Kinking it up: An exploration of the role of online social networking site FetLife in the stigma management of kink practices

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Abstract

This article draws on the narratives of FetLife users, derived from a study funded by the University of Lincoln. The study highlights two important findings: first, that kink practitioners are cognizant of the deviant label associated with their sexuality, and employ several techniques in order to neutralise and manage the stigma; part of this involves their use of alternative SNS such as FetLife, as they are able to express their sexual identity in a space seen as non-judgemental. Second, that FetLife users acknowledge that they are unable to freely express their sexuality on mainstream SNS, such as Facebook, fearing further stigmatisation; here it was felt that normative sexualities are more tolerated. As it will be discussed, these findings raise important questions relating to how sexualities are policed, and the extent to which online spaces may help to further isolate non-normative sexual practices, potentially exacerbating the stigma.

Key words: kink, policing, sexuality, FetLife, SNS, stigma

Introduction

Increasingly, online social networking sites (SNS) play a significant role in identity work, whereby individuals can construct and play-out different identities, as part of their self-exploration (Albury, 2017). In terms of sexual identity work, mainstream SNS may prove difficult for those with sexual interests that are highly stigmatized, such as kink (Brickell, 2000; Sarabia and Estenez, 2016). The alternative fetish-based SNS,

FetLife, has limited restrictions on sexual expression, providing a platform for individuals to freely interact with others who have an interest in kink. This paper will draw upon the narratives of FetLife users, derived from a pilot study, which used semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences of FetLife users. Fetlife is one of the most popular SNS for the kink community, serving as a platform for platonic and sexual interaction, both online and in person (offline), and as a community organising tool (Fay et al, 2016). As such, Fetlife acts as an important platform for exploring kink free of stigmatization. The term kink is commonly used by fetish practitioners (Bezerha et al, 2012), reflected in the language used by the participants who took part in the study this article is based upon. As a practice, it encompasses a wide range of sexual interests and activities, referred to as 'fetish' and/or Bondage, Domination, Submission, and Masochism (BDSM) (Bezerah et al, 2012; Lin, 2017; Newmahr, 2010; Rehor, 2015; Wignall and McCormack, 2017). Not only does kink refer to non-normative sexual practices, forming part of a person's sexual identity, in line with other sexual minorities such as homosexuals and pansexuals (Brenner, 2005; Dugauy, 2016; Sarabia and Estenez, 2016), but has also been described as 'serious' leisure, in which there is a "devotion to the pursuit of an activity that requires specialized skills and resources, and provides particular benefits" (Newmahr, 2010: 318).

The article will highlight two important findings: first, that kink practitioners are cognizant of the stigma associated with kink, and employ strategies to manage this; part of this involves their use of alternative SNS such as FetLife, as here they can express their sexual identity in a space seen as non-judgemental, and simultaneously cultivate a kink community. In identifying the management of stigma, we draw upon the work of Goffman (1963); here Goffman's work provides a theoretical basis to explain patterns of disclosure of kink practices (via passing techniques) to others, and the formation of online communities (through the creation of norms and values to measure themselves against). Second, that FetLife users acknowledge that they are unable to freely express their sexual interests on mainstream SNS, such as Facebook, fearing further stigmatisation; here it was felt that normative sexual practices (including sexuality) are more tolerated. As it will be argued in this paper, SNS increasingly police non-normative sexualities and sexual practices via formal (SNS policies regarding 'appropriate sexual behaviour' including imagery and speech) and informal (shaming and disapproval) measures. In reflecting upon these key findings, we suggest that

despite the benefits of alternative sites such as FetLife, the stigmatization of kink continues to be a significant concern.

Sexuality and Social Media

Sexuality is ubiquitous online (Brickell, 2000), at its most obvious, this is evident from the significant presence of the pornosphere (McNair, 2013); beyond this, sexual content is apparent in other online spaces, from dating sites to social media (Bricknell, 2000; Houck et al, 2014). Mainstream SNS, such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram provide a platform for people to express their identity, including the expression of sexuality (Albury, 2017; Duguay, 2016; Sarabia and Estenez, 2016). Here the expression of sexuality may only be implicit for some, for example, Brickell (2000) suggests that our "sexualized selves" (p. 31), are evident in profile information, by stating for example that we are interested in 'men or 'women'; beyond this profile pictures and status updates are other ways in which the sexualized self is expressed. However, the expressions we find on mainstream SNS are generally normative (Duguay, 2016). The use of 'selfies' as part of sexual expression is not an entirely contemporary phenomenon yet remains a significant way of communicating sexuality for some (Albury, 2017; Attwood and Walters, 2013). In relation to this, Sarabia and Estenez (2016) suggest that sexualized behavior is particularly common amongst young social media users, with over 60% of young people documented to post selfies that are considered erotic or sexualized, with further sexualized behavior apparent via private messaging, with some sharing "explicit photos or videos" (p.22). Indeed, sites such as Facebook have been documented as facilitating sexual relationships, with individuals meeting prospective sexual partners through interacting on Facebook (Aziz, 2014; Basile and Linne, 2016). As noted, mainstream SNS are more likely to support the expression of normative, rather than non-normative sexualities, suggesting that the marginalization of sexual minorities extends beyond the physical world into the cyber world (Brickell, 2000, p. 37); for LGBTQ individuals there is a significant fear of being stigmatized by overtly expressing sexuality in mainstream online spaces, with this extending to concerns relating to "safety and privacy" (Duguay, 2016, p895). In response to this, these individuals self-manage posts on mainstream SNS, preferring to restrict expressions of non-normative sexuality to alternative online spaces (Sarabia and Estenez, 2016), or limiting which contacts can see sexualized posts. Sarabia's and Estenez's (2016), who studied the perceptions of young social

media users argue alternative sites such as Tumblr acted as a "retreat" for some of their participants. Here it is important to note that in 2018 Tumblr took a prohibitionist stance to sexual content and restricted sexually explicit posts, stating that:

> 'Adult content primarily includes photos, videos, or GIFs that show real-life human genitals or female-presenting nipples, and any content—including photos, videos, GIFs and illustrations—that depicts sex acts' (Tumblr.com, 2018).

The management of sexual expression for sexual minorities is not just evident in the self-management of individuals, but in the regulatory power that is exercised more formally on the internet, where sexual content is monitored and, in some cases, blocked (Brenner, 2005). The Facebook 'Terms of Service' and their 'Real Name Policy' potentially, together, restrict sexual representation and increase risk of exposure to sexual minorities (Albury, 2017; Marwick and Boyd, 2011). For example, kink practitioners are at risk of being 'outed' if their group membership, page 'likes', and Facebook searches are made public for others to see (Albury, 2017).

Given the restrictions on mainstream SNS alternative sites such as FetLife are considered safe for those with non-normative sexual interests to express themselves, enabling them to freely engage in identity work (Albury, 2017; Duguay, 2016, McCabe, 2015). Like Facebook, the interaction of the kink community exists on and offline, with some members running offline events, known as 'munches' or more focused events which centre around exploring fetishes with others (Albury, 2017). FetLife itself contains friendship links, relationships, interests, groups, events and blogs; indeed, in this respect there are similarities with other SNS (Albury, 2018; Fay et al, 2016). Research suggests that alternative SNS such as FetLife are more supportive, and less judgemental, for those whose sexual interests are stigmatized (Bezrah et al, 2012; McCabe, 2015), with its popularity evident in the number of users, which is currently over 7 million (FetLife.com, 2019).

Stigma and Sexuality

According to Lin (2017) kink is "Perceived as a deviant sexual practice" and "controlled as a psychological and social problem via several mechanisms, among which medicalization is central" (p.304). Here Lin suggests that the stigmatization of kink rests upon the medicalization of fetish via the scientific communities, (incl. psychiatry,

psychology, and sexology - see Rubin, 1984; Beckman, 2001); this emphasizes the significant influence of biomedical science on the social construction of sexuality (Foucault,1978). In the US, kink-based practices have been identified as 'paraphilias', and cited as a mental health condition in the 'Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders' (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), resulting in the diagnosis of practitioners as "pathological and at risk" (Wignall and McCormack, 2017: 802). Unlike normative sexual practices kink is positioned as a sexual 'perversion', with negative implications for practitioners (Beckman, 2001; Foucault, 1978). Sex education programmes do not include teachings covering non-normative sexual practices, such as kink, perhaps contributing to the limited understanding about fetish (Bezreh et al, 2012) and reinforcing the stigma (Khan, 2014). Furthermore, as suggested by several studies, there is an acute awareness amongst practitioners of the stigma associated with kink (Bezreh et al, 2012; Lin, 2017; Wright, 2006). Although the deviance associated with kink is appealing to some practitioners (Newmahr, 2010), it nonetheless has wider implications for kinksters. For example, disclosure of sexuality is influenced by stigma and remains a "complex consideration" for kink practitioners (Bezreh et al, 2012: 48). In their study, which explored disclosure decision-making processes of kink practitioners, Bezreh et al (2012) highlight that decisions of disclosure were carefully assessed and 'based on overall evaluation of a person; being seen as judgmental or narrow was sometimes disqualifying' (p. 48). Challenges of disclosure related to revealing sexual interests to family members, such as parents, prospective partners, as well as to colleagues in the workplace; here practitioners showed significant reluctance to disclose their sexual identity if they felt it would jeopardise relationships.

Even where tolerance is shown there is still a clear association made between fetish and violence. Yost (2010) argues there is a misconception that kink practitioners are prone to acting violently or are subjected to violence. The stigmatization of kink is also evident in policy (Califia and Sweeney, 1996); although it is not strictly an illegal practice in England and Wales, there are policies in place which suggest a moral opposition to fetish (Attwood and Smith, 2010; Carline, 2006; Cowen, 2016). There is some evidence that the imagery of kink, produced via advertisements, music videos, and film, has helped to normalize its practice (Marin, 1997). However, kink is misrepresented, with some negative portrayals depicting it as 'abnormal' (Beckman,

2001; Weiss, 2006: 111). This is evident in the film *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which portrays the main male protagonist, a practitioner of kink, as violent and abusive (Musser, 2015); many members of the kink community choose to distance themselves from this film, as it is argued to reinforce harmful stereotypes about kink (Flood, 2012). Weiss (2006) challenges the representations of fetish, arguing that rather than making kink more acceptable, they enforce 'boundaries between normal, protected, and privileged sexuality, and abnormal, policed, and pathological sexuality' (p.111), thus reinforcing notions of 'normative' and 'non-normative' sexualities and related practices. The stigmatization of kink has significant consequences for practitioners, with individuals commonly experiencing episodes of related anxieties, including feelings of shame and depression (Bezreh et al, 2012).

The Study – An Overview

The findings discussed in this article are based on a small-scale study, which explored FetLife users' experiences[1] with a focus on identity and stigma using semi-structured interviews with 14 participants. Interviews were conducted face-to-face using Skype, or via telephone, recorded and thematically analysed using NVivo. Thematic analysis was used to code because of its flexibility and offered an accessible form of analysis for interpretation of the themes of interest (Walter, 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2006). As well as recruiting participants from FetLife, a fetish-based Facebook group page[2] was used in order to reach kink practitioners and provide information about the study; all the participants were either active on FetLife or had previously used this platform. The majority of participants were male (10), and the remaining female (4) – none of the participants identified as trans or non-binary; the ages ranged from 24-63. The sexuality of participants varied; only two participants described themselves as heterosexual, three as bisexual, and the remaining nine described their sexuality as 'complicated', polyamorous, or pansexual. All the participants described themselves as having some form of sexual interest in kink and identified this as a central part to their overall sexuality.

The Experience of Stigma

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[1] This study was funded by Social Science College Research Fund, University of Lincoln, and was approved by the University of Lincoln Ethics Committee.

[2] The use of Facebook to recruit participants was important as it enabled us to reach a population of FetLife users who also engaged with mainstream SNS.

The findings of this study indicated that all the participants were aware of the stigma associated with kink and could offer examples of how it had affected them, suggested in the wider literature (Bezrah et al, 2012; Lin, 2017; Wright, 2006). In discussing the stigma, Jen[3] stated*:*

> we are perceived as the wrong ones; we are perceived as the ones that are a bit dirty and a bit wrong, and a little bit seedy, when in actual fact what we do doesn't hurt anybody and is purely consensual. We are stigmatised for it.

