

GENDER DIVERSITY MEETS BDSM- SUBCULTURE:

Experiencing and sharing kinks online: a FetLife
reception study

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DEZE MASTERPROEF IS EEN EXAMENDOCUMENT DAT NIET WERD GECORRIGEERD VOOR EVENTUEEL VASTGESTELDE FOUTEN. IN PUBLICATIES MAG NAAR DIT WERK WORDEN GEREFEREERD, MITS SCHRIFTELIJKE TOELATING VAN DE PROMOTOR(EN) DIE MET NAAM OP DE TITELPAGINA IS VERMELD.

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ABSTRACT

Members of subcultural BDSM-communities come together in digital spaces such as the website FetLife. The increased interest in kink and BDSM is reflected in the amount of academic research approaching the subject from different angles, but The Next Generation (TNG), including younger members between ages of 18 to 35, remains under-researched. The research goal for this project was to collect TNG's lived experiences with(in) the online community on the platform through walkthroughs and semi-structured interviews that were coded through close reading and underwent thematic analyses. Research questions inquired about participants' use of the website, goals for use, sense of safety and meaning-making around intimacy. Findings illustrate how the platform operates as a hybrid environment in which user experiences are shaped by the interaction between platform affordances, community values and broader social structures. Experiences differ depending on gender, level of experience, and position within the community; goals converge around information seeking and community engagement, but differ in risk awareness, with women and non-binary users engaging more cautiously and adopting more protective strategies; and intimacy becomes a multi-layered notion extending beyond sexuality.

Leden uit subculturele BDSM-gemeenschappen groeperen zich in digitale ruimtes als de FetLife-website. De toenemende interesse in kink en BDSM is weerspiegeld in het aantal academische studies die het onderwerp vanuit verschillende invalshoeken benaderen, maar The Next Generation (TNG), namelijk jongere leden tussen 18 en 35 jaar, blijft onderbelicht. Het doel van deze studie was om de lived experiences van TNG binnen de online community te bestuderen via walkthroughs en semigestructureerde interviews, gecodeerd door middel van close reading en thematische analyse. Onderzoeksvragen betroffen gebruik van het platform, doel van gebruik, ervaringen rond veiligheid en betekenisgeving van intimiteit. De resultaten tonen aan dat FetLife fungeert als hybride omgeving waarin gebruikerservaringen vorm krijgen doormiddel van interactie tussen platformarchitectuur, waarden van de gemeenschap en bredere sociale structuren. Ervaringen verschillen volgens genderidentiteit, ervaringsniveau en positionering binnen de community. Doelstellingen convergeren rond informatieverwerving en betrokkenheid tot de gemeenschap, maar verschillen in bewustzijn over risico's, waarbij vrouwen en non-binaire gebruikers namelijk voorzichtiger omgaan met het platform en beschermende strategieën hanteren. Tenslotte wordt intimiteit ervaren als gelaagd concept dat verder reikt dan louter seksualiteit.

Keywords: BDSM, kink, FetLife, gender & gender identity, walkthrough, thematic analysis, TNG, The Next Generation, digital intimacies

TABLE OF CONTENT:

Acknowledgement.....	3
Abstract	4
Table of content:	5
1. Introduction	7
1. Theoretical framework	8
2. Problem statement.....	10
3. Methodology	11
3.1. Recruitment	11
3.2. Data-collection	12
3.3. Coding	14
4. Results.....	16
4.1. Participants	16
4.2. General use	19
4.2.1. FetLife: a hybrid platform.....	19
4.2.2. Overwhelming or easy to use?	20
4.2.3. Content: “where are the dudes? They also have to show their dicks.”	21
4.3. The community on fetlife.....	22
4.3.1. Cultural gatekeeping?	23
4.3.2. Demographic perceptions	23
4.3.3. Norms and (un)expected behaviour: “talk about an ice-breaker”	24
4.3.4. Avoiding “random dick pics”	26
4.3.5. “If you have something negative to say, you should really keep it to yourself”	27
4.3.6. Sub-communities and groups.....	28
4.3.7. An ambivalent community: supportive or problematic?	28
4.4. Purpose and goals	29
1. Matrix Purpose and Self-expression.....	30
4.5. Sense of safety	32
4.5.1. Gendered asymmetry.....	32
4.5.2. “But if you’re a pretty woman, it can be quite unsafe, and the more pictures you post, the more unsafe it becomes” – a typography of unwanted behaviour	33
4.5.3. “Really fun, but dangerous”	34
4.6. Link with intimacy: a platform beyond “pure sex”	35
4.6.1. “Something porn can’t do”	35

4.6.2.	“It’s like ‘this is allowed’, ‘this is okay’”	36
4.6.3.	“When I see something, I can easily check in with myself”	37
4.6.4.	Practicing kink: a learning process	37
4.6.5.	“Oh, that looks pretty” – kink, a form of art	38
4.6.6.	Tensions and ambivalence	39
5.	Discussion	40
	2. Spatial visualization of themes and subthemes	40
5.1.	Intent and purpose for use	41
5.2.	Connections with the community.....	42
5.3.	App’s affordances & content	44
5.4.	Ingroup versus outgroup.....	45
5.5.	Thoughts on gender	45
6.	Conclusion.....	46
7.	Themes for future research	47
8.	Bibliography	49
9.	Attachement: glossary.....	55
10.	Bijlage check-list gebruik gAI	58

1. INTRODUCTION

“BDSM” stands for “Bondage-discipline/Dominance-submission/sadomasochism” and is often used by the “communal scene” subculture as umbrella-term for a diverse range of alternative intimate acts, often sexual in nature. Another frequently used term is “kink”: an “inclusive linguistic term” (Weiss, 2011) that refers to a variety of sexual practices that are not mainstream, or “uncommon acts that bring erotic gratification to the practitioner” (Kien, 2011). Fetishes are erotic desires or obsessions centred around certain objects, objectified persons, or experiences “that creates sexual arousal or gratification” (Kien; BDSM Dictionary, 2023).

In the post *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2012) media landscape, BDSM related content became integrated in pop culture (Drdová & Saxonberg, 2019; Kratzer 2020; Langdridge and Barker in Stevens, 2014) in movies such as the *365 Days* series (2020) and *Babygirl* (2024); fantasy and dark romance trending on Book-Tok and Instagram; explicit “reels”; and profiles dedicated to kink on Instagram. As such, BDSM went from a subculture with vocal queer voices to becoming “intentionally mainstreamed” and heterosexualized (Kien), becoming easily consumable to multiple audiences and was soon part of the cultural imagination (Stevens, 2014). However, pop culture BDSM does not necessarily explicitly name, explain or even acknowledge the pillars on which communities stand, such as consent and how it works (Barker, 2013). The increased interest in kink and BDSM is reflected in the amount of academic research approaching the subject from different angles, depathologizing what was for a long time seen as a perverted disorder. SM in particular was categorized as sexual deviation or disorder in the Diagnostic Statistical Manual or DSM until a revision of the DSM-5 stated “that nonconventional sexual interests and behaviours are not evidence of psychopathology” (Bezreh et al., 2012, p.702; Dunkley & Brotto, 2018; and e.g. Hughes & Hammack, 2019 for further information). Scholars also note an increase in newcomers in online BDSM communities and physical spaces like dungeons (Kratzer, 2020). The kink community is very heterogenous and welcomes people from different intersections, embracing “a wide range of practices, relationship types, roles, desires, fetishes, identities and skills” (Weiss, 2006 in Kratzer, 2020, p.197). One of the intersections in the community is age. The Next Generation, or TNG, includes younger members between the ages of 18 and 35, and remains under-researched (Kratzer, 2020).

The members of BDSM-communities come together in digital or physical spaces (Drdová & Saxonberg, 2019). One of these spaces is *FetLife*, a Social Networking Site (SNS from here on) or “online social media community similar to Facebook where those interested in BDSM interact as individuals and within online groups across a variety of topics that are often but not exclusively of a sexual nature” (Graham et al., 2016, p.899). In the context of globalization, advancements were made in communication technologies and a “digital turn” shifted many social practices to digital environments (Mills, 2010). The convergence of media technologies and

growing importance of social media also saw the rise of phenomena like mediatization¹ and platformization². The content in these new (social) media technologies also underwent a change, through which “consumers increasingly [participate] in the process of making and circulating media content and experiences” (Banks & Deuze, 2009). De Ridder (2015, p.357) states that “[intimacies] have, especially for youngsters, become a habitual digital media practice creating intensive mediated sociabilities that set out challenges for the socio-cultural shaping of gender and sexual identities and the normative frameworks through which they are shaped”; meaning that content available on social media is made by the consumers and is about the consumers, often containing references to their personal, if not intimate, lives.

FetLife is a website that can also be downloaded and installed as a desktop app on a computer or phone. The app cannot be found on any kind of app store, which the platform team mentions on their website³. In this article, the words “app”, “platform”, “website” and “site” will be used interchangeably when talking about FetLife, for readers comfort and variation in word choice. The research goal for this project was to collect TNG’s lived experiences with(in) the online community on the app. Points of inquiry were how they found their way to it, whether they feel safe when using it, what they hope to experience on it, gain from it, find on it, and how they interact with other users.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Oftentimes, though not always, the practice of BDSM, kink and fetish involve a power dynamic (Graham et al., 2015). Gender and diversity studies focus on social power dynamics and systemic exclusion, making this discipline an optimal research perspective. The “marginalized” practices in BDSM (Kien, 2011) are founded on consent and respect as foundational bases for the community (e.g. Barker, 2013; Drdová & Saxonberg, 2019; Kratzer, 2020), that self-defines as intersectional and respectful of members’ self-identified titles, honorifics and roles. For these aspects as well, gender and diversity research fits the project, as the field analyses categories and their social meaning.

Kink communities are “collective sexual space[s]” (Bauer, 2020) that offer a sex positive perspective (Kratzer, 2020) and consist of people with shared sexual interests and practices that differ from mainstream society’s sexual prescriptions (Kien, 2011). As per Kien (2011), communities started organizing in the 1990s, and “BDSM

¹ A term chosen to “capture somehow the broad consequences for everyday life and practical organization (social, political, cultural, economic) of media, and more particularly of the pervasive spread of media contents and platforms through all types of context and practice” (Couldry & Hepp, 2013, p.191).

² “Platformization entails the extension of social media platforms into the rest of the web and their drive to make external web data “platform ready”.” (Helmond, 2015).

³ <https://fetlife.com/pwa>

as a sanctioned and policed set of practices between consenting adults began to institutionalize” to ensure ethical conduct (Bauer, 2020). Members come together in digital or physical spaces for conferences and educational sessions such as workshops (Drdová & Saxonberg, 2019). The communities exist as a safe and accepting space for marginalized identities, transgressive gender expressions and personal growth (Newmahr, 2011 in Graham et al., 2015).

Online Networking Sites or ONSs “can provide access to task advice, work-related support, and strategic information” in a context where networking has gained in importance, like in professional contexts (Davis, 2014 in Kim & Malek, 2018). Fay et al. (2016) explain that ONSs “provide a venue for virtual interactions and relationships between individuals [and can] facilitate arranging offline meetings and relationships”. One of ONSs categories are SNSs, described as online platforms that allows users to communicate with others in the same network, to share pictures and videos about oneself and viewing other users’ profiles (Subrahmanyam et al., 2008). These online communities aim to “create, maintain and present social relationships to their users as well as match them with each other” (Musiał & Kazienko, 2013). In online communities and social media, boundaries between public and private life blur (Baym & Boyd, 2012). Digital intimacies research has focussed on presentations of the Self in SNSs, theorizing that young people narrate their intimacy through daily digital practices (e.g. De Ridder, 2015); on the impact of gratifications, such as entertainment and network extension, in interaction with psychological traits such as collective self-esteem and online emotional openness when using SNSs such as Facebook (Zhang et al., 2011); and on identity disclosure on SNSs, analysed with walkthroughs (Duguay, 2016). These types of research have been mapping out how people from different identity intersections interact with digital environments and how they make sense of their performative practices narrating their intimacy for their networks to see and consume. Other academic works about discursive practices on dating platforms focussed on how users mediated their intimacies with the intention of meeting potential partners, concluding that hegemonic discourses impact users’ discourse and the way they frame their search for a sexual partner (e.g. García-Gómez, 2024). De Ridder also shed light on how societal changes and cultural expectations, as well as “the speed of modern life” added a commercial and rational dimension to dating, indicating a datafication of intimacy (2022).

Looking more into online sexual intimacies, scholars have researched the impact of digital technology on BDSM practices, showing a “development of a transgressive global community and subculture through online coordination” (Kien, 2011). Fay et al. (2016) analysed differences between fetish social networks and “classic” ONSs, with the use of CESNA community detection algorithm, concluding that users look for sexual contacts and platonic friendships. Another example focussed on intersectionality as a tool for digital media research, exploring how this perspective allows for critical research about notions of gender, sexuality and embodiment (De Vuyst et al., 2022).

Previous research on FetLife has looked into characteristics of European users, painting a picture of “complex hetero and homo-philic interacting communities” (Fay et al., 2016). One study on identity sentiment and self-evaluation of BDSM-practitioners recruited participants through FetLife (Hughes & Hammack, 2019); another focussed on the narratives about origins of kinky desires in self-identified kinksters, also recruited on FetLife (Hughes & Hammack, 2022); and Graham et al. (2016) report that almost 80% of their participants count their presence and activity on the platform as “a form of participation in the kink community” (Kratzer, 2020). Lastly, a content analysis of content posted in groups meant specifically for TNG on FetLife focussed on how newcomers learn about the community (Kratzer, 2020).

The present research project situates itself in the social cognitive constructivist paradigm, which acknowledges the importance of individual experiences as much as the role of socio-cultural context in the construction of meaning making (Martin & Sugarman, 1996). This paradigm is based on interactions between individuals and society, where “personal factors in the form of cognitive, affective, and biological events, behavioural patterns, and environmental events” impact each other (Bandura, 2009, p.266). Reality, then, is situated as an individual experience in a social construct, where multiple meanings exist and are vehiculated through language as a social tool (Dickins, 2004; Martin & Sugarman, 1996). Socially-mediated publicness will be examined in link to sexuality (Baym & Boyd, 2012).

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

A plethora of research on BDSM focusses on consent (e.g. Barker, 2013), neurodiversity (Pliskin et. Al, 2024), feminism (e.g. Ritchie & Barker, 2005), notions of transgression (e.g. Kien, 2011), and power dynamics (e.g. Drdová & Saxonberg, 2019) to name a few; yet an intersectional lens going beyond heteronormative binaries is often missing (Bauer, 2020), as well as research on sense of safety withing the community. Continuing to map out the multiplicity of subjects recognizes their existence, unique experience of BDSM, and the digital embodiment of their intimacy. Personal lived experience of the diverse participants and their experiences with intimacy and sexuality merits further investigation.

Young people’s online dating habits have received a lot of attention (e.g. Blackwell et al., 2015; De Ridder, 2015 & 2022) but have been researched less in the context of BDSM. The age of TNG encompasses ages 18 to 35, and this research focusses on ages 18 to 25; a population of university students and emerging adults. The research questions for this study examine whether gender identity influences participants’ app use, namely on purpose of use, sense of safety and management of intimacy as a consumable good. The questions are as follows:

- How do people of different genders experience the app?
- Do people of different genders use the app for different goals?
- Is there a link between the sense of safety while using the app and the gender of the user?
- How do people of different genders make sense of the display of their own intimacy and of the consumption of other user's intimacy?

3. METHODOLOGY

Reception studies analyse the meanings a media text can have for a certain audience in a specific context (Staiger, 2005). Digital media such as apps require methods to account for new dimensions of the media, with research focussing on audiences as producers of content and intimate data (De Ridder, 2022), (im)mobility (Büscher & Urry, 2009), mediated sociabilities (De Ridder, 2015), and “doomscrolling” without active consumption (Curran & Liebes, 1998) to name a few. With physical and digital spaces hybridizing in today's technological advancements, ethnography has been adapted to study social networking platforms and apps, becoming a tool to study audiences (Cousineau et al., 2019). In order to familiarize myself with FetLife, I made a personal account before starting the recruitment phase, and discovered how different features and tools worked. When this profile started receiving messages, I decided to reply in a superficial and polite, yet non-engaging and non-sexual tone, to get a sense of what interactions on this platform could look like.

3.1. RECRUITMENT

Working with a smaller sample size “allows for examination of the meanings individuals create for their experiences and the processes through which they create those meanings (Hesse-Biber, 2007 in Simula & Sumerau, 2017, p.8). The goal was to recruit a minimum of 12 and a maximum of 20 participants of different gender identities (male, female, non-binary, trans, etc.) between ages 18 to 25. I attended social gatherings of BDSM-communities to hand out flyers explaining the requirement of being an active FetLife-user, which I estimated at a frequency of minimum once a month; research goal; and interview procedure. In case this didn't result in enough interviews, I planned to expand the age requirement to 30 years old and to be flexible about the frequency of use, to include people who used to be active but had either reduced their frequency of use or stopped using the app altogether.

Participants were found through a mix of convenience sampling, to insure representation of different genders, and snowball method, since the candidates belong to a discreet world. The intention was to find 12 to 20 participants of different genders, to notice possibly significant similarities and differences between them, while

still being able to complete coding and thematic analysis within the relative short amount of time and depth of research possible for a master's thesis. Since the recruitment was slower and more difficult than predicted and the interviews started later than planned, the participant sample only contained the minimum amount of 12 people. The recruitment started through Kajira, an official student organization recognized by the University of Ghent, who provide a physical community for students who are interested in BDSM⁴. To communicate my search for participants, I handed out physical flyers, and after receiving authorization, I also posted it on Kajira's discord. I also attended a Munch organized by the city of Ghent. This is a social meeting in a local public space for members of the community to connect and chat in an informal setting (Graham et al., 2016). There, I was able to recruit participants as well. Multiple other social events were attended, but these yielded no new participants. All candidates were between 18 and 25 years old, with the exception of one person, aged 27 at the time of interview.

Interviews could either be done face-to-face on UGhent campus, or digitally through Teams. Six participants were interviewed in person and six participants chose for a digital interview. This was decided on since meeting-rooms on campus could not be booked after a certain hour or for a sufficient amount of time. This way, working participants or participants who attended class during opening hours could still have an interview suiting their schedule.

3.2. DATA-COLLECTION

The data-collection was done through semi-structured interviews, introduced by a participant-led platform-exploration/media go-along following Jørgensen's method (2016). The walkthrough method by Light (2016) was adapted to assess real use of the target-app, to focus on participants' lived experience instead of only the app's affordances and features. I observed how participants moved through the digital space of the platform and interacted with the app's different screens, noting how they use and give meaning to the features, technical aspects and symbolic elements (Light, 2016). Supporting questions about the app in general, personal use and experiences, and interactions with other users helped starting the interview, keep it on track, and suggest new themes in case the conversation got stuck. However, the aim was to get a natural and trusting conversation lead by the participant. The app's presence helped participants to "engage with the media materialities" and supported their narration and stream of experience (Jørgensen, 2016, p.42). In this first half, participants were not interrupted, and questions were only asked in case more information was needed for the analysis, in which case I used narrative interviewing techniques (Jørgensen, 2016). "Open touring questions" such as "Could you also tell me a bit about the buttons on the bottom?" were used when participants skipped over certain features, while "thematic touring questions" such as "Were there fields in

⁴ Kajira Gent | Homepage, n.d.

your profile that were important to fill out and ones you maybe intentionally decide to leave empty? Could you tell me more about your thought process behind those choices?” allowed participants to expand on topics they had not or insufficiently mentioned (Jørgensen, 2016, p.40).

Since personal accounts possibly contained nude pictures, and might inform the researcher information on the participant’s sexual preferences, I always offered to do the walkthrough from my account, giving participants control over the mouse or phone. For digital interviews, I would click on the features the participants were mentioned. When a participant in a digital interview had a preference for opening the app on the phone, I would open my account and show my phone screen to the camera, tapping features while the participants lead me through their tour. I had to get creative with hiding behind the screen of my phone, so the camera of the computer would not focus on me and blur the image. This did make for strenuous moments when the camera wouldn’t focus, which I solved by suggesting the participant could look on their own phone at the same time. Luckily, this didn’t happen too often, and the participants were very willing to make the best out of the interviews despite these technical issues.

The second half consisted of a semi-structured interview, inviting participants to reflect on their motivation, attitude and behaviour on the app; their sense of security; and personal meaning given to the content explored during the first part. A list of open questions organised in five categories structured the interview, and I added spontaneous questions where needed. The categories were Motivation, Attitude, Behaviour, Communication and sense of safety, and App use and sexuality. An audio recording of both parts of the conversation served as an alternative for taking notes, to avoid stunting the conversation, and to promote a natural flow to the interaction. This way, I could be fully present and attentive in order to build a bond of trust with the interviewee. All recordings were kept on the UGhent OneDrive, as advised by the Ethics Commission. Having roamed around the app before the interviews took place, I was able to recognize and follow the participants explanations, but the conversations lead me to discover features I was still unaware of. Since the topics are sensitive in nature, the social power dynamics between researcher and participant had to be balanced so that the participant would feel at ease. I prepared myself extensively by reading many articles about BDSM practices and attended certain Kajira discussion nights, where I learned the four rules of thumb they formulated to embody the notions of respect, consent, open communication and personal boundaries central to BDSM-communities⁵ (e.g. Bauer, 2014; Bauer, 2020; Graham et al., 2016; Rubinsky, 2018):

1. “Your kink is not my kink; but your kink is okay”: I am not there to judge kinks that my participants talk about. I keep an open and curious mindset and ask questions to clarify terms and concepts I am unfamiliar with. The goal is to create a safe and trusting space, where the participants feel encouraged to share freely.

⁵ This list was communicated orally at the start of discussion nights, and authorship belongs to Kajira.

2. Discretion: I protect the identity of my participants and remove all details that could make them identifiable.
3. “If you don’t feel like answering a question, you can simply say ‘pass’”: any question the participant doesn’t feel comfortable answering can be skipped. I also mentioned this in both information letter and form for informed consent. Skipping a question never happened during the interviews.
4. “In case you feel uncomfortable, you can leave the discussion”: I adapted this slightly, offering participants to let me know if they needed a break, if they wanted me to interrupt the recording, or if they wanted to stop the interview entirely. This was also mentioned in information letter and form for informed consent, but just like with the previous rule, this never occurred during interviews.

3.3. CODING

To analyse the interviews, all fragments had to be transcribed. Whisper, “an open-source speech-to-text tool developed by OpenAI” (*GenAI: Transcription of Interviews with Whisper | (Re)Search Tips*, n.d.) transcribes audio-fragments safely through the High Performance Computing web interface from the UGhent. All transcriptions were reviewed and many mistakes had to be removed during a thorough screening and were corrected by hand. The texts were then analysed thematically based on a modification of the model by Braun and Clarke (2006) and its critique by Lawless and Chen (2019).

Braun and Clarke’s model prescribes “a constant moving back and for-ward between the entire data set, the coded extracts of data that you are analysing, and the analysis of the data that you are producing”, until meaningful patterns become discernible (2006, p.86). This is structured in six phases (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.87):

1. Getting familiar with the data: the researcher reads the data and starts taking notes.
2. Initial codes: the entire data set undergoes a first coding of interesting features and the researcher collects data for each code.
3. Initial themes: the data from different codes are grouped into themes.
4. Reviewing the themes to make sure they work with the codes for the entire data set, which generates “a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis”.
5. Definitive themes: themes are attributed clear definitions and names.
6. Translating data into a report: the collected data is brought back in relation to the research question(s) and examples are selected to illustrate the analysis.

The analysis is to go beyond the simple overview of the collected data and gives meaning to the themes, exploring possible implications and explanations. This phase delves into the thematic map and attributes significance.

This method was critiqued by Lawless and Chen, who identified a missed opportunity connecting the analysis to the larger social context (2019). Their Critical Thematic Analysis (CTA) aims to connect “discourses, social practices, power relations, and ideologies” and examine how these interact (Lawless & Chen, 2019). They refer to Owen’s development of three criteria for analysis: “(a) recurrence; (b) repetition; and (c) forcefulness” (Owen, 1984 in Lawless & Chen, 2019). These criteria gain their importance in function of cultural identity positioning: participants’ utterings in an interview should be examined along with the questions “Who said this, and why does it matter?” (Lawless & Chen, 2019). The results coming out of the thematic analysis have to be brought into the network of knowledge, created through intertextual chains of discourses, and contextualized in hegemonic structures. CTA contains two analytical steps: a first round of open coding based on the criteria explained above, and parts of the interviews important to either the individual participant or the whole group are identified. This first part helps the researcher understand what the participants “were actually saying [...] about their social worlds” and how this is similar “across respondents” (Lawless & Chen, 2019, p.98). A second round of closed coding links this data to broader social structures, uncovering meanings for the themes found in the first round. They developed the following questions as a guide:

How are everyday discourses enabled and constrained by social systems, dominant ideologies, and power relations? How do macro- and micro-level discourses, practices, and systems intersect and reproduce dominations and oppressions? How can individual subjects become aware of dominant ideologies and work toward challenging them and promoting social justices? (Lawless & Chen, 2019, p.97)

The raw data of the interviews were coded through close reading. Since the first step described by Braun and Clarke (2006) was already achieved when correcting the interviews, the actual analysis started by their second step, developing initial codes. In the second reading, 16 themes were decided on inductively through back and forth comparisons between the different interviews. A third round of coding consolidated the thematic map, reorganizing and reducing the initial themes to five. Braun and Clarke are clear on the need to delimit themes from each other, but a certain overlap remained between them. Multiple different hierarchies of the themes were tested before finding a structure that worked best, and new names were attributed to the thematic groups: Intention, Connection with the community, App’s affordances and content, Ingroup versus outgroup, and Thoughts on gender. A last round of coding corresponded to the closed coding step by Lawless and Chen (2019). Owen’s criteria were taken into account through all coding rounds.

The first research question about app experience is answered in part by the walkthrough. The way participants explain how the app works gives an indication of their use: which features are described by a lot of information and which are gone over swiftly, do they add personal comments about their likes and dislikes, how do they characterize the features. Participants’ undirected narration about the digital environment characterizes a

media go-along and allows the researcher to access “authentic accounts of experience and practice” (Jørgensen, 2016, p.37). The data from the walkthrough is completed with participants’ answers about attitude and behaviour, and the “App’s affordances and contents” subthemes “ease of use/technical aspects” and “content, interests, and entertainment”.

The second research question about the app’s purpose is partially answered by the walkthrough, in case participants brought up their own circuit of use. Answers to the motivational questions, behavioural questions and questions about intent complete this data. The third research question about sense of safety is informed by the theme “Ingroup versus outgroup” and answers to the questions related to this specific topic. The theme “Connection with the community” contains a subtheme “Sharing the Self”, which answers the last research question on meaning-making concerning intimacy, along with answers to the specific interview questions belonging to the category of “App use and sexuality”.

4. RESULTS

The results will be structured as follows: a first section describes the participants. The analysis is mainly constructed based on the four research topics, namely general use, purpose and goals, sense of safety, and link with sexuality. An extra section about the online community bridges the sections on general use and purpose and goals.

4.1. PARTICIPANTS

The recruitment for this project yielded 12 participants between the ages of 18 and 27 years old. The names of the participants were changed to pseudonyms, to protect their identity. Some participants chose their own pseudonym and I made suggestions to participants who either didn’t have a preference or who suggested something that could be traced back to them through similarities with their FetLife username. The suggestions I made were always fitted to the participants gender identity and I always asked the participants to validate them.

