

“Sometimes It’s Easier to Type Things Than to Say Them”: Technology in BDSM Sexual Partner Communication

Valerie Rubinsky¹ 

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Abstract The present study sought to investigate how individuals in BDSM or kinky relationships leveraged communication technologies to maintain their sexual relationships. From an analysis of 321 open-ended survey responses from 162 participants, results indicated that technology was disinhibiting, particularly in negotiation, fantasy exchange, and channel selection, multimodality within checking in, planning, foreplay, and preferring face-to-face sexual communication and activity, relational maintenance, particularly within 24/7 hierarchical relationships and LDRs, as well as changes in sexual communication mediums with relational progress. These patterns emphasized that technology use, common in increasingly multimodal sexual relationships, provided a means for reductions in the perception of threat typically experienced in sexual communication by increased disinhibition. As one participant said, “Sometimes it’s easier to type things than to say them”. Findings are discussed in light of extensions to the online disinhibition effect in sexual minority relationships and sexual communication in increasingly multimodal relationships. Limitations and recommendations for future research are discussed.

Keywords Sexual communication · BDSM · Kink · Technology-mediated communication · Disinhibition

✉ Valerie Rubinsky
vr225514@ohio.edu

¹ School of Communication Studies, Ohio University, 400 Schoonover Center, Athens, OH 45701, USA

Introduction

Sex, a face-threatening (Cupach and Metts 1994), taboo (Anderson et al. 2011), and vulnerable (Noland 2010) site of discourse within intimate relationships, comprises a uniquely important arena for partner communication (Montesi et al. 2011). Specifically, sexual communication facilitates positive relational and sexual outