, one of my respondents wrote that she feels whole on a "psychological level" when she feels she is not alone (T11). She suggested that the quality of her life has been improved by the knowledge. Ehn and Löfgren (2001, 10–15) discuss how through symbols it is possible to create and strengthen the feeling of collective identity. The sense of collective identity, or even that of home, is present even though the people can, to quote Anderson "never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 1991, 6). The repeatedly occurring narratives of finding home become symbols of the collective experience of belonging in kink communities.

The narratives in my data often have a certain intensity in the expression of emotion. Charles Moser and JJ Madeson (1999, 49), as well as Staci Newmahr (2011), have discussed how entering a kink event for the first

time can be filled with intense emotion. Harviainen calls this the "relief effect" (Harviainen 2015a). One of my interviewees said: "It's a little like, like coming home! I mean the atmosphere is like so relaxed and accepting that you can't find it anywhere else" (H3). Another participant wrote that "the first time at a kink event was really impressive: liberating, warm, solidary. I felt like I was among my kind, approved of, part of a community" (T11). The same writer also mentioned that kink events are not very important to her and she does not attend them regularly; she is more involved in the online community. Although finding a community for the first time can result in feelings of relief, the effect might wear off after an often short honeymoon phase.

Even though the first experience at a kink event might be important and strong, an enjoyable experience, after the initial excitement the club scene might not be the place for everyone to feel connected to the larger kink community itself. Moser and Madeson discuss the phenomenon that especially young twenty-somethings enter the kink scene with high hopes but after a certain period of time the excitement subsides (Moser and Madeson 1999, 40). This shows in my material as the writers discussed their initial feelings of belonging and finding home as something nearly ecstatic, but then stated that the online community, or merely the knowledge of the community's existence, is enough for them. For some the internet and everyday life with a partner is what is needed to fulfil the need for a community and a sense of belonging: there is the knowledge that it is possible to return to or visit the face-to-face-community again later.

Regardless of the sporadic nature of the kink community, the feeling of belonging is, however, maintained. According to Michel Maffesoli (1995), the modern community may be temporary and random, but it is usually nevertheless a community with regular gatherings. Maffesoli also adds that an individual is nothing without a community (ibid. 44). An individual

thus pursues the feeling of belonging and a group of people to identify with. These ideas from Maffesoli's work apply to the kink community as well. The kink associations organize events fairly regularly. In its simplest form, these events do not require commitment other than attending that particular event and possibly complying with the dress code, though sometimes membership to a kink association is required. The associations function on a volunteer basis, and also have board meetings, pub meet-ups and even theatre visits or weekly sports gatherings, but individuals may choose which events to attend and when to do so. Thus, participating in a local level kink community is regular, but at the same time random and temporary as Maffesoli's theory on modern communities suggests (Maffesoli 1995). On the other hand, perhaps because of the temporary and random nature of the kink community the feeling of belonging is preserved: the community is not overly demanding and an individual may choose their level of commitment at a certain time.

### Organizing and attending the kink community events

There are essentially two ways in which one can participate in a kink event and they do not exclude one another. There is participation through organizing an event and participation through attending an event as a guest. These both add to the sense of belonging in their own ways.

Organizing and belonging in kink events is something that Taru Liski (2014) has discussed from a culture manager's point of view. The kink organizations exist to facilitate a safe space for those who are otherwise stigmatized by the surrounding society. They operate on a volunteer basis, and all the possible profits from the events go to the organization, not to the individuals arranging the events. Liski points out that the events are produced to sustain the organizations: the aim is not to make profit. Another reason for producing these events is to make people enjoy

themselves: to provide a means for safe playing, new experiences and peer support (Liski 2014). Maffesoli mentions solidarity that manifests itself, for instance, in different forms of generosity or as volunteer work (Maffesoli 1995, 56). Solidarity – and commitment – is indeed needed, since the production of an event may take months.