Several participants described how they were often perceived as "promiscuous" and/or "perverted" – this term was used to describe the perceptions of non-kink practitioners by almost all the participants in the study. In relation to the association with 'perversion', here one participant suggested that kink is sometimes mistakenly connected to paedophilia. Peter: *'Most times people are very judgmental. If you go worst case scenario* they *go – Oh, you are a pervert, you are into rubber, and you probably shag kids!'.* Although this concern was not expressed by other participants it is nonetheless indicative of the deviant association, and perhaps the medicalization, of kink practices. However, the extent to which kink practices are stigmatized was found to relate to the type of fetish being practised, with some forms more tolerated than others. Many of the participants agreed that outside of the kink community, practices described as 'vanilla' by kink practitioners (Lin, 2018), which might include light spanking, were less stigmatized. This is reflected in the sale of related merchandise in high street retailers such as Ann Summers', as well as the kink practices portrayed in the film *Fifty Shades of Grey*. One of the participants, John, reflected upon this:

> *I think certain types of kink have become more normalised with films like Fifty Shades of Grey; certain types of kink have become, not the norm, but more acceptable to talk about, if that makes sense.*

He continues to identify that other forms of kink might be more deviant and further stigmatised: *'whereas anything anal, I'd say, or to do with body fluids, I think there will always be a stigma towards that….because it's kind of dirty, isn't it?'.* What is also interesting here is the context of John's assertion - not only did he acknowledge that

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[3] Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of participants.

some forms of kink might be considered 'dirty', but he also indicated his acceptance of the deviant association, by proposing the question: 'because it's kind of dirty isn't it?'. This suggests that different types of kink are stigmatized within the kink community, as well as outside of it; it is important to note here that John described himself as heterosexual, which may be why he identifies 'anal' as an example of a practice seen as 'dirty'. Furthermore, this suggests that kink is heterogeneous, with multiple interests and practices (Hughes and Hammock, 2019). As indicated in the wider literature (see Barker, 2013), participants identified that the stigma associated with kink was due to misinformation and a limited understanding about consent, acknowledged here by Andy:

> …you are giving somebody power; giving somebody, in a way, the right to hurt you, with your consent; and of course that is a big taboo: people don't understand that. If people hear that you are into kink, people will assume at that point that it just means you get beaten black and blue. It's so not that.

Moreover, the effects of the stigma associated with kink are evident in different ways. For example, some of the participants discussed how it had impacted upon romantic relationships (also see Bezrah et al, 2012). Finn stated:

> When I was going out with a girlfriend a few years ago, when she found out I was into a lot of fetish things, that was it; the relationship was over when that happened; and I remember before it all came out, whenever she'd see someone who was in a latex outfit or anything like that, she'd have a sneering attitude and anger towards stuff like that".

In response to the stigma of kink, some participants made attempts to challenge the stereotypes associated with it, arguing that transparency about all sexual practices was important. For example, for Amy the 'visibility' of kink was significant to the process of normalisation:

You have things like Pride which helps the community come out from the shadows and be more visible. Pride encompasses more than just LGBT, these days: it's all manner of different sexual identities; kink being one of them. That is one way I suppose. I think just increasing visibility really. It is a very difficult thing to do.

In general, most participants suggested that the process of normalising kink was not straightforward. For instance, despite some participants suggesting that *Fifty Shades of Grey* has helped to normalise 'vanilla' kink practices, for many participants it has been damaging, misrepresenting fetish (also see Flood, 2012; Musser 2015). This was indicated by Tina:

Int*: Do you think people would have different perceptions depending on what the kink is?*

Tina: *Those that don't know about FetLife, always go back to Fifty Shades of Grey; which you try to explain to them, that it's not really like that. They won't listen…I think you have to start with the soft-core stuff to explain. If you went straight in with the needle play, they'd freak out…*

Unfortunately, this stigmatization of kink means that practitioners are restricted in online spaces where they can safely express themselves, exacerbated by the erosion of platforms such as Tumblr. One of the participants, Finn, even suggested that many mainstream SNS continue to reject kink, stating *'there is a stigma towards fetish and stuff. With the Tumblr ban that came into effect; with general other sites looking further down their noses at kink'.* In response to the stigma associated with kink, many of the participants found different ways to manage it, with findings suggesting that the use of alternative sites, such as FetLife, play a significant role in the stigma management of fetish.

Online Stigma Management Strategies

As well evidencing the stigma associated with fetish, the findings suggest that kink practitioners engage in several stigma management strategies. The work of Goffman (1963) is used to explore these strategies. According to Goffman, those who are stigmatised engage with three strategies: first, by creating their own social norms and

values to measure themselves against; second, by rejecting the community that supports the stigmatised norms; and/or third, by employing passing techniques, such as 'dividing up social worlds'. In their attempt to manage the stigma associated with kink, participants engaged with the first and third techniques.

The first technique is suggested in the participants' use of alternative SNS such as FetLife. Participants identified that FetLife, and to some extent Tumblr - prior to the 2018 sexual content restrictions, had provided a space to form communities[4]. Furthermore, FetLife was identified as an important platform where information about kink is freely exchanged, proving a safe space with limited judgement placed on kink practitioners. This was indicated by Mark and Amy:

> **Int**: *How important would you say sites like FetLife are for kink communities?*

> **Mark:** *"Very. I think they are now because the taboo is still connected to it; so therefore we can't discuss the normal things on social media; so we need to have our own outlet for it."*

> **Amy:** *"I think FetLife is a good website for people who want to develop their knowledge of the subject or develop their own kinks. I found it very useful in developing certain things or finding advice."*

For John, FetLife served his needs in many ways, but importantly addressed the feelings of isolation that could be felt within the company of non-kink practitioners:

> **John:** *It is (FetLife) a really good way of connecting with like-minded people who you can talk to about this stuff in a non-judgemental way. It is a very difficult thing to talk about to people in real life…As a person who is kinky, I think sometimes you can feel quite isolated, and it's like 'the weirdo in the bunch', and I think it is really important that people don't think they are alone; and that there is support out there; and people can reach out for support if they need it.*

Likewise, other participants such as Jen have been able to make friendships, extending into offline relationships:

> **Jen:** *"I formed quite a few friendships going to munches organised through FetLife. I went to one last night. I met some really lovely people; and because*

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[4] Interviews were conducted prior to and following the sexual content restrictions imposed by Tumblr.

the munches are organised through FetLife. I am then able to keep in touch with those people between the munches through websites"

Here Mike highlighted the importance of FetLife to those who were new to the scene:

Int: *Do you think it's important for maybe people starting out, who have just got into some kind of kink, do you think it might be a useful way to kind of express their sexual identity to other people?*

Mike: *Yes, I think it's tremendously useful for that; not only is it a safe place to express almost any sort of sexual interest or identity, you can get discussion groups on there that are genuinely educational; also it gives you access to your local area, so people can find their local munch or their local rope workshops. That is how you meet a lot of people*

Furthermore, participants acknowledged that FetLife was open to different kink practices, making it possible for kink subgroups to emerge. This was suggested by Gary: *"Yes, definitely different cliques and social tribes that don't seem to interact so much with each other".* Amy also explained how she could continually update her profile, providing an opportunity to *"draw the right people towards you".* In this respect, one of the participants Lyndsey, who described himself as a 'living doll', was able to make connections with others on FetLife with similar interests. Another participant Wylf, who engaged with 'pet play', like Lyndsey, cited the importance of been able to communicate directly with people who shared similar sexual interests. As Amy highlights, kink communities within FetLife are not just about sexual gratification:

my impression of the community is that it is so much more caring and kind-spirited than I ever would have imagined. It is not all about people just wanting to get on and fuck each other; there is so much more to it than that. There is a real, deeply engrained culture of looking out for each other

In facilitating face-to-face and online encounters, FetLife enables each kink practitioner to feel part of a unique fetish community. In this sense, we can see how different FetLife users are able to customise their own kink community subgroup based on their sexual interests. Here it is possible to identify how kink embodies 'serious leisure' (see Newmahr, 2010); moreover, as suggested through practitioners' use of FetLife, their subcultural dedication is emphasised (Newmahr, 2010).

The second strategy employed by participants relates to 'dividing up social worlds' (Goffman, 1963). In these instances, participants were careful about who they disclosed their practices to; sexual interests may be concealed from family members, but not necessarily from close friends or other kink practitioners (see Bezrah et al, 2012; Duguay, 2016). Amongst participants it was apparent that many kept their 'kink' life and 'regular' life separate, as highlighted below:

> **Gary:** *I kind of realised a few years ago, that I don't need to proclaim to everybody that I am doing this or that today. At the moment, with my family, they don't really need to know….*

> **Int**: *You would openly discuss it (kink) with anybody?*

> **Jen**: *Not with anybody; with good friends or people I can trust. I wouldn't just tell anybody; especially with my line of work. That could be used against me… (emphasis added)*

> **Mark**: *You don't know when and where your information is being shared or used. There are so many people on Facebook. You don't know who is watching or what is going on.*

Jen's belief that the knowledge of her interest in kink could be used against her professionally is again indicative of the widespread social disdain that continues to marginalise kink practitioners. This is emphasised by Mark, who cited a lack of trust pertaining to mainstream SNS, such as Facebook, and feared his interest in kink could be exposed.