Out of these participants, three identify as male or cis-man⁶, using “he/him”-pronouns; four identify as woman and one identifies as a demi-woman, with two using “she/her”-pronouns and three of these five persons using “she/they” or “she/them”-pronouns; and four participants locate themselves under the non-binary umbrella, with one non-binary person using “they/them”-pronouns, one agender trans person using “they/them”-pronouns, one genderfluid person using all pronouns but suggested “she/her” for the interview and larger

⁶ All gender and role identity are explained in the attached glossary.

research, and lastly one non-binary trans-masc individual who uses both “they/them” as well as “he/him”-pronouns interchangeably, who will be referred to by “they/them”-pronouns for the sake of clear readability. Many participants identify with more than one role, and two persons mentioned having evolved in their role identification and experience. At the time of interview, six individuals located themselves as “switch” or “switch”-related on the role-spectrum, with three participants used the term “switch”, one person using the terms “bottom, puppy, switch”, summarized as “switch leaning bottom” and two individuals identified as “sub leaning switch”. Three participants located themselves on the dominant side of the spectrum, with one Dom who sometimes dabbles in “switch” experiences, one daddy Dom, and one sadist Domina. The last three individuals located themselves on the submissive side of the spectrum, with one “bratty sub”, one “primal, bratty sub princess”, and one “sub-leaning brat, prey, and emotional masochist” who also has dabbled slightly with the dominant side as a sadist hunter.

All participants were asked how long they had been interested in BDSM, kinks, and fetishes (these terms will be used interchangeably from here on); whether they identified as a member of the community and for how long; and how regularly they used FetLife. Mario (man, 23 years old) has been interested in BDSM for the last two to three years, has recently started to feel more and more belonging to the community in the 6 months prior to the interview and uses FetLife daily. Blues (demi-woman, 24 years old) has been interested in it since she was 12 or 13 years old, not knowing the link with kink. She feels “a bit” part of the community, depending on the sub-communities, and mainly connects with members who like D&D (Dungeons and Dragons) and other tabletop games. She felt part of the community since joining FetLife, three years prior to the interview; and she uses the app once a week to once every other week, because she tries to decrease the amount of time she spends on social media. Sam (non-binary, trans-masc, 21 years old) has been interested in kink since they first came in contact with it, around the age of 13; they definitely feel part of the community since the past 2 or 3 years; and use FetLife once a day to once a week. Eva (woman, 18 years old) has had a fascination with BDSM since she was 12 and entered a physical community in the academic year of 2025-2026. She uses FetLife “quite often”, namely multiple times a week. Lyria (woman, 21 years old) has been interested in this world since she was about 12 to 13 years old and identifies as a member of the community: “and even if I didn’t *feel* that way, I *am* a part of the community, yes” (her accentuation) since she was 16, but got temporarily kicked out for being underage. She uses the platform weekly to monthly. Nyx (non-binary, 27 years old) has always been interested in kink, but specifically used kink-related terms since they were about 15 to 16 years old. Recently, they started to feel more and more belonging to the community and estimate their frequency of opening the platform at three to four times a week. Olivia (woman, 25 years old) thinks her interest started around 17 or 18 years old, she sought out the community when she was around 19 to 20 years old and started to feel a part of it around 22 years old. At the time of the interview, she was less present at events, which did affect her sense of belonging: “a community is made out of people, so it’s harder for me to keep hold of those identity

markers for myself [now that I'm less present at] munches or because I don't like to go to BDSM parties[...]. So that's a personal struggle I sometimes have". She uses FetLife once to twice a month, but used to be on it daily during her most active period. Jason (cis-man, 22 years old) has been interested in kink for the four years preceding the interview and has been a member of TNG community for the same amount of time. When he was most active on FetLife, he would open the app once a week, but he has been less active recently. Mushu (genderfluid, 20 years old) has been interested in kink since she was 14 to 15 years old and has felt part of the community since she came of age ("since I was legally allowed to"), but isn't very present at parties. She uses the app about multiple times a day: "I get bored easily[, so] I open it casually". Raptor (agender, 22 years old) estimates they became interested in BDSM around the age of 17 or 18, even though it was present before, because "I didn't really dwell on it"; and feels part of the community. Their use of the website fluctuates between once a month to once a week. Kevin (man, 24 years old) has actively been interested in kink for four years before the interview, because he didn't label it that before this point. He has felt part of the community for the same amount of time. His use of FetLife fluctuates and he opens it once to twice a week or less. Sophie (woman, 24 years old) has been interested in BDSM since she was 15 to 16 years old, about as long as she has been sexually active. She does feel part of the community, and has for the four to five years before the interview, but has been a less active member. She opens FetLife at least once a week.

The participants were organized by how much they shared about themselves and expressed themselves on FetLife based on five elements: (1) posting on the own profile, which includes pictures, writings, and status updates, as well as how much the participant filled out their profile; (2) posting in groups; (3) commenting on other user's posts in groups; (4) commenting on posts that other users made on their own profile; and (5) private messages, which includes both messaging other users first, as well as replying to messages they received. The participants' answers in the interviews were summarised as either a "yes" or "no" in the categories above. Having one profile picture, either a real picture or a cartoon, and either recognizable or not, but having no other pictures was counted as a "no"; and having pictures that could only be seen by friends was also counted as a "no". The evolutions of "yes" to "no" and the intentions of a "yes" in the future were interpreted to either "yes", "no", or were attributed a half point for "maybe" or "sometimes", depending on the context given in the interview. Then, all "yes"-answers were tallied per participants. This resulted a gradation going from one participant amounting to a level zero of sharing and expressing to one participant amounting to a level five of sharing and expressing. The choice to allow for half points and contextualized interpretation was made in order to establish in which order the interviews would be coded, so that every interview was as different as possible from the previous and next one in terms of gender, role and levels of sharing and expressing oneself.

4.2. GENERAL USE

4.2.1. FETLIFE: A HYBRID PLATFORM

FetLife is described as a hybrid platform combining multiple uses: it is a forum, a hotspot for information, a social network, and an event platform. Just like on other SNS's, becoming a member starts by making a personal account. The new user chooses a name and a profile picture or image and can then fill in general characteristics about themselves, such as their gender(s), role(s), orientation, pronouns, level of BDSM activity and what they are looking for on the platform. Levels of activity situates how often kink is practiced and can range from "not applicable" to "I live it 24/7", with in-between levels such as "curiosity" and a practice "in the bedroom". Users can also indicate what they do and do not use the platform for, with options for different relationships and dynamics such as "long-term relationships", "mentor", "play partner"⁷; or to find people for specific power dynamics such as "Master", "Dominant", "submissive", or "slave". FetLife can also be used to find platonic friends and community, or to find events organized by and for the community. Specifications about what someone is not looking for also includes "long-distance relationships", "one night stands" and "cybersex". Age and location can be added, as well as an "about"-section that can be as long or short as the user chooses, or remain non-existent. The profile is meant to be completed with a list of fetishes the user is "into" giving, receiving, watching, wearing, watching others wear, and/or "everything to do with it"; "curious about", with all the same sub-options; and fetishes that constitute a soft or hard limit⁸. Apart from username and image, all characteristics are optional. Options to remain anonymous include using a blank image, indicating an age such as "100 years old" and choosing Antarctica as location. It is also possible to indicate only the country or province, without specifying the city-location. Everything, including the username, can be modified at any time. An active profile can then post pictures, writings and status updates. A premium account can also post videos and audios.

When the profile has been built, the user is asked to "follow" a minimum amount of other profiles, in order to get content on the "Home"-page. This features the activity from the followed profiles: their posts, statuses, pictures, videos, writings, audios and "Ask Me Anything"-replies (AMAs). Videos and audios will be visible, but can only be played by premium accounts. This feed can also be customized to show only one of the content types listed above, or filtered with the "for you" or "events"-button. The "Explore"-page is divided into "Friends and Following", "Kinky and Popular", "Fresh and Pervy", and "Stuff You Love". Each of these sub-pages can filter pictures, videos, writings and commercial profiles in or out.

⁷ Mushu comments that indicating one is looking for play partners on the personal profile is usually interpreted as looking for a sexual dynamic instead of a more general and potentially non-sexual practice of BDSM.

⁸ FetLife defines soft limits as "personal boundaries [...] that can be negotiated", and "hard limits" as non-negotiable personal limits (Kinktionary - BDSM Dictionary | FetLife, 2026).

A user can enter public and private groups, and create a new group. These become visible on the “Groups”-page, along with other groups to explore. The groups house conversations and discussions around specific themes or interests, which can be sexual or non-sexual. A group contains a description and rules of conduct, posts made by members to start new discussions, and a tab with an overview of all members. Groups can have one or multiple administrators, or remain un-administrated. The “Event”-page lists in person and virtual events based on a customizable range around a specific place, and can be filtered by type of event. A “Places”-page allows for exploring kinksters, events and local groups based on the selected location. The “More”-button leads to the “Fetishes”-page, which works like the “Places”-page, but based on kinks and fetishes; the “Writings”-page, divided into “Fresh and Pervy” and “Kinky and Popular”; the “Kinktionary”, with definitions and descriptions of terms around kink, fetishism and BDSM; and the FetLife shop. This “More”-button also leads to informational pages about privacy, safety and other. The platform contains a messaging feature, allowing users to communicate privately; and notifications are sorted into general notifications and requests. Individual-related features contain the possibility to activate the personal AMA, look through the list of friends, liked and saved posts, and upcoming events that have been marked as “interested in” or “going”.

All participants commented on this hybridity of the platform and are convinced that it does need to exist, since it is “*the website of the community*”. Several of them suggested labels such as “a forum”, a virtual meeting spot, and a source of information. The platform is also compared to other social media’s when it comes to structure (Facebook and Messenger) and content (Reddit and Facebook and Instagram for the profile structure). Specific features cited by the participants are educational posts, the possibility to explore how others experience their kink-life, and the grouping of different functionalities.

4.2.2. OVERWHELMING OR EASY TO USE?

While the majority of the participants find the interface relatively intuitive, the content and structure of the platform feels overwhelming, chaotic and difficult to navigate. Criticism includes a lack of filters on the Explore-page, which Jason would introduce by a little questionnaire or a list of categories to choose from, as to tailor more to the user’s personal interests. Lyria suggests content on that page should be more personalize-able in function of certain themes, for people who don’t necessarily know the terms to look up new things. Secondly, the lack of structural organisation of themes imply a learning curve, though participants say that the same struggles remain. A third avenue of criticism is about users’ activity being visible for followers and others who browse the profile. Mushu and Raptor were the only participants who mentioned that this feature felt invasive and made them quite conscious about the posts they would “like” and react to. Lastly, the many different tabs and multiple ways to reach the same options feel unneeded and take some getting used to. This tension between overwhelming content and relative user-friendly interface is noted by participants of all genders, and while it determines the regularity of use, it has not pushed any of the participants to stop using the app,

because “It’s the easiest tool [...] and the most accessible. There is no other platform that combines so many BDSM-parties and stuff”.

Certain aspects of FetLife are well-appreciated, specifically those related to the construction of the personal profile. An extensive list of options makes it possible to articulate gender and role identity, preferences and boundaries with nuanced detail, allowing users to share as much or as little as they want other people to know about them. Participants find this an important tool for self-expression and to position themselves in the world of kink. Raptor’s experience illustrates this perfectly. They explain how they avoid unwanted attention, fetishizing or triggering comments and messages through tricks that are key in making their experience better, more enjoyable and for it to feel safer: “what the intentions of other people will be, it’s really kind of a Russian roulette. Like where and what the reactions will be and which audience you’ll reach”. They learned a lot about the general fetish-list, as it really helped them getting to know what they were into; so keeping their own list of fetishes up to date allows them to filter their feed to the content they are interested in, and users who are “into” or “curious about” it as well. Other participants find this list of fetishes too overwhelming because it has so many options, yet miss a lot of nuance by taking them out of their specific dynamics. Another appreciated feature in the message-page is the possibility to show what a user is *not* looking for on the sides of a conversation. Lastly, the “relationship”-feature offers the possibility of linking profiles to each other through different types of relationships is also appreciated, as it can create entire networks of connected users.

4.2.3. CONTENT: “WHERE ARE THE DUDES? THEY ALSO HAVE TO SHOW THEIR DICKS.”

Content on FetLife is described as varied and diverse, encompassing a wide range of formats, themes, and levels of explicitness that present users to explicitly sexual material as well as more reflective or educational content. Variety includes “lots of nudity, sex positive elements, educational texts, etcetera” (Blues), based on user interest and interactions. Having access to knowledge about kink and BDSM, but also to general information and resources, is an important part to the participants’ experiences. Discussions in groups and personal experiences of other users are cited as particularly enriching, but the diversity present on the app is not always seen as neutral.

Despite the apparent diversity, some participants note a lack of innovation, as the same ideas tend to circulate. This repetition can create the impression that certain practices, roles, or dynamics represent the “correct” way to practice kink, especially in pictures and videos that are “not really fabricated, but staged” (Blues), blurring the line between representation and prescription. These can also possibly reinforce certain assumptions around gender, identities and aesthetics, since the people who tend to share their experiences can be so used

to doing things a certain way that they do not necessarily question their practices. As such, content on FetLife can participate in shaping expectations and normative views.

Content is also perceived to be unevenly distributed across genders, showing more naked women: “Like, where are the dudes? They also have to show their dicks” (Mushu). This imbalance suggests that female or female-presenting bodies are structurally more visible on the platform and that certain genders are more frequently displayed. Participants also make a difference in types of representation, separating explicitly sexual content from more aesthetic and artful images. Explicit pictures can furthermore also be experienced as overwhelming, or remind of pornographic content, which shows that participants actively distinguish and interpret representations of different forms of intimacy.

Some noteworthy remarks wrap up this section of the analysis. Raptor noticed that more and more features are becoming upgradable only for paying members, and they worry that this might become even worse. Videos, for example, can only be posted and watched by paying members, which means that the people making and posting these videos don’t gain anything, while the owners of the platform do. Lyria adds that this “promote FetLife” paid version is unnecessary, because the app should be more about the community instead of marketability. When talking about the event-page, Sam mentions that certain events are only available if one registers through FetLife, which forces people to make an account on the platform if they want to attend. Recently, they also noticed the addition of an “AI generated”-label. This new addition to FetLife detects content that is probably AI-generated, automatically labelling it, which in their opinion is a good way to indicate that a certain image might be AI; but they are sceptical about the impact it might have. Olivia, Sam and Sophie mention that FetLife blocks certain types of content. Pictures showing blood play with real blood on it, either from menstrual blood or as a result of knife play for instance, tend to get flagged. This can sometimes be avoided by tagging the picture with “fake blood”, even if the blood is real. Content like rape play, on the other hand, does not get censored.

4.3. THE COMMUNITY ON FETLIFE

Sophie’s stance about the platform is very revealing about the tensions that exist on it, she explains that a lot of users don’t have good intentions and that they are not being monitored very well. This is also a problem in certain groups, where content can pop up that really doesn’t belong there, isn’t consensual, goes too far or just completely missed the concept and overstepped. She likes FetLife because there are not too many restrictions in terms of talking about certain kinks (refers to CNC), and calls it “a little place of lawlessness” where there is a lot of freedom, but deplores the consequence of having people on there with the wrong intentions. That is also why she will give warnings to submissive people she recommends the platform to: because new people, especially women and trans persons, are “new fish in the pond”, and certain users will take advantage of this. When recommending the app to dominant persons, she will warn them to be careful

in their behaviour too. But she would still recommend it, “just because it’s such a valuable source of information”. She misses information about safety and wishes there would be more on how to report someone, how it works, what happens and how this report will be processed. She did find certain groups that feel safe and comfortable, where there is a group feeling with people who protect and take care of each other. She feels safe in the way she uses the platform, because she implemented certain habits: “but that doesn’t make it okay. So I wouldn’t say I feel very safe either.”

4.3.1. CULTURAL GATEKEEPING?

The FetLife community is experienced as a meaningful and recognizable social space, characterized by shared interests and a strong sense of belonging; yet marked by internal inequalities, implicit norms, and a persistent tension between supportive and problematic interactions.

Getting to know other members of the community is important to new members: Mario for example explains that, “as a young person, it’s not always easy to step into this world, so I was hoping to connect with people who could tell me more about how things work” or what events to go to. FetLife is experienced as welcoming and inclusive, but certain factors also maintain the semi-closed character of the community. Raptor explains that a couple of years ago, it was possible to scroll through parts of the platform without making an account. They decided to make a profile in order to have access to more content and to be able to save posts. All participants shared their general impression many people on the app don’t really belong on it, as they focus their use to find dates and exhibit chasing behaviour. This will be developed further in another section.

The site and the BDSM-community in general can sometimes have elitist behaviours, although this is also a way for people from a specific subculture to delimit their space and protect their kink identity from outsiders. Lyria explains this quite well: “I find it a very nice app when it comes to expressing your interests, especially because the app is still quite underground. It’s really well-known in the community, but outside of that they did a good job to create a kind of boundary so that most normies wouldn’t be on here. But I did notice an increased presence of vanilla people, so I hope it will continue to exist in a sort of grey area. Because that might impact how much I like the app on the long term”. Genuine interest in BDSM, kink and fetishism is the criteria all but one participant mentioned considering before advising the app to new people.

4.3.2. DEMOGRAPHIC PERCEPTIONS

Several participants note that that many users are a bit older than them. This also gives them the impression that a lot of younger users are looking for other people their age, but they don’t always seem to find each other. For some of the participants, this disconnect impacted their use: “At the beginning, it’s all new [...] like as though you got a new toy, so you open it a lot, with the enthusiasm of wanting to see everything, wanting to discover. And also with the hopes of meeting new people. But that changed a lot. Because I also realized

that there were less younger people on the app, like when you scroll or you check out groups, events. That a lot of people are actually older than [my age], like... yeah thirties, forties... And you just don't have a connection with them". Jason, for example, feels that younger people might prefer something more accessible than FetLife, where everything is very graphic and users quickly get messages with very direct and explicit content, or insisting to meet up: "I also think that people who are just starting their journey prefer to start as a slower pace".

Another demographic characteristic appears as a gendered difference. Despite the impression that a lot of content shows female bodies, there appears to be more profiles of men. As per Jason, this unequal distribution of genders is typical on dating apps. While the expectation is that both genders are present equally on such platforms, there are more men compared to women. All participants repeatedly talked about how interactions are characterised by the gender of the different users. Mario gave a first example: "as a man, there is a lot of input and not a lot of feedback, while women seem to have the opposite experience. Which makes sense of course, when you get so many messages. [...] So it's always nice when there is a message waiting for me". No comments were made about non-binary persons in this aspect. Men appear to take more initiative, while women tend to be on the receiving end of this. Men also tend to come over as "pushy", which is a trend that make most participants feel uncomfortable.

4.3.3. NORMS AND (UN)EXPECTED BEHAVIOUR: "TALK ABOUT AN ICE-BREAKER"

Since BDSM, kink and fetish practices rely on the vulnerable disposition of the different players, the community recognizes the importance of respect and consent and value these as core principles. Treating other users with respect and addressing them in the right way is also expected on FetLife, both in general interactions as in private messages. Blues, for example, notes that in the kink community, most people are more concerned with notions of consent, which she enjoys, but she deplores the people who don't bother as much. Nyx, who is relatively new on the app, feels like people are quite respectful in their interactions, and estimates that that is a tendency in the kink community. However, they also add "I haven't been on here long enough to see the dark sides. But I'm sure there are some, it is a social media after all." This is corroborated by every single participant, who all had dozens of examples of situations where this went wrong, resulting in an important dissonance between the ethically aware disposition of the community and the inconsistent practices experienced on the app.

Starting a conversation with a stranger by addressing them with a title could be interpreted as a sign of respect to their identity. However, the participants experience this as unneeded, because it pushes them into a role and a dynamic that does not exist. This is experienced across all roles: as a Dom, Mario sometimes feels that

certain things are expected from him and that he feels weird about it. He expresses that it shouldn't be necessary to embody or take on roles when people who don't have a dynamic are interacting with each other. Lyria actively makes educational comments when she notices this type of "bad behaviour", which she attributes to older men, or to new members of the community who not aware of certain unsaid rules about giving nicknames such as "little princess" or titles without consent. She will explain that something like that is "not done", and possibly also say that something is not appreciated and to think again before sending certain things to other users. Kevin has been in similar situations and expresses annoyance about the messages he receives from "random men".

Unwelcome messages are sent to users of all genders and all roles. Jason speaks about people using graphic and demanding language "in a creepy way, that makes you very uncomfortable". He says that his female friends get these messages characterized as "graphic, demanding, direct, like suggesting to meet, or detailing what they want to do with them [also known as "fantasy pushing"⁹]" even more, "almost as soon as they make their profile". This makes women more vigilant, since they are often preyed on. Jason only answers messages from people who are friendly, "which doesn't happen often". Even though his profile indicates he is not interested in men, he did once receive "a random dick pic" in his messages, which was a bit of a shock: "talk about an icebreaker!"

Authors of these unwelcome messages wilfully ignore parts of a profile that are inconvenient to them. Eva usually receives messages from men who will quote parts of her profile to her in order to show interest, but ignore every mention of her not being into men. While men tend to "always project their fantasies", both in comments to her pictures as in messages, the only message she ever received from another woman was a real (non-sexual) compliment. She draws the parallel with real life, in which "women handle it differently, they're just... nicer". In her opinion, women on the platform are more often looking for community, while men seem to use it for dating- or even hunting purposes. Blues has received comments from strangers on her pictures that were inappropriate and felt "icky". Some comments wouldn't have anything to do with the pictures, like solicitous messages from people expecting things from her, who feel it's their right to comment things like "come to daddy": "Uncomfortable, yes. That's really the word I would use, because it feels almost as if you're being assaulted".

Lyria says there is a lot of sexualisation in her comments, but that it's logical on this kind of platform and that she just has to take it, knowing what platform she is using; "but that doesn't make it okay and I'm not trying to make excuses for it", and that is something a user should be aware of when posting more revealing photos.

⁹ FetLife defines this as something that "happens when someone involves another person in their sexual thoughts or fantasies without that person's consent. It can feel invasive or objectifying - especially when it comes out of the blue or isn't part of an established dynamic." (Fantasy Pushing | FetLife, 2026) The kinktionary's section on this topic contains a list of all actions that count as fantasy pushing with a nuanced explanation about why these things are experienced in a negative way, even though they can also be welcome in case of consent, and a paragraph that situates this behaviour in online spaces.

She thinks peoples' roles also have an impact, along with their gender: "when they see a woman who is smaller and a sub, they will approach you, thinking you're naïve, especially if you're young. They might play the long games because from the perspective of a sub towards a Dom, they're supposed to show a sense of responsibility". Just like Lyria, Olivia has been contacted by people playing "the long game", who message her about the interests she listed on her profile and she thinks they are having a genuine chat until they turn it sexual. In Olivia's opinion, the app is "really fun, but dangerous", especially for people who are in a vulnerable position. Young women would easily get messages from people willing to "teach it to them" and some, who are new to the community, might agree to it. She feels frustrated and disgusted when reading some of these comments because many don't respect boundaries. Especially when they misinterpret her roles, even if they didn't do it with bad intentions, they are sticking an identity on her that is not correct, when she paid so much attention to how she worded everything on her profile. When asked about the kind of messages she receives on the platform, Mushu says one can receive really creepy messages and recalls a conversation she was having with a young submissive man who was new to the community and suddenly, he sent her an unprompted video in which he was urinating. She often feels a lot of unease when reading the messages she receives, especially when they come from older men, when she is barely an adult: "Especially when there is like a 20 year age gap or something, just the fact that you're interested in me... I'm more vigilant in those cases".

4.3.4. AVOIDING "RANDOM DICK PICS"

Participants try and avoid these types of interactions as best as possible with the tools and features that are available. Sophie filled in her profile as much as she could, in the hope it would filter out the people who might send her unwelcome messages, especially pushy men or those who use explicit slurs. The messages from people Olivia doesn't know arrive in her message requests, so that "a random man sending me a dick pic" can be filtered out of her inbox. Raptor uses the same filter, but they still often get these messages from cis-gender men who identify as straight, but want to be sexual or have a BDSM experience specifically with trans persons who they push in the role of a straight, usually female cisgender person:

They get off on it, but it's hard because this is my identity and how I go through life, so it feels as though I'm not taken seriously, or I'm being fetishized in a way I don't want to. I've also seen people pretend they're trans because they think it's kinky. [...] I think they get a kick on the idea they can shape someone into what they want, and they specifically look for trans persons to do so. Or people who pretend to be trans. (Raptor)

They mostly receive sexual messages from people usually older than 50 who want to meet or 'train' them. To them, messages can be worse than comments because comments are public and can motivate others to add more in the same tone. They feel safer when this happens in messages rather than comments under a picture: "Usually with these messages, I read the first three words and if I already think 'wow, I'm not going to continue

reading', I just close it again. Because I'm also not going to chase triggers. Certain things can be really heavy [to read] so I find that's a very strong thing to do for myself". They have also blocked people who start a nice conversation before starting to act aggressively when not getting what they want.

The techniques users come up with to avoid unwanted attention are not always very efficient and they do not help with the emotional toll of being on the receiving end. Sophie thinks the monitoring of the platform should be better, because there is a lot of predatory behaviour, also towards new people who don't have a lot of knowledge yet and receive messages along the lines of "I will teach you" or "I'll explain it to you". The comments she receives on her profile picture are very demeaning, either explaining what they want to do to her, general sexual comments or inappropriate comments that can get very specific and concrete. She deplores that that is all they can think of commenting: "like, is that all you can think when you see this? Isn't there more you could think of saying? It's just... it just feels icky". While such comments on themselves don't make her feel unsafe, they do contribute to a general feeling of unease and unsafety: "It doesn't sink in, extreme comments or dick pics, I didn't ask for this, I don't need to get these thrown in my face. I would also never meet up with someone I met through the app, because... this is the kind of people that's on here, how are you any different?". To her, it's common social responsibility to be respectful and polite to each other, which is also her attitude when she comments or sends a message, but she will be careful about commenting on a man's content: "because then you open the gates to them messaging you. I know it seems like I'm bashing on men, but it's just the general experience with that group. Though there are exceptions where it's a woman, but my bad experiences are mostly with the dominant cis-man type". When asked about her experience with non-binary and trans persons, she laughs and says "They are fucking respectful! It don't matter! [sic]".

4.3.5. "IF YOU HAVE SOMETHING NEGATIVE TO SAY, YOU SHOULD REALLY KEEP IT TO YOURSELF"

Sam is mindful and respectful when commenting on others' posts and consider how they word things, as they don't want to overstep any boundaries. When receiving a message about something they aren't into, they just reply to say that and ask not to do it again and usually either don't get a response, or a reply from the other person saying they won't do it again. Lyria will only comment if she has something positive to say, because one never knows what another person is struggling with: "even more on this kind of app, there are a lot of people that went through something. They are trying to come into their own, so if you have something negative to say, you should really keep it to yourself". When commenting on other people's posts, she will hype them up with compliments, but will do it quicker for a woman than for a man, as she feels men may have ulterior motives.

The participants all indicated they are mindful about their communication style and tone. Their intention is always to be respectful, open, curious and friendly; “not a demanding tone, like you see a lot on FetLife” (Jason). Every participant that interacts with other users also pays attention to other people’s boundaries and overstepping these is a fear for some, particularly the women and non-binary participants. Raptor, for example, uses emojis to make sure people wouldn’t misinterpret their comment or message. This illustrates the kind of attitude and behaviour that is desired in the community.

4.3.6. SUB-COMMUNITIES AND GROUPS

The Group-page on FetLife houses all sorts of different sub-communities that can be based on sexual or non-sexual interests, specific kinks, and the expression of a specific identity that can but does not have to be kink-related. Examples mentioned by participants are groups for people who enjoy tabletop games, groups for users with autism, and groups for daddy Doms. These micro-communities share a lot of information, insider knowledge and ideas or suggestions on how to try new practices, as well as personal experiences. Some groups are meant for specific audiences, such as the group “Novices and newbies” meant to educate newcomers on rules and codes of conduct in the community. Others serve the purpose of connecting likeminded people, or allow users to post personal adverts. The type of group can impact the experience, which is why multiple participants recommend to remain critical about the content that is available in the group’s conversations.

The possibility to link profiles by adding different types of relationships result in the construction of networks. This can also have a negative impact, because interacting with one dubious or “bad” profile heightens the chance of seeing more of these profiles. One of the participants cited an article that came out in a Belgian newspaper about a member of the community who had been accused of assault by his partner; “and then you go to that profile and you think “But how is it possible that he has that many followers?””. Olivia explained the emergence of little communities of women or of men where people vouch for each other as “safe and trustworthy users”. To her, it’s interesting that people acknowledge the need to create safe spaces, though it says a lot that such initiatives are needed. She tells the story of a man who was refused entrance in such a network and was so vexed about the situation that he started his own. This triggered a whole debate, with people speculating on the safety of the new network, since he had been refused himself but would vouch for others; or speculating on possible nepotism of the original group, wondering if they had selection criteria that were too elite to begin with.

4.3.7. AN AMBIVALENT COMMUNITY: SUPPORTIVE OR PROBLEMATIC?

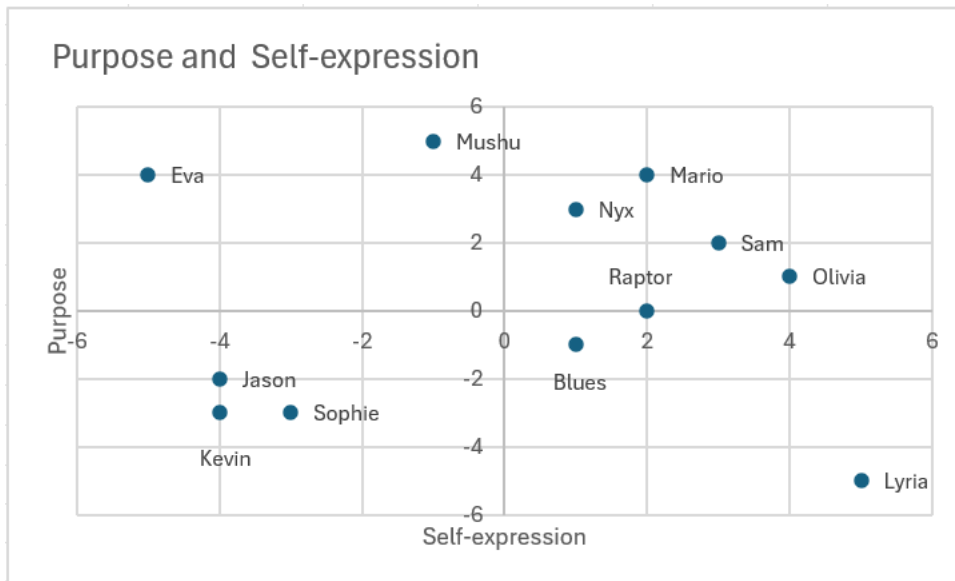
Mushu defines the platform as a pillar to the community, which allows members to connect and communicate. This shows that FetLife is not “just” an app, but a space where kinksters can find the feeling of recognition,

belonging, and people of similar interests who make them find less alone in their curiosities. The platform can also function as a digital anchor of the offline community. Trends about positive experiences also include feeling acknowledged, gain access to resources and personal experiences, and find support. Since the community is not homogenous, it fundamentally contains contradicting elements.

The platform is not owned by a mega-corporation, which is an added bonus to Sophie, but it also explains why certain groups are not as well monitored and certain behaviour is not getting flagged. This is what makes the platform a real double-edged sword, because the user has to filter a lot through information that is sometimes very toxic. In Olivia's opinion, people are responsible for how they experience FetLife: "What you get out of the app largely depends on what you put in", because the profiles a user follows and the fetishes they add will impact what they see on their feed. Everyone has their own responsibility in blocking people with toxic behaviours and think critically about what they read. When asked if she likes the app, Lyria answers "sometimes I like the people on it a bit less. But I come across just as many problematic people on TikTok or Instagram, or in real life in a café [...] It's also just something that comes with this app; you'll find very questionable people on it every once in a while". She advises to keep a good moral compass for oneself and to stay safe.

4.4. PURPOSE AND GOALS

Use of FetLife can be situated along two important dimensions, namely self-expression and level of purpose. A horizontal axis, named on the left side in vertical fashion, indicates how much a participant shares information about and express themselves as an individual. The left pole indicates anonymity, with participants who prefer to remain as untraceable as they can be, while the right pole is characterized by publicness, with participants who share more about themselves. A vertical axis, named on the bottom of the diagram, situates the goal for app use, going from a goal oriented and specific use for the bottom pole to a use for entertainment and scrolling through content at the top pole. This matrix helps dividing the participants along these four conceptual categories, with a left upper category for anonymous users who look for entertainment, a right upper category for users who take a more public approach and look to be entertained, a lower left category for anonymous users with a specific goal, and a lower right category for goal-oriented users who share more about themselves. This matrix is found below.



1. Matrix Purpose and Self-expression

App use can be characterized as a form on relaxation and entertainment, where participants opened the platform “to see if anything interesting came up and fear of missing out” (Mario), out of fascination or curiosity, to check for notifications, and a general need to feel surrounded by similar people. Multiple participants who open FetLife for this purpose mention that they cannot use the app just anywhere, because there is no feature that allows for a more discreet use. Suggested solutions include a more neutral first page, so one could open their messages without accidentally flashing the person sitting next to them, the possibility to send disappearing pictures, like it is possible on certain other social media apps, and the possibility to adapt a text message after it was sent.

The participants who adopted a goal-oriented approach would open the app to search for events; for social interactions in groups; notifications for messages, friendship requests, and general notifications such as invitations to an event; for self-expression; and to find information. Blues also shifted her use from scrolling to purposefully opening the app for a specific goal, in order to avoid the impact social media can have: “I think I was a bit addicted to it at some point, so I try to not be on it so much now. I used to open it every day, and yeah with social media, it starts to... it impacts your brain and how you feel and how you think about yourself and how you think of others, and... It’s not healthy.” Olivia shared a very personal story about a different kind of unhealthy use of FetLife. When going through a difficult period, she would push herself to post pictures of herself every day, the same way someone might post selfies on other social media to get likes, and can feel good about themselves again. “I used it as a form of self-validation, [...] so I would do that on FetLife, to kind of validate the sexual aspect of myself again.” This quickly turned into a performative habit that only worsened her mental state: “this really caused a break, so I was like “okay, stop. Take a break from FetLife, because this is unhealthy.” Following this phase, she decided to go through all her pictures and writings and deleted

everything that didn't resonate with her anymore, so she wouldn't be reminded of it. Now, she still sometimes finds it difficult when scrolling through content, "because I'm not that far into my healing journey yet and it can impact my self-image."

Most participants discovered FetLife through recommendations made by friends from their physical community, two participants found it when researching on the internet and one participant heard about it on a television program. The intentions in making a profile are varied and multiple: four participants were looking for information, three participants had the desire to meet more members of the community, one participant wanted to find events, three participants initially had hopes of meeting a romantic or play partner, two participants were looking for a sense of belonging, similar people, or generally wanted to feel less alone, one person wanted to be able to connect with people met at real life events, another intention was to express the identity, mentioned by one participant, and three participants named curiosity and access to content. Kevin explains that he was looking to find good and qualitative information on BDSM, something he was missing when first entering this world. Nyx only made their own profile very recently so that they could find out more about kinks that involving certain risks, so that they would be aware of safe and respectful practices. They also like learning about kinks they hadn't heard of before and the different ways they can be practiced. Blues decided to make her profile "mainly to meet people, to be more active [...] in the community and meet people like me and... to get some action? [laughs]". Olivia and Sophie initially wondered if they might find a partner to practice BDSM with, though they both moved away from that idea. Mushu hoped to make connections on a website specifically designed for BDSM, Lyria made her account to keep in touch with people from her physical community without having to mix this with her personal life and to express herself on kink-related topics "without placing things on the wrong sites, which is debatable whether FetLife is the right space for it, but to me it's a good fit".

Across participants, the effective use of the site impacted their initial motivation for making an account. Trends show less random exploration and a more focussed, goal-oriented use; and a slight gendered difference is noticeable, with men mostly mentioning FetLife as source of information and of events, and women and non-binary persons being more aware of the risks around a dating platform. The following six functions of the app are the current motivations:

1. Source of knowledge (most important feature, mentioned by all participants)
2. Self-expression
3. Event platform
4. Social interaction
5. Meeting play partners (this is very limited and most participants advise against this use)
6. Entertainment

Sam comments on how getting familiar with the app's affordances as well as the online community impacted their use: "Now, I also post on it sometimes. Because you get more comfortable with the app and you get more comfortable with yourself". They mainly open the app to chat with friends, to find information about a kink they have questions about, or to read general experiences of real people, which they find more enriching than technical explanations or porn. Nyx also mentions they simply likes "to look at pretty pictures". Raptor's use was impacted by changes in their physical community that made the app less needed: "Because now I'm in contact with other kinky people almost daily. And I didn't have that before, so I used the app more often because I craved contact with other similar people." Mushu is very motivated to change her use in the future, as she wants to start sharing more pictures of herself. Mario's journey of discovery and discovery of groups meant specifically for newcomers taught him a lot, making his app use "smarter". He has learned how to write better and more thought-through messages, restructured his profile and has a better idea of what he wants to look up and how to do it.

4.5. SENSE OF SAFETY

4.5.1. GENDERED ASYMMETRY

Sense of safety is a topic that came up all through the interviews, and it was revealed as a very important aspect that colours the use and the experience of this use. Many participants have a latent sense that they need to be vigilant, because the stories about uncomfortable interactions described in a previous section are not isolated events. Instead, there is a pattern of constant and persistent "wrong" behaviour that tends to come from male users, often older men. For Olivia, the danger comes from not knowing who is behind the other screen, unless you know them personally.

When recommending the platform, all participants would include either a warning or a disclaimer to potential future users. These can include warnings to be careful and safe, especially to (people who identify as) women, to set their limits and guard them well. Male participants felt relatively to entirely safe and experience less unwanted interactions. When asked if he feels like his role and/or gender have an impact on whether he feels safe on FetLife, Kevin says he thinks so and adds "I feel like it can be a very toxic environment, and that if you're anything other than the dominant heterosexual man, there is a good possibility you will be treated with disrespect" and "as a man, I find it disappointing how other men use this app". Jason comments that his female friends started getting these messages "almost as soon as making their profile". Indeed, female and non-binary participants experience a lot of unrequired attention. This manifests as unwelcome explicit approaches and fantasy pushing in either comments or private messages. People who identify with sub-leaning roles are also more vulnerable to toxic behaviour.

4.5.2. “BUT IF YOU’RE A PRETTY WOMAN, IT CAN BE QUITE UNSAFE, AND THE MORE PICTURES YOU POST, THE MORE UNSAFE IT BECOMES” – A TYPOGRAPHY OF UNWANTED BEHAVIOUR

The distinction between sexual and non-sexual aspects mentioned previously about the content comes back in a lot of the interviews when reaching the questions about sense of safety. This is situated in part to the fact that BDSM and kink aren’t necessarily sexual experiences for everyone, and in part to how users behave in their interactions with each other. When informational, artistic and identity-related experiences are dragged into a sexual logic by another user, this other person’s projections are put above the original self-definition in order to serve their desire.

Participants then experience immediate sexualization and a disregard for their boundaries. They receive explicit, detailed paragraphs of fantasy pushing from complete strangers, occasionally with nude pictures. Profile information such as preferences, boundaries and indications about unwanted contact are systematically ignored. Some users go with a more subtle approach, starting friendly conversations with seemingly trustworthy behaviour before turning the interaction around to a sexually charged subject and tone, which participants feel manipulated by. In some cases, identity markers such as sexual preference, gender identity and practices get reinterpreted. The fetishization of Raptor’s trans identity is a prime example for this. They also elaborated on their interest in the ABDL-kink (Adult Baby Diaper Lovers¹⁰). Some people who practice this kink also do it in a sexual way, which can be very triggering, because age regression to Raptor is a strictly non-sexual way to connect to a safe space. The reframing of interest in non-sexual ABDL as an object of desire is in the same line of patterns of fetishization of marginalized members of the community. To avoid the fetishization and sexualisation of this interest, they never “like” posts about this content, since personal activity is publicly available for anyone to look up and contact them.

Many participants have developed strategies to improve their sense of safety. Certain profile settings can be turned on for more privacy, and a filter can be used on the inbox in order to sort messages by non-friends into message requests. The profile can be made more anonymous by setting the location on Antarctica and the age on unrealistically high numbers. Posts can be set to visible for friends only, and users can also decide to share less to practically no information about themselves. Problematic users can be ignored, blocked, or reported, but there is not a lot of information available about what happens to a profile that has been reported. Raptor mentioned that a profile they had reported in the past was still active at the time of the interview, suggesting

¹⁰ This is defined on FetLife as “Adult baby diaper lover (ABDL) is a term used to refer to someone who enjoys (or is curious about) age regression, age play, and/or the mindset of being a baby or young child. This can include wearing baby clothes, using pacifiers or bottles, playing with toys, or seeking comfort and caregiving in a childlike role” (Adult Baby Diaper Lover (ABDL) | FetLife, 2026).

that the platform may not have taken any action. Some users also adapt their behaviour by not or no longer posting any content, not engaging in any interactions or avoiding to “like” content. Lyria has had to deal with stalkers and doesn’t advise to block them: she leaves the chat open so they can continue to send any further sexualisation and threats they want, so she can have proof in case she ever encounters them in person or has to go to the police. As per her, blocked people could act out because of the frustration, and if they know in which area you live, that can be dangerous. She wonders whether the police would be of great help, since kink still holds a big taboo in society, but she knows which habits can keep her safe. The key insight from these strategies is that safety is the active responsibility of the user.

Certain participants therefore also consciously reflect on aspects like the ability to set and guard strict boundaries, and the level of maturity and responsibility of other people before recommending FetLife. Blues is unsure whether she’d recommend the platform to girlfriends who don’t have strong boundaries, stating that members have to dare to say “no”. She thinks she would rather recommend it cautiously and suggest using it together, even offering for them to text her if they need help, so they can have access to someone who knows their way around the platform. Like Blues, many participants are careful when recommending the app to potential victims or people who might be vulnerable. Sophie also makes sure to warn men against certain types of behaviour, explaining that these are unwelcome on the platform. Before advising the app to someone, Lyria first reflects on the person’s emotional ability to deal with this kind of platform and whether they will be trustworthy towards other users and responsible enough to exist in this specific network. She knows her judgement might be biased with her personal criteria, but she feels a sense of responsibility linked to her position as somewhat of a spokesperson for the local offline community.

4.5.3. “REALLY FUN, BUT DANGEROUS”

While all participants are aware of the potential dangers of FetLife, the overall experience is not negative for everyone. Toxic behaviour and negative experiences occur systematically and undeniably. Participants use their awareness of this to critically inform their use of the platform. Still, most participants are quite positive about it and like the app for everything that it offers. They enjoy the sense of belonging, the access to knowledge, and the sense of freedom to openly discuss the topics of BDSM, kink and fetishes with other people who share these interests. In a sense, FetLife also “started to feel safe”, for the participants in more vulnerable positions, whether they use extra strategies to improve this or not.

Mushu thinks the app has a great potential if one already has a real life community:

It’s a good way to channel the principles of the community and teach people the good forms of BDSM, with Safe Sane Consent and Risk Aware Consensual Kink etc. But there is also a risk. Because I’ve noticed that some young people, they just... they start on FetLife and don’t have a physical

community and they kind of use it to hunt people to partner with. And that worries me, that they either will get a toxic mentality, or that they will find toxic partners and they might be like ‘oh yes, they are the chosen one, they speak the truth’. While, if you have a physical community, you can hear different opinions and [FetLife] will strengthen your knowledge and allow you to keep in touch with your physical community. (Mushu)

So far, she doesn't feel unsafe yet, but she expects she might if she starts sharing more revealing pictures, which is why she feels strongly about members of the community having access to self-defence classes. She worries that people might be more motivated once she posts pictures of herself. Yet she wants to risk it: "I don't want to live in fear. I've always wanted to show my body. I'm very proud of it. So I'd like to show it to the world. I want to get proof that people can see me as attractive. I want to be desired. Who doesn't?" This remark makes the perfect bridge to the next category.

4.6. LINK WITH INTIMACY: A PLATFORM BEYOND "PURE SEX"

4.6.1. "SOMETHING PORN CAN'T DO"

At first glance, FetLife appears to contain a visualized Sodom and Gomorrah with no taboo, that might shock uninformed outsiders to the community with the amount of bruises and more "extreme" kink practices. To newcomers, the first browsing around FetLife can be quite shocking as well. Further use then creates an interest in and an appreciation for the artful displays and the different ways in which BDSM and kink can be practiced. Jason describes this process as one of desensitisation, where one gets used to seeing certain pictures, images and topics.

When participants describe the platform, however, they rarely focus only on the sexual aspects of it. Both the display of their personal intimacy as the consumption of other users' intimacy are linked to an exchange of knowledge, inspiration and self-development, rather than the immediate satisfaction of a sexual urge. Multiple participants explicitly name a difference with pornography, highlighting the alternative functions of the app as information, inspiration and community. Something that comes back multiple times is that content on FetLife portrays real life, with real people who are practicing kink because they want to: "it's something porn, for example, can't do" (Mario), instead of being paid for it, which is what makes the platform attractive. There is an agreement that the platform could perfectly be used in a more sexual way, but that was "never really entirely" the goal for them.

4.6.2. “IT’S LIKE ‘THIS IS ALLOWED’, ‘THIS IS OKAY’”

For multiple participants, sharing their intimacy is connected to the display of a vulnerable part of their identity that they cannot express anywhere else. They show themselves and position themselves into the network of the community. This is possible across several features of the platform, where users can implement different strategies depending on how much they want to share about themselves. Personal profiles are the first space in which users construct their online persona. Preferences and sexual orientation, pronouns, and labels for gender identity and roles function as base layer. Recently, FetLife added more variety in role labels. Many participants find it overwhelming to have so many options, especially without receiving definitions or descriptions that can help them make a choice; but they are enthusiastic about the possibility to find the exact term to describe their identity. This is viewed as a way to welcome diversity.

They really got more inclusive [and] more playful. So I think that it really helped, that they created these new roles, because I felt more recognition about my personal BDSM experience. [...] It doesn't have to all be Dom, sub, slave, fetishist, kinkster, there can be more playfulness and alternative things. [...] I think there is more nuance and I like that a lot [,] I have the feeling they became more inclusive and personal. [...] I'm really happy about that. (Olivia)

Posting personal content, whether through pictures or written text, constitutes the second layer for self-expression, allowing for recognition and a sense of belonging. Participants mention how this form of exhibitionism helps them connect with others who understand them, who also know and understand this world and can engage in kink-aware conversations. This is described as “being surrounded by other people that make you feel you’re equal, you’re seen and you feel at home” (Blues). What appeals to Nyx in the idea of sharing pictures on the platform is to have a space in which they feel safe to “literally and figuratively” expose themselves. Another important aspect participants experience on the app is self-acceptance. Their presence in this network helps them embrace themselves and their identity: “it’s like ‘this is allowed’, ‘this is okay’ [...], it gives you a more open feeling about your body, a kind of empowerment”.

Participants who share less information about themselves and prefer to remain as untraceable as possible do not see this choice as a contradiction to the kind of platform they are on. Even though they acknowledge that someone needs to make the content and “share things and talk about their private life in order to build a base of knowledge” (Jason) in order for them to consume it, this level of vulnerability is not for everyone. These participants highlight their informational use and prefer to be able to choose with whom they talk about their personal practices. That isn’t a possibility when posting about it on a public platform, where they have no control over who will access it: it becomes available for anyone to read and judge. On top of that, this information shared online is saved and continues to exist “on a server somewhere” (Jason).

4.6.3. “WHEN I SEE SOMETHING, I CAN EASILY CHECK IN WITH MYSELF”

The consumption of other users’ intimacy is described in terms of accessing knowledge resources. Reading these stories and seeing how practices can be embodied in different ways serve to inform participants’ self-reflexion and self-discovery. Personal preferences can be explored and refined: “When I see something, I can easily check in with myself. Do I find this arousing? Do I find this exciting? Do I find this appealing? That way I can define for myself what I find interesting and what I don’t.” (Kevin). This statement clearly shows an intention of getting to know oneself better and a desire to keep exploring what exists, instead of settling into a fixed identity.

Accessing other users’ experiences allows for a normalization of certain desires that are taboo in general society. Being interested and curious towards the naked body is recognized as a normal human behaviour and being a part of this community allows participants to know that it is okay to like certain things. Sam also suggests that it makes the learning process more personal, which is very different from pornographic sites and from “rigid, clinical explanations”.

The concept of voyeurism then becomes non-sexual, it informs and inspires personal practices. Participants repeatedly mention watching other people’s content to see how other people, whether they are personal friends or aspirational content creators, practice BDSM and what kink means to them. This effectively shows a process of cognitive processing of the individual identity as well as an open mindset towards the implementation of new practices. They are also happy to share their own tips and tricks, adding to the network’s knowledge base:

Like when someone asks ‘I’ve been wanting to learn this or try this for a long time but don’t know how to start, how did other people start?’, or ‘how did you guys do it’, and then I can be like ‘oh, I tried this and this and this’, or ‘I try to go from here to there, then make that switch, this goes smooth’, so yes really informing. But it’s very neutral, not really sexually tinted. (Sophie)

4.6.4. PRACTICING KINK: A LEARNING PROCESS

Kink is explicitly described as a skill to be honed, something to be developed and built up over time, a practice one can get better at in order to play at more advanced levels. Approaching kink and BDSM from this angle goes beyond a lens of specific interests or identity markers, to a process of learning, experimenting and refining both knowledge and competence. The practice of kink implies that certain acts, dynamics and techniques are not obvious and have to be learned and trained. The community, both online as offline, is an ideal space for this socialization because they provide tools, advice and knowledge to accompany newcomers in their journey. They can start their exploration with the fetish list on FetLife, to get an idea of what speaks to them, what

triggers an interest in getting to know more. As such, the platform becomes a supporting tool that provides insights about different plays and their possible executions. The app can and does offer a good base for information and concrete examples, but participants also underline the importance of having multiple perspectives and nuance, preferably through a physical community.

Defining kink as a practice includes certain risks, especially for newcomers whose only or main exposure to BDSM happens through the app. The dangers include wanting to skip steps when seeing advanced play, because they do not realize how it can take up to years to reach this level of play. Wanting to participate too quickly in types of play that are too far outside their reach can be harmful, especially with kinks such as bondage with ropes or knife play. Complex and impactful practices without sufficient and correct knowledge and competences can lead to unsafe play and dangerous injuries. This is also where having a physical community, or at least a forum with nuanced explanations, is important to bridge the gap between app use and real practice, and avoid incorrect assumptions about certain practices and dynamics. People who don't have access to or don't feel comfortable to join a physical community represent a group that becomes more vulnerable to these risks and dangers. To summarize, consuming content can contribute to insights and mental reflection, but real life practice of kink requires a gradual and embodied learning process.

4.6.5. “OH, THAT LOOKS PRETTY” – KINK, A FORM OF ART

A final use of FetLife, mentioned by all participants, is the aesthetic experience. Certain content is described as visually appealing, creative, and sometimes even as artistic. Images of shibari, the Japanese art of bondage, but also pictures styled with attention for perspective and light are described in terms of composition, beauty, mood and atmosphere. Content such as this shifts the focus from sexuality to an expression of fine creativity to aspire to. While participants all agree that kink can be practiced as a form of art, they know non-kinky persons will often not see it that way. Still, to them it can be “really insane” and “crazy artistic” (Raptor).

Modelling personal practices of kink can be a way of doing identity work. Whether this is through pictures of kink persona or specific dynamics, displaying intimacy can function as a form of expression that is not necessarily welcome on other platforms. Certain pictures take a lot of effort, especially when the intention is to create visual storytelling. In this sense, kink takes a new meaning and becomes the expression of a creative and artistic drive.

Aesthetically pleasing pictures can be at odds to the overwhelming amount of explicit and explicitly sexual nudes and pictures showing genitalia-focussed masturbation or penetrative sex “that feel a bit like I’m on a porn site” (Mushu). Artful pictures with non-sexual play, aesthetical and suggestive photographs give off a very different energy, thus showing the plurality of representations of intimacy. The tension between suggestive and explicit content can be a reason why some participants don’t open the app when they don’t want to be

bombarded with this second type of content. Even though Mushu really enjoys reading articles and users' writings, she struggles with all the nudity and wishes there was a way to filter out pictures without being restricted to the accounts she already follows. This would allow her to read more about intimacy, which is something she is fascinated by. The differences in visual representation of intimacy also impacts how other users situate themselves in their own participation on the platform, proving participants are active players in their signifying practices. Nyx, for example, wants to post pictures in the future in order to receive helpful feedback on their bondage technique and on the way they stage their pictures.

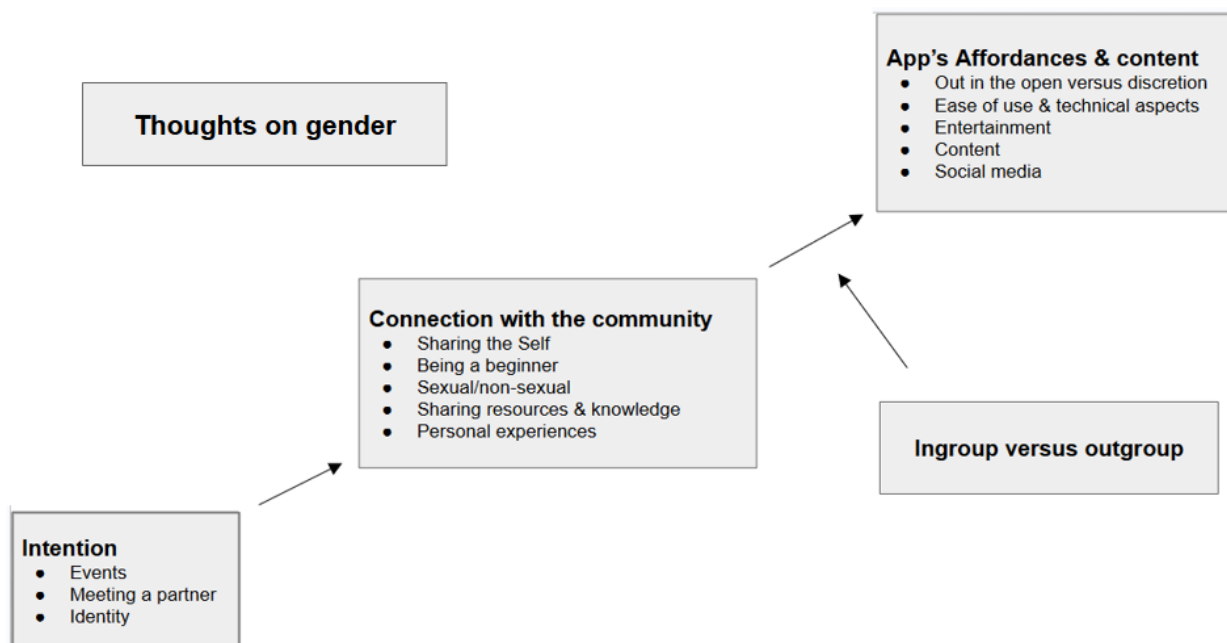
4.6.6. TENSIONS AND AMBIVALENCE

The different aspects developed above do not exist in separation of each other, and some dimensions actively overlap or collide. The website can work as a source of knowledge and entertainment, however it also houses people who do not belong there. Visual content can be fascinating, but certain forms of nudity can be overwhelming and even cause discomfort. Exposing oneself on a platform such as FetLife can be experienced as an empowering practice, but also makes one more vulnerable to objectification and sexualisation: the community can act as a safe space, but also one that brings along certain risks. Wanting to show and express personal identity can cause unwanted objectification and fetishisation. Lastly, pictures of advanced practices do not show the process of getting there, putting uninformed newcomers at risk if they want to recreate them without building their own skills first.

5. DISCUSSION

The discussion will be structured following the themes distilled out of the data from the interviews. The graphic below illustrates how the themes and respective subthemes are organized and inform each other. Only the theme “Thoughts on gender” remains unattached in the visual representation, because participants linked this to many different aspects in their answers. Of course, since gender is the lens for this project and participants were asked whether their gender influenced certain parts of their experience, the danger would be to interpret this as a framework the participants implemented themselves. While some persons did mention gender spontaneously at different points in the interview before they were questioned about it, others did not. Still, everyone had *something* to say about it and the answers showed that gender is a topic young people are very aware of.

The themes will be discussed in the following order: the intentions of use will lead to the aspect of connection with the community, and then the app’s affordances and content. Characteristics of ingroup versus outgroup is developed in a next part, ending with participants’ thoughts on gender.



2. Spatial visualization of themes and subthemes

5.1. INTENT AND PURPOSE FOR USE

Among the possible uses, one of the most consistent purposes for FetLife is related to events, either to discover new events, check on practical information, or to register attendance. This stems from all participants' desire and need to connect with their physical community, as well as certain participants' wish to practice their kinks and fetishes, illustrating that digital use supports real life participation. Certain events mandate registry through the app, which reduces their accessibility and forces people who want to attend to make a profile on the platform. However, it shows the strong embedding of the digital platform into the offline community.

FetLife also plays a considerable role in identity exploration. Participants report using the platform for self-expression and identity exploration, which aligns with research on digital identity formation and self-disclosure on social media (Colosi & Lister, 2019; De Ridder, 2015; Luo & Hancock, 2020). As stated before, young individuals have developed digital practices through which they produce and develop their intimate identity (De Ridder, 2015), and social media technologies participate in shaping our identities (Lagerkvist, 2017). In this context, results show that FetLife provides a space for kinksters to explore and articulate identity markers that they have to keep hidden in other social and parasocial contexts.

Access to representations of kink, BDSM and fetishism in digital environments and the possibility to explore digital sexual identity has been linked to de-stigmatisation (Döring et al., 2022). When compared to kinksters from previous generations, digital exploration of kink identities also lead to a better acceptance of kink identities in young adults (Döring et al.). Alternative types of SNSs such as FetLife are a good fit for this, since they contain very "limited restrictions on sexual expression" in comparison to more mainstream SNSs and social media (Colosi & Lister, 2019, p.6). FetLife positions itself as particularly relevant, especially to emerging adults, to navigate "conflicting cultural discourses" (Hughes & Hammack, 2019). The wide variety of options offered to express identity in the profile inscribes itself in a movement against binary divisions of gender and sexuality along with queer-built apps, catering to LGBTQ+ members in the user-base (Teixeira Riggs, 2025). The "lawlessness" experienced on the app due to the limited restrictions on speech and images at the same time also lead to less monitoring on the app, creating patterns of gendered sexualization and objectification, among other harmful practices. De Vuyst et al. (2022) situate intersectional inequalities in the digitalization process, with misogynistic discourses occurring even in digital environments that promote inclusivity, thus reinforcing gender and sexual inequalities. Although certain participants still mention the possibility of meeting a partner on the platform, this function is usually approached with caution in terms of an occasional or casual partner and less in terms of finding a life partner or romantic relationship. Most participants explicitly name the dangers they see to using FetLife as a dating app, emphasizing the difficulty in discerning other users' intentions and the tendency towards hunting behaviour on the platform. This parallels concerns in research on dating apps (Blackwell et al., 2015) and illustrates risks associated with unequal power dynamics (López-de-Arana

Prado, 2025). Harmful online behaviours consistently target vulnerable groups more, which is consistent with the results showing more awareness in female and non-binary participants (López-de-Arana Prado).

Intentions for use of the platform does not remain static but evolves over time. Across participants, initial engagement shows curious exploration manifested by scrolling through content to “see what is out there”. A gradual shift towards goal-oriented and selective engagement focused on events, specific information, or particular interactions, suggests that user practices become more strategic as they gain familiarity with both the platform and the community. This transition aligns with Newmahr’s (2010) findings on leisure and participation as processes where users move from exploration to more specialised and purposeful engagement. User experience develops over time, resulting in a process of adaptation in behaviour. They become more selective about what they share, which content they choose to interact with, and how they handle interactions with other users. This shift illustrates how their use makes them develop tactics to deal with the app’s affordances and risks. Participants who continue to manifest entertainment-oriented use also undergo this gradual transition, which becomes apparent in their strategies for interaction-based behaviour (Zhang et al., 2011). Certeau’s (2004) theory of everyday tactics also confirms that people actively appropriate and negotiate platform-based affordances in their personal use.

5.2. CONNECTIONS WITH THE COMMUNITY

Visibility and self-disclosure are notions that participants handle significantly differently. While half actively shares personal information and experiences, the other half deliberately limit their self-disclosure on the internet. This observation shows how one same tool, namely FetLife, can be used and experienced differently, suggesting that the platform is not the determining factor to user experiences. The individual strategies for navigating digital intimacies and individual positionalities weigh more; shaping how affordances are used and experienced. This finding aligns itself with existing work on digital intimacies and self-presentation in networked environments (e.g. Colosi & Lister, 2019; De Ridder, 2015; Luo & Hancock, 2020). Goffman’s notion of self-presentation, transferred to online environments, shows that individuals have greater control over their identity construction and management and select which aspects of the Self becomes visible, instead of presenting a fixed identity (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). This way, they adjust their level of disclosure based on personal boundaries, perceived risks, and intended interactions.

A similar divide is observed on the topic of visible user activity on both profile and activity feed, since participants of different genders found this an interesting feature. The two participants taking the stance that this feature felt invasive were not-binary participants, but this result in gender representation can be related to the fact that this aspect wasn’t an explicit interview question. No clear age and gender patterns were seen in relation to visibility and self-disclosure, but positionality may still impact different experiences, mirroring broader issues around stigma management and identity negotiation within kink communities (Bezreh et al.,

2012), as well as reflecting the deeply personal and existential nature of digital media use (Lagerkvist, 2017). Participants' concerns about platform security and digital data protection shows their awareness about the persistence of digital content and the implications of their digital footprint, and contributes to their cautious and strategic participation (Döring et al., 2022; Geerts et al., 2022, p.84; Goode & McKee, 2013, p.116). Self-disclosure on FetLife reflects ongoing negotiations between authenticity, safety, and social expectations; proving participants construct meaningful and context-dependent identities online (De Ridder, 2015; Luo & Hancock, 2020).

Being a beginner on FetLife is characterized by an explorative curiosity that plays a role in the integration process into the online community through learning and gradual familiarization with the platform-specific affordances. Beginners rely on community knowledge and guidance when navigating unfamiliar practices, based on a process of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). They learn about practices, norms, and expectations through the experiences shared by others (Graham et al., 2016). Observation and participation in the online community, specifically through groups, can be complemented with help from offline friends who are familiar with the platform, to inform their evolving trajectories. Since much of this learning is based on personal experience, the situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988) remains partial and not neutral, resulting in practices that may be perceived as normative or "correct", even though they reflect only specific interpretations. This is why beginners, especially young and submissive-leaning users, are vulnerable for manipulation and sexual approaches. Moreover, safe BDSM-practices rely on more than personal interests and desires: they require the development of embodied skills, techniques, and self-awareness as embedded in community norms (Weiss, 2011).

Participants' input regarding the sexual/non-sexual divide reflects findings in previous BDSM-research (Graham et al., 2016; Hammack et al., 2019; Walker & Kuperberg, 2022, p.2; Rubinsky, 2018, p.1413; Weiss, 2011). Kink is a multi-layered practice that includes notions of art, meaning, identity, connection, and embodied practices. Still, users' self-definitions are often misinterpreted through others' desires, resulting in sexualization and fetishization.

Sharing resources & knowledge is central to users' experiences, as reflected in the results. Personal experiences and group discussions are accessible and practice-oriented sources for learning (Walker & Kuperberg, 2022; Weiss, 2011, p.10). The downsides include bias from not neutral personal experiences, the circulation of similar ideas without much innovation, and the potential implication that these are the only ways to correctly represent and embody roles and practices. These 'real' experiences still have value as alternative for porn and can be used for inspiration and self-reflection.

5.3. APP'S AFFORDANCES & CONTENT

FetLife's affordances shape how users navigate visibility and privacy, impacting anonymity and interactions. Explicit content on the Home-page makes the platform "not public-proof" like other social media, reflecting broader dynamics in location-based and social platforms, where visibility enables interaction but simultaneously increases exposure to risk (Blackwell et al., 2015). The visibility of explicit content on the platform is a phenomenon related to "networked publicness", exposing interactions and representations to broader audiences (Baym & boyd, 2012). As a result, users cannot easily control the context in which their engagement is seen, making discreet use of the platform difficult in everyday situations. The platform's visibility is shaped by its underlying architecture, that organizes and standardizes content distributed through a centralised feed structure (Helmond, 2015).

Participants are mitigated about the app's interface, experiencing relatively easy technical aspects but overwhelming content and report a learning curve in app-use. This paradox is based on the absence of filters, overlapping functions and a chaotic structure, showing that accessibility does not equal clear overview. Moreover, safety and boundary-setting become a shared responsibility of the users as a result of insufficient platform moderation. Participants situate this as a common responsibility, reflecting core BDSM principles of negotiated consent (Bauer, 2014; Rubinsky, 2018).

Zhang et al.'s uses and gratification theory (2011) manifests in FetLife's function of entertainment, allowing users to scroll through content out of curiosity, "fear of missing out", or when bored. The app offers easy access to community, which is emotionally comforting. However, risks of addiction, performative behaviour and negative impact on self-image lead multiple participants to change their use for entertainment when they were a newcomer to the app, preferring a goal-oriented approach. While participants highlight the sense of freedom to discuss intimacy and sexuality, this relative "lawlessness" coexists with selective forms of censorship. The criteria determining what is allowed or removed remain unclear, raising questions about the objectivity of the moral frameworks and normative hierarchies on the platform. Content also contains repetition, staged pictures and aestheticism, reflecting and framing norms for digital intimacy (De Ridder, 2022; Weiss, 2011). FetLife follows the classic SNS-structure with a centralized feed that allows for scrolling, options to "like" content and "follow" other users, and a profile constructing self-presentation (De Ridder, 2015, 2022; Luo & Hancock, 2020). The platform can be understood as a form of "existential media" (Lagerkvist, 2017), with users engaging in communication and deeper processes of identity, belonging, and existential positioning.

5.4. INGROUP VERSUS OUTGROUP

FetLife constitutes a niche space for a semi-closed community that clearly delimits kinksters from “normies”, reflecting ongoing processes of stigma management and boundary negotiation within the community (Bezreh et al., 2012; Hughes & Hammack, 2019; Graham et al., 2016). This tension between inclusion and exclusion illustrates common dynamics in digitally mediated publics (Baym & Boyd, 2012; De Ridder, 2015) and protects identity and community-specific values, but can project elitism (Simula & Sumerau, 2017). These patterns create an online atmosphere that is simultaneously supportive and restrictive.

Results also indicate a generational shift in how BDSM is understood and practiced, with younger users emphasising boundaries, consent, and reflexivity; contrasting with more traditional and codified approaches described in earlier formations of BDSM communities (Weiss, 2011). These generational differences impact how participants approach the platform, particularly in relation to safety, mentorship, and interaction. While intergenerational dynamics can offer opportunities for learning, participants also report tensions and boundary violations, with some participants raising questions about the role and limits of such interactions within the website.

While kink-communities do show a certain openness and tolerance towards identity-markers such as race, culture, gender, and body type, belonging in the community is still based on hidden exclusion, “regulat[ing] social normativity through shifting and flexible attitudes instead of rigid domination” (Weiss, 2011, p.15). I argue that Flemish TNG show a shift happened in mentality and approach, both towards their views on community and who belongs in it as in their online behaviour on the community’s social networking platform. Every participant showed awareness of intersectionality of experiences and an ability to reflect on abstract categories such as sense of safety, consent, setting boundaries, and gender, both in their offline as well as their digital experiences.

5.5. THOUGHTS ON GENDER

Participants’ perceptions about content indicate a paradox with a majority of female bodied representations and an online population with a majority of male users. Gender systematically impacts interactions, sense of safety and general experience. Firstly, men usually initiate contact but receiving less response; while women and non-binary persons receive many unsolicited messages and a lot of unwanted attention. This pattern, accompanied by systematic occurrences of fantasy pushing and expectations around gendered behaviour reflects gendered sexual scripts (Simon & Gagnon, 2003) that shape expectations around who initiates contact and how desire is communicated. An interesting finding nuances this pattern, since all male participants also reported receiving unwanted messages from men, even though they clearly indicated just as much as other participants that they were not interested in these types of contact.

Sense of safety is experienced differently by participants of different genders. Women and non-binary individuals face more unwanted messages and sexualization, which do not necessarily make them unsafe, but contribute to a general feeling of unease and a need to remain vigilant; while male participants reported feeling safe on the app. This imbalance corresponds to findings in digital sexual communication research, which highlights how online environments can reproduce and intensify gender-based vulnerabilities (Döring et al., 2022; López-de-Arana Prado, 2025), revealing the gap between BDSM values of consent expected on a platform dedicated to its practice, and everyday interactions impacting users' experiences. Participants also report the sexual reinterpretation of aspects of their identity or interests by others, including fetishization of gender identity and sexualisation of non-sexualized interests in kinks. Butler's (2025) notion of gender performativity is the idea that an individual socially creates their gender through everyday acts and speech, but that their gender also takes meaning through other's interpretations. Participants' experiences show that marginalised identities and self-definition becomes negated and overridden by the desires of others.

Taken together, these occurrences construct gender as an important axis shaping interactions, safety, visibility and meaning-making on FetLife, impacting users' strategies to manage risk and maintain control over their identity and self-presentation. These patterns reflect intersectional dynamics, where experiences of safety, visibility and recognition are shaped by the interplay of gender, sexuality, and other identity markers (Damm et al., 2018; De Vuyst et al., 2022).

6. CONCLUSION

This study examined how users of different genders experience FetLife and focused on use, sense of safety and the meaning given to digital intimacy. Overall, findings show that the platform operates as a hybrid environment in which user experiences are shaped by interactions between platform affordances, community values and broader social dynamics.

All participants described FetLife as a hybrid platform with multiple functionalities, housing community and information organised in a social media structure. Individual experiences deferred based on gender, level of experience and self-exposure, and positionality within the community. New users tend to explore at random, before transitioning towards more goal-oriented use, indicating a gradual learning process of app affordances and community interaction.

Although users share similar goals, focussing on accessing information, connecting with others and attending events, differences emerge in how participants approach these goals. Women and non-binary users tend to

navigate the platform more cautiously, with awareness of potential risks. Men usually focus on finding information and events.

Findings reveal a clear link between gender and the experience of safety. Women and non-binary users report significantly more unwanted interactions and sexualisation, therefore adopting various strategies to manage visibility and self-protection. This highlights a tension between the community's core value of consent and the inconsistent enactment in user behaviour.

Intimacy on FetLife is experienced as a multi-faceted and negotiated concept that extends beyond sexuality. Participants use intimacy as a form of identity construction, knowledge acquisition, artistic outlet, and self-reflection. These meanings are not fixed, as users' self-presentations are often reinterpreted or sexualized by others. Women and non-binary persons are particularly vulnerable to this.

Together, these illustrate how interplay between platform affordances, community values and gendered expectations fundamentally impact user experiences on FetLife. This results in continuous negotiations of visibility, safety and belonging. In conclusion, FetLife illustrates how digital spaces can simultaneously enable connection and self-expression while reproducing broader inequalities and tensions.

The focus on user experience allowed this study to examine how kink-oriented platforms function as spaces of learning, identity construction and negotiation, instead of mere sites of sexual interaction. Limitations of this study are its small sample size and focus on one specific community context.

7. THEMES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Generational differences in the community have been insufficiently researched. Avenues for future research could start by a comparison of general characteristics of the different generations, their attitudes towards the practice of BDSM as well as how they define it, and whether different generations are aware of the differences between them. Future focus on online kink-communities should also look into generational gaps: the respective patterns of behaviour on FetLife, the intentions and purpose for using the platform, the approach towards other users, communication styles, as well as attitudes towards other users.

Chasing and hunting goals and behaviour on the app could be researched further, both in comparison to classic dating platforms as well as standing on its own. The purpose of sharing resources and personal experiences, as well as how these resources get a life of their own in the different groups, for example, may show how younger generations of BDSM-players communicate and learn about their practice and their community. It would be interesting to analyse whether the possibility to communicate openly about BDSM-related desires

while keeping relative anonymity online could be linked to less feelings of shame about the subcultural sexual identity compared generations whose informational and community resources was limited to books and possible local dungeons.

While some research focussed on how individuals defined their BDSM activities as a marker of identity or as a practice (Walker & Kuperberg, 2022; Rubinsky, 2018, p.1414; Weiss, 2011, p.11), this difference could be transposed to how individuals see their online display of BDSM. In addition to this, since the interviews showed that many participants also use FetLife as entertainment, the interaction between these different aspects through specific use merit further in-depth focus.

Half of the participants, namely two women and all the non-binary participants, spontaneously mentioned their neurodivergence and how this impacted or influenced their use of the platform. At the moment of writing, the Collaborative Antwerp Psychiatric Research Institute (CAPRI) is researching possible links between interest in BDSM, neurodivergence, and emotional dysregulation. This project is a part of their Sexual Mental Health research and could add to the knowledge base needed to further investigate intersectionality in digital intimacy research.

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9. ATTACHEMENT: GLOSSARY

All following terms are defined by the “Kinktionary” BDSM-dictionary on FetLife (*Kinktionary - BDSM Dictionary*, 2026). Extra notes are added to terms that participants defined or used in a different way.

Gender identity:

Agender or **gender-neutral**: this term can be situated in either the non-binary or the transgender umbrella and is used by people who do not identify with genders or gender categories.

Cisgender (cis-man or cis-woman): this identity refers to individuals whose gender aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth. The opposite term is “transgender”.

Demigender (demi-man or demi-woman): this gender identity is situated under the non-binary umbrella and is used by people who only partially identify with a certain gender. The participant using this term did not necessarily refer to feeling non-binary, but rather to the feeling of disconnect with the societal definition of “being a woman”.

Genderfluid: “refers to a person who fluctuates between more than one gender, and/or between having a gender and not having one. Gender identity and presentation can both fluctuate, separately or together”.

Non-binary: this term is used by people whose gender identity falls outside of the male-female binary dichotomy. It is an umbrella-term that includes a spectrum of identities ranging from vague to more specific self-definitions such as any combination of male and female and dichotomy-transcending or -rejecting identities.

Trans(gender): this adjective is used by people whose sex assigned as birth “is not an accurate or complete description of their personal identity and gender”. The term can exist on its own or as an umbrella term, and can be used when a person underwent surgery for gender-affirming purposes.

- “Non-binary” and “transgender” can co-exist as gender identity and participants used the term “trans” to refer to surgery used to distance themselves from the sex they were assigned at birth.
- **Trans-masc** (versus **trans-fem**): “A transmasculine person is someone who was assigned female at birth but whose gender identity is in some way aligned with or characterized by masculinity.” The non-binary trans-masc participant used these specific terms to indicate that they see gender as a spectrum and exist between a non-binary and a masculine identity; that they used breast-removal surgery to distance themselves from the sex they were assigned at birth, but not to change their sex.

Role identities: as there are a lot of roles, and it can be tricky to understand how they interact with one another, a first part explains kink and BDSM roles, following the definitions on FetLife. Specific additions used by the participants from this study are explained in the second part.

Kink roles: “A kink role is a label that describes how someone participates in kink. It may reflect their position in a relationship or power dynamic, what they enjoy doing or receiving during play, a fetish or activity they identify with, a relationship style, or a persona they take on for fantasy and roleplay.

Broadly, kink roles may describe:

- Power and relationship dynamics, such as Dominant, submissive, caregiver, or pet.
- What someone does or receives during play, such as Top, bottom, rigger, or rope bottom.
- Fetishes and interests [...]
- Relationship styles [...]
- Personas and roleplay identities [...]

These categories are not rigid. A role may fit into more than one, and people may use several roles to describe different parts of their interests or identity.”

BDSM-roles: “BDSM roles are a subset of kink roles. They specifically describe someone’s position or function within BDSM.

The best-known BDSM roles broadly include:

- Dominant, submissive, and switch roles
- Top and bottom roles
- Master, Mistress and slave roles
- Sadist and masochist roles
- Rope and bondage roles
- Impact, sensation, service, and discipline roles

Not every role used in kink is specifically a BDSM role. [Certain roles] may be part of kink culture without necessarily involving bondage, power exchange, discipline, pain, or control. A label does not always reveal exactly how someone practices it.”

Bottom: in a bottom-Top dynamic, the bottom is the person who receives the act, whereas the top is the person who performs or gives the act. The terms "bottom" and "submissive" are not synonyms: “A bottom simply takes on the receiving role in a scene[, and this] may or may not involve any sort of hierarchy, submission, or surrender of agency”.

Brat: “an individual who exhibits intentionally disobedient and often playful or mischievous behavior within a consensual power exchange dynamic” (sic); brats can be bottoms, Tops, submissives, and Dominants.

- **Sub-leaning brat:** a brat who leans towards submissive behaviour.

Dominant (Dom or Domme): “a person who consensually takes or is given power, authority, or control within a BDSM scene, relationship, or activity”. This power-dynamic must be consensual as “[being] Dominant is not the same as simply being bossy, aggressive, or having a dominant personality”.

- **Daddy Dom:** “a dominant partner who provides a nurturing, protective relationship based on care, structure, and discipline to their submissive partner.”
- **Sadist Domina:** Domme or Domina are terms used for a dominant “feminine-identifying person”; a sadist or sadistic Domme is a dominant “who enjoys inflicting pain, discomfort, or intense sensations on a consenting partner”.

Emotional masochist: “Emotional masochism is a psychological tendency or pattern in which a person derives pleasure or satisfaction from experiencing emotional pain or suffering.”

Hunter: “Hunter usually refers to a person who takes on the role of a pursuer, tracker, or captor. The Hunter is typically a Dominant role that often pairs with the hunted, a person who evades, hides, or tries to escape. Hunter/hunted scenes tend to involve fear play, predator/prey fantasies, and capture and restraint”.

- **Sadist hunter:** a person that takes on a hunting role and combines their hunt with sadistic behaviour.

Prey: in hunting play, the prey is the person being chased “or [takes] on a carnal submissive role in play”.

Princess: “A princess in BDSM is usually a submissive who enjoys being treated as special, treasured, and cared for. The dynamic may include praise, affection, attention, gifts, dressing up, or being spoiled”.

Puppy: “A puppy, or “pup,” refers to a participant, typically a submissive, who takes on the role or persona of a dog. Puppies often enjoy exhibiting puppy-like behaviors such as affection, enthusiasm, and obedience. This is part of pet play, a broader kink where people embody animals in consensual, often power-exchange dynamics.”

Submissive (sub): a person who gives away power and control to submit to a Dominant person.

- **Bratty sub:** “a submissive partner who engages in playful defiance and teasing, rather than pure obedience. Their bratty behavior is not about being disrespectful or malicious, but a form of playful interaction based on banter and playful resistance”.
- **Primal bratty sub:** a person who identifies as a bratty sub and likes to engage in primal play; which “emphasizes instinct, raw emotion, and animalistic energy”.

Switch (or switch-leaning): “switch is a person who switches between Dominant and submissive or Top and bottom roles in relationships, scenes, and activities depending on their mood”.

- **Sub-leaning switch:** a person who is comfortable taking on both dominant and submissive roles, but has a preference for submission.

10. BIJLAGE CHECK-LIST GEBRUIK GAI

GENERATIEVE AI-GEBRUIK

Binnen de opleiding Gender en Diversiteit volgen we de [UGent richtlijnen](#) voor een verantwoord gebruik van generatieve AI. Je wordt ook uitgenodigd op Ufora voor het doorlopen van het Ufora-leerpad "[Generatieve AI – van leren tot creëren](#)".

De ingevulde versie is een verplichte bijlage bij de masterproef.

Naam: Marie-Anne Craenen

Studentnummer: 02404371

Gelieve met 'x' aan te duiden wat van toepassing is en vul aan indien nodig.

- ☐ Ik heb geen GAI-tool gebruikt.
- ☒ Ik heb een of meerdere GAI-tools gebruikt.

Welke? Copilot, Zotero, Whisper

Gelieve met 'x' aan te duiden wat van toepassing is, vermeld welk tool(s) je heb gebruikt en omschrijf hoe je de tool(s) hebt gebruikt.

Ik heb een GAI-tool gebruikt als:

- ☒ Ideeënverstrekker *(bijvoorbeeld: brainstorm met de tool over een bepaald thema, bereid een discussie voor door argumenten te laten genereren, enz.)*

Specificeer GAI-tool(s): Copilot

Omschrijving: Ik heb Copilot gebruikt om mijn analyse en discussie te structureren, mijn resultaten af te bakenen volgens mijn thematische categorieën en om verbanden te leggen tussen de resultaten van mijn analyse en theoretische concepten. Ik heb suggesties steeds kritisch geëvalueerd en aangepast op basis van mijn eigen interpretatie van de data, maar gebruikte Copilot NIET om inhoudelijke resultaten te genereren of aan het licht te brengen.

- ☐ Zoekmachine *(bijvoorbeeld: extra literatuur zoeken over een bepaald onderwerp, enz.)*

Specificeer GAI-tool(s):

Omschrijving:

- X Schrijfassistent *(bijvoorbeeld: spellings- en typfouten laten verbeteren, een tekst formeler laten schrijven, enz.)*

Specificeer GAI-tool(s): Copilot

Omschrijving: Ik heb Copilot gebruikt om bepaalde delen in mijn resultaten en discussie na te lezen op academische formuleringen en taalgebruik. Alle gegenereerde formuleringen werden nagelezen, aangepast en kritisch geïntegreerd.

- ☐ Ontwerper *(bijvoorbeeld: maak een nieuwe, unieke afbeelding, enz.)*

Specificeer GAI-tool(s):

Omschrijving:

- ☐ Oefentool *(bijvoorbeeld: gebruik de tool als een buddy en vraag extra uitleg bij specifieke leerstof, vraag om extra oefeningen te maken, enz.)*

Specificeer GAI-tool(s):

Omschrijving:

- ☐ Data-analyse *(bijvoorbeeld: berekenen van data, scatterplot genereren, enz.)*

Specificeer GAI-tool(s):

Omschrijving:

- X Efficiëntie bevorderen (*bijvoorbeeld: samenvatten van bestaande teksten, bronnenlijst in APA-stijl zetten enz.*)

Specificeer GAI-tool(s): Copilot en Zotero

Omschrijving: Ik heb Copilot gebruikt om delen tekst in mijn resultaten en discussie samen te vatten, te herstructureren en herorganiseren. Zotero heb ik gebruikt voor het beheer en genereren van mijn bronnen en bibliografie, waarbij ik alle metadata en referenties handmatig heb gecontroleerd.

- X Ik heb de tools op een andere manier gebruikt.

Specificeer GAI-tool(s): Whisper

Omschrijving: Ik heb Whisper gebruikt om de recordings van mijn interviews te transcriberen. Deze werden daarna grondig handmatig verbeterd

Ik verklaar dat ik

- X bovenstaande gegevens naar waarheid heb ingevuld.
- X het Ufora-leerpad "Generatieve AI – van leren tot creëren" heb doorlopen.