I was involved in Turun Baletti, a local BDSM organization in Turku, at a time when the biggest event of the year was produced in an old factory hall that otherwise functioned as a dance theatre. The planning started months before the event with brainstorming ideas, booking the performers, creating a schedule and a floorplan, taking care of various permits and decorating the space as well as executing various building tasks on the premises. All this preparative work is done on a voluntary basis without any other compensation than the possible positive feedback from the attendees eventually participating in the final event (c.f. Liski 2014).

The events usually feature different visual and aural performances on a designated stage. The booked performers can be professionals, but it seems to be characteristic to the Finnish kink events to also have amateur performances by the members of the organization. One of my respondents, who had taken part in organizing kink events, mentioned that the stage program is to acknowledge new participants and to act as entertainment and encouragement to the event guests (H5). The stage program may consist of amateurs, but since the performers come from within the community, their performances are usually well appreciated. The feeling of having “one of our own” on stage, again without monetary compensation, creates solidarity and a shared feeling of accomplishment, in addition to perhaps encouraging event participants to engage in playing or getting to know each other.

The unified effort needed to successfully organize large scale events such as these creates a team spirit among the organizing group which is then

hopefully transmitted to the event guests as well. Lee Harrington and Mollena Williams see volunteering as giving back to the community and call it a “labor of love” that strengthens an individual’s investment in the community (Harrington and Williams 2012). This enhances the feeling of belonging to a community and on the other hand, makes people feel responsible and willing to organize these events in the future. Moreover, one motivator to organize these events is the end result, the kinky ball, which through their own involvement becomes the kind of event the organizers can themselves fully enjoy (H5). Volunteering and joint commitment brings people together and enables the existence of events, thus aiding in building the sense of belonging inside the community.

While the organizers create the optimal conditions for a successful event, all the participants of a particular kinky event are in control of both the general atmosphere and the success of the event. Margaret Wetherell (2012) discusses affects and describes atmosphere as an affective zone that is not a pre-existing given, but that needs work to exist. She also discusses how we may be “affected by an event” even though it is not clear what the impact is (ibid. 2). At kinky events it is customary to comment on the atmosphere of that particular event and perhaps compare it to a previous one, or to another event organized in another city. And although this may seem like meaningless small talk, it in fact conveys one of the most intriguing aspects of the kinky events.

Some of my respondents noted the atmosphere of the events (H2, H5, T8) and its importance to the overall experience. One of my interviewees mentioned that “the events are not merely regular pub nights, but have a special enjoyable atmosphere”, which is her motivation to attend regularly (H2). Although the kinky events may take place in a night club, they differ greatly from a regular visit to a night club or other possible events organized in them, such as theme nights or holiday celebrations.

My respondents’ discussion on atmosphere is abstract: they are affected by something; they feel emotions and have sensations that might not occur at other events. To be able to get a better understanding of these affects I employed methods that Ehn and Löfgren suggest for ethnographic culture analytic fieldwork, while at an event I tried to open up all my senses. In addition to looking and talking to people, I closed my eyes and listened to the sounds and smelled the air (Ehn and Löfgren 2012, 59, 65, 77). I could hear people chatting to each other, whiplashes and occasional screams of pleasurable pain, I could smell the vinyl and rubber clothing; all these elements contribute to the special atmosphere of a kinky event.

When I asked my respondents about the contributors to the special atmosphere at kinky events a common answer was their social aspect. A respondent stated that “a kinky event is a social event” (T2) and another wrote: “I appreciate the organizations, because the events they organize are a good and an easy way to find people who think alike” (T1). Kinky events are important social gatherings: they allow members of the community to meet friends from other cities and people from the online discussion forums in addition to making it possible to get to know entirely new people.

According to my observations at different kinky events, the atmosphere of solidarity perhaps enables more possibilities for communicating with people previously unknown to the participant. Harrington and Williams mention that at kinky events people are “bonded by otherness” (with regards to the world outside the community) which may help in opening up to others (Harrington and Williams 2012, 121). Furthermore, they discuss the need to bond with others: to find play partners, mentors, friends and allies, which pushes a person to communicate with new people inside the community (ibid. 112). In addition to meeting new people, it was also pointed out in an interview that the same people seem to frequent all the kinky events (H2). I have also noticed this in my fieldwork at the Finnish



events: people travel between cities to attend kink events. Seeing familiar faces creates a feeling of community and a safe space: the sense of knowing each other and being connected, if not personally, but at least through a friend, to the other event guests.