Both strategies of stigma management enable kink practitioners to manage the stigma associated with kink. Although these techniques were clearly practiced on and offline, the first strategy, through which practitioners create their own norms and values, is particularly significant as it was predominantly practiced through online sites such as FetLife, having less significance in offline spaces. For some of the participants, communication with fellow kink practitioners was limited only to FetLife.

Online Policing of Sexualities

The findings suggest that SNS can be used to police sexual boundaries, helping to

promote normative sexualities and further marginalise non-normative sexualities (see

Duguay, 2016). This is achieved through informal and formal control measures, for example, informally through disapproval and shaming (by other users) directed at users who choose to talk about non-normative sexual interests. Formally, SNS such as Facebook and Tumblr have made steps to prohibit what they consider unacceptable sexual content; this is significant in the policing of sexuality (Brenner, 2005). The policing of non-normative sexualities (including sexual practices) stems from the stigma associated with it, and simultaneously helps to reinforce and exacerbate the deviant label (See Duguay, 2016; Brenner, 2005). Formal control of sexualities on SNS, such as Facebook, (see 'Community Standards' on Facebook.com), is enforced through sex policies listed under 'Adult nudity and sexual activity', 'Sexual solicitation', and 'Sexual Exploitation of Adults' (Facebook.com, 2019). Although there are several Fetish Groups and Pages on Facebook, there are restrictions on what can be posted, thus many of the participants in this study preferred to use private messenger to communicate when discussing kink. Facebook's policy on nudity, despite claiming to have become 'nuanced over time' (Facebook.com, 2019), continues to limit posts by kink practitioners, for example, in instances where clothing might show nipples. This was discussed by one of the participants, highlighted below:

> **Peter:** *What is the problem? People I know get photos banned on Facebook – You can't show nipples. Well they will put something a bit close, and it gets banned; especially latex designers. It could be a bit of cleavage, and that will get banned because obviously it's sexual if they are wearing latex.*

Furthermore, although it could be argued that Facebook has become sex phobic, more generally, it clearly highlights kink practises as an area of potential concern, stating 'fetish scenarios' risk containing inappropriate content if they are 'implicitly or indirectly offering or asking for solicitation in order to be deemed violating' (Facebook.com, 2019). Furthermore, given that most of its sex policies are vague, as well as potentially discriminatory, clear limitations are forced upon kink practitioners

to freely express their sexual interests. Policies can also be interpreted widely, giving Facebook enhanced control over exactly what can and cannot be posted.

As highlighted earlier, Tumblr's classification of what constitutes sexually explicit content, like Facebook's policy, is again rather broad and subject to interpretation. Kink practitioners voiced their concerns in the lead up to the sexual content restrictions on Tumblr. At the time this study was conducted Tumblr was used alongside FetLife by many of the participants. One of the participants Finn identified it as central to the kink online community: *'it was a place to express yourself – anything goes; as long as you were keeping an eye on under 18 year old people, it was fine. It was a big part of the community."* For Rebecca, another participant, embracing her fetish side was inconvenienced by changes to Tumblr. Indeed, she noted that Tumblr's stance may also disrupt the community as they are forced to migrate to another platform:

> *I know it (Tumblr's censoring of adult content) has made things a lot harder for me; so it has probably made it harder for other people, and for people quite established because Tumblr has been going for donkey's years. There are a lot of established people on there, and for them to have to pick up and shift. I can imagine it has impacted quite a few people.*

In response to restrictions on content, participants felt apprehensive about the future of other platforms:

> **Finn:** '*You never know when the next Tumblr is going to happen. You never know when it's going to be.*'

One of the participants, Peter, who had encountered problems posting on Facebook, acknowledged that the sexual content restrictions on Tumblr could have implications for his latex clothing business:

> *The ban might affect me: I work in latex, and you have different levels: you have dressing up were you either look really cool, so you are going to parties or nightclubs wearing it; people even wear it to normal nightclubs these days to*

shock everyone. Then you have the other end of bedroom clothing that is very much about feel; but if they bring a ban they'll just go – Right that's latex; sexual clothing.

Therefore, such restrictions not only have the potential to impact upon people's freedom of sexual expression but in some cases may impact upon their income where business is affected. Alongside the formal policing methods identified through the rules imposed by online sites, informally users of SNS can help control sexual expression (Duguay, 2016). Here we see a process of 'othering', which kink practitioners are subjected to both on and offline (Lin, 2018). For example, in this study participants reflected upon how the anticipated reactions of others continued to shape their online behaviours relating to disclosure of sexual interests in fear of being ridiculed and further stigmatized. It is important to note participants did not cite examples of being shamed on SNS, but felt that they *would* be judged if they did post about their sexual interests. Here Jen reflects upon how she is careful about disclosing such details on Facebook:

I filter what I post on Facebook. FetLife I don't filter. FetLife, I'll post anything. I don't care within reason. Facebook, I tend to have to filter (general interaction, not necessarily re fetish). I have friends and family on there who don't have an idea what I get up to.

This sentiment was reinforced by Finn, who confirmed *'I wouldn't talk (openly) about my sexuality (on Facebook). I don't know anyone who does'*. The anticipation of disapproval from other users regarding the sexualised posts of kink practitioners was acknowledged by other participants, demonstrated in the following extract:

Interviewer: *Why wouldn't you talk about your sexual interests on Facebook?*

Lyndsey: *I don't think people would appreciate hearing about that. I don't think that is why people go on Facebook. I think it would make people uncomfortable. I just don't think it is appropriate really.*

The notion that discussing sexual identity on mainstream SNS, such as Facebook, is inappropriate appears to be directed at those who practice non-normative sexualities more widely, with existing literature supporting these findings (see Duguay, 2016; Sarabia and Estenez, 2016). Alongside the use of the different SNS sex policies, which elicit a more formal measure of control, informal control as demonstrated through the anticipated disapproval of posts expressing non-normative sexual identities helps to police sexuality more widely, simultaneously promoting normative sexuality as superior. Furthermore, the online policing of sexuality, alongside offline measures of social control, continues to marginalise non-normative sexual identities, with kink at the center of this process.

Conclusion

The study indicates that practitioners of kink are subjected to, and aware of, the stigma associated with fetish, which has been shown to influence their lives in different ways. By focussing on the use of SNS, such as FetLife, Tumblr, and Facebook, it has been possible to identify how this stigmatization influences the *online* behaviours of kink practitioners. Evidence from this study suggests that mainstream SNS, such as Facebook, offer limited opportunities for kink practitioners to explore and express their sexual identities. Both formal and informal methods of policing are apparent across mainstream (Facebook) and alternative (Tumblr) SNS inhibiting sexual expression, with participants always anticipating further stigmatization. The findings of this study indicate that mainstream SNS are hostile to non-normative sexual practices, as suggested in some of the SNS policies, and that this is compounded by wider online social hostility directed towards kink, anticipated through disapproval. Thus, sites such as Fetlife have created important spaces for open interactions relating to fetish, allowing kink practitioners to feel 'safe' and accepted in a non-judgmental online environment, forming some level of resistance against stigmatization. Furthermore, in attempts to neutralise the stigma of kink, FetLife provides a space for kink practitioners to cultivate a set of unique kink communities specific to their sexual interests, leading to the creation of their own norms and values against which they can be measured (see Goffman, 1963). Importantly, the use of FetLife did not necessarily extend into offline interactions; although this was not the case for all participants, it was evident that FetLife online communities could exist entirely on this platform without leaving the virtual world. Despite the benefits of sites such as FetLife for kink practitioners, the

policing of sexualities in online spaces, alongside the stigma management strategies employed by kink practitioners, may only help to further isolate non-normative sexualities as the 'other'. As kink practitioners are increasingly forced to engage with alternative online spaces, they risk facing further stigmatization and marginalization. In response to this, existing SNS policies need to be revisited and challenged with the view to making them more inclusive for all sexual identities.

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