In addition to the need to bond with people at a kink event, it is also easier to maintain an atmosphere of solidarity at the events due to the lesser use of alcohol, a feature that Liski has also pointed out (Liski 2014). My respondents mentioned that people tend to drink less alcohol, which they, too, see as a factor that makes the kink events special (H2, H3, H4, T7). Drinking less is related to the play sessions and communication: for playing to be safe and consensual, one has to be able to communicate and not to have their senses blurred by intoxicants (H1, H2). Getting inebriated is not prohibited at the events, but seems to rather be an unwritten rule and common knowledge inside the kink community – at least for those who engage in play sessions.

Although the finding home narratives and ease of attending the organized events are present in much of my data, they do not apply to all participants or members of the kink community nor do all those who identify themselves as part of it feel at home in the face-to-face community. It may also be difficult to access the community. Two of my respondents wrote about their experiences as newcomers at a kink event where they did not personally know anybody. Both respondents felt it was difficult to find the feeling of community when all they encountered was people sitting in groups and chatting to their friends (T7, T8). Both identified as men and pinpointed this as a cause for the not-so-warm welcome: they both expressed the problematic situation of attending an event as a lonely, inexperienced man merely surveying the event, instead of engaging in play with someone, which might have made them seem suspicious to other attendees. These experiences indicate a problem with entering a new

community: it can be very difficult to enter a tightknit community without the help of a friend or an acquaintance already familiar with the group.

The experience of alienation may be agonizing because the expectation of belonging does not actualize. In this environment a lonely individual who is not actively invited to participate may indeed feel estranged and not very safe. The kink events are supposed to present a safe space for the kinky, similarly as Hudson discusses queer cafés and Clare Forstie a lesbian pub as a safe space for these marginal groups (Hudson 2015; Forstie 2015). However, Forstie points out that, according to her study, a certain kind of lesbian expression was more permissible there than others (Forstie 2015, 192). In the same way it may be that inside the kink community a certain kind of kinkiness is preferred to gain access to the group. Harviainen proposes that experience is valued in the kink community, since knowledge and skill provide both safe and more fulfilling play sessions than engaging with less experienced partners. For this reason the kink community places high value on experience, which may make it difficult for supposedly inexperienced newcomers to find play partners (Harviainen 2015b). This, in turn, can make it hard to gain the sense of belonging that is often anticipated when entering the community.

To be recognized in the kink community one needs to have a certain status, or a positive reputation. According to Staci Newmahr, there is a dual path that leads to this: engaging in playing and social involvement (Newmahr 2008, 636). In accordance with this research, both of the respondents who were ignored as newcomers reported about gaining this access to the community later, through volunteering and joining other activities that the organizations provide (T7, T8). One of my interviewees also discussed how it is easier to be noticed in the community through volunteering and getting to know people. Likewise, it may be easier for some people to become part of the community than it is for others: “If you’re, like, a

visible and a loud persona, you will be noticed even if you're new to the community" (H5). She also added that knowing people who are already inside the community helps with gaining access. The event organizers also pay attention to newcomers: to help all those attending an event, there is usually a host who gives a speech with instructions regarding the etiquette and what is to be expected during the evening. In addition, they may casually chat with the newcomers in order to get to know them (H5). This is an active way of enhancing the sense of belonging on the organizers' part.

### Submitting to the rules of a kink community

What distinguishes kink events the most from other events (for instance, regular night clubs or festivals) is the etiquette (Liski 2014). This means the specific rules that create a safe space for everyone participating, which again creates a bond between the participants. The rules are often visible, for instance, as posters at the venue, introduced on stage by the host several times a night, or at the very least available on the event's website before the event. It is usually assumed, however, that guests attending parties with a dress code are already familiar with the rules, which is usually also the case.

These rules, for instance, prohibit photographing, touching without consent and discussing the participants or the events of the party after the event. One of my respondents disclosed: "You need to respect people and what they're doing. This is the kind of place where you need to feel safe to be whatever you want to be. Even if you're naked. So, if someone would [violate the etiquette, JP] that would ruin the atmosphere" (H3). Due to the general sense of safe space integral to the community, the etiquette rules are generally obeyed, but in cases of violation the person may be asked to leave. Kathryn R. Klement, Brad J. Sagarin and Ellen M. Lee (2016) discuss how in BDSM play "a culture of consent" prevails. This seems to

extend from play sessions to the events as well and is a crucial factor in building the solidarity among the community members.

Naturally, even if the rules are known, it does not mean they are always obeyed. None of the respondents referred to any serious rule breaking, but in my discussions with people about the events they have attended these experiences did arise. Usually the rule breaking had to do with touching without consent, or interfering with play sessions. This is an important topic for further study, but is not within the scope of this article. The etiquette and consent is nonetheless a distinctive and crucial part of the kink community and the way in which it operates.

Another factor that makes the kink community distinct from many other communities is the fact that it is so closely connected to materiality: fetish clothes, BDSM equipment and other elements of clothing and accessories. Since materiality is so closely related to kinkiness it has even been claimed that sadomasochism is the most capitalist form of sex in existence (Siegel 1995). In particular, the dungeon equipment<sup>5</sup> is something that many people cannot obtain, and this is for many the main reason for attending the events. Even though the large pieces of dungeon equipment and the glamorous fetish outfits are usually big investments, it is also possible to attend kink events on a budget and still belong.

Through a dress code the organizers aim to ascertain that all the participants are dedicated to the lifestyle, and it helps to create a safe space where the participants can be freely what they are without the fear of being stigmatized, in addition to building the sense of community: when everyone is dressed

5 The event venues usually feature so-called dungeon equipment that serves as the location for playing: usually a submissive is attached to this specially made bondage furniture and then spanked or otherwise handled by the dominant(s), all in a consensual manner.

in fetish outfits the sense of *us* becomes stronger. Even at events without a dress code most people still wear fetish outfits. One respondent wrote: “Even if there’s no strict dress code at an event, a person with regular clothes may be frowned upon. But I guess that’s justified, because the senses of belonging and of the subculture are maintained through the dressing up” (T5). Dressing up for the events creates solidarity and a collective identity through complying with the shared rules of appropriate style of attire.

Dressing up, for an individual, may be an expression of a fetish but it serves other purposes as well. Firstly, it creates the sense of belonging to a subculture that values a certain non-normative aesthetic. Secondly, it functions as a means of escapism or as a transition from the mundane to the special (Lönnqvist 2006, 63; Pohtinen 2014). A respondent wrote: “For me putting on a collar is usually the sign that I am now stepping into my BDSM self and the role of a slave” (T7). Another person described how dressing up in his fetish outfit, even at home, is a total break from everyday life (T6). Bo Lönnqvist notes that the processes of dressing up and undressing may act as a possibility to abandon the rules of mundane life (Lönnqvist 2006, 63). The dressing up in certain gear and pieces of clothing can act as a symbol for crossing a border from the banal to the kinky.

Furthermore, through dressing up in a certain way for the kink event, individuals show their desire to be both one with the crowd and at the same time distinguished as unique individuals (Nykyri 1996, 32). However, many of my respondents viewed dressing up as showing their kink identity and being able to display their fetishes in a semi-public setting among an accepting crowd (T6, T7, T8, T11, H5). The solidarity at the kink events also manifests in frequent compliments on one another’s outfits. This is something that does not happen quite as easily in regular night clubs, where if it does, it is often dishonest, flirtatious and connected to making

a pass at someone, whereas at kink events complimenting might be just that: admiring an outfit. Obviously, also at kink events, compliments may act as icebreakers in getting a conversation started, but honesty is expected and assumed (Harrington and Williams 2012). The setting at a kink event is different: people are at the kink event together, not to compete against each other, but rather to create a fortress against the vanilla world.

Since kink community events are sporadic, the feeling of belonging and being part of a community needs to be enforced through materialistic symbols and consumer choice (Jurvansuu 2002, 23). For the kink community these symbols can be for instance T-shirts, buttons, and badges with the logo of the association, or perhaps less literal and more specific to the kink community, such as leather pants or a collar and a leash (Harrington and Williams 2012). At the kink events I have visited, the logo of the association is usually clearly visible: on the walls printed on large banners and on T-shirts and buttons that are being sold. In addition, there may be a slide show on a big screen that presents BDSM themed art together with advertisements for future events. Through these symbols, it is possible to create a concrete, visual sense of *us* that separates us from *them*: to separate the kinky from the non-kinky and this particular kink group from other groups. Through this separation the feeling of belonging is strengthened inside that particular event and on a larger scale, inside the community.

### Belonging through fostering solidarity

In this article I have discussed the Finnish kink community and how the feeling of belonging is created. Kinky sexuality is still stigmatized in the media and popular culture, and people who identify as kinky are often closeted. This creates the need for kink communities: safe, semi-

public spaces to foster the sense of “us”. These communities are created in contrast to “vanilla” life, but co-exist with its demands and often also expectations. What is special to the Finnish kink community is the diversity and inclusiveness of multiple kinks. Most associations and their events are open to BDSM practitioners as well as to fetishists of many kinds. Due to their open nature, the communities enable people with various kinks to communicate, work and party together. This, in turn, feeds the sense of finding one’s way “home”.

Finding the kink community was described as ecstatic by my respondents. It is important for an individual to find a community where they can feel they belong. In the end it does not matter whether the community is found online or from face-to-face encounters, such as events, the most important thing is the knowledge that the community exists.

Solidarity in such a community can be created online through sharing knowledge and experiences or face-to-face by taking part in events as a guest or volunteering. Volunteer work in organizing events may act as an easy way to access the community through getting to know people. By participating as a guest at the events, the solidarity is created through dressing up in fetish outfits, complimenting others’ outfits, playing and lesser use of alcohol. While physical presence at events is not required for the sense of community, according to my respondents, it nevertheless seems to be a key component in building it for many. I believe that the events function as anchors, around which online discussions can be formed in a manner that further sustains the sense of community.

My own position as a researcher but also as a previous member of a kink association has been beneficial for my study. In addition to the support and information access I have been given by the community members, I have knowledge of the ways in which the community functions. Additionally, my taking part in the community has perhaps led to me highlighting the

aspect of organizing the events instead of focusing on merely the event guests and their experiences. I had to focus on being analytic towards the community, yet not allow my own expectations or ideas to mislead my discussion. The results reflect this carefully sought-out balance.

The kink community is important for an individual’s well-being. Feelings of belonging still manifest through the contradictions and complexities within the community. Means such as taking part in organizing events and dressing up in fetish outfits together with shared experiences and knowledge all contribute to a sense of solidarity and commitment among individuals. However, even without the face-to-face contact the feeling of belonging can exist: the knowledge of others who share similar interests can be a healing experience.

## References

### Query answers

The archives of History, Culture and Arts Studies, University of Turku

Code used in text, age, archive code

T1, 20, TYKL/spa/1474a

T2, 22, TYKL/spa/1474b

T3, 23, TYKL/spa/1474c

T4, 23, TYKL/spa/1474d

T5, 23, TYKL/spa/1474e

T6, 28, TYKL/spa/1474f

T7, 30, TYKL/spa/1474g

T8, 38, TYKL/spa/1474h

T9, 41, TYKL/spa/1474i

T10, 43, TYKL/spa/1474j

T11, 43, TYKL/spa/1474k  
T12, 56, TYKL/spa/1474l

## Interviews

The archives of History, Culture and Arts Studies, University of Turku  
Code used in text, age, archive code

H1, 32, TYKL/aud/1474m  
H2, 31, TYKL/aud/1474m  
H3, 19, TYKL/aud/1474n  
H4, 20, TYKL/aud/1474n  
H5, 29, TYKL/aud/1474o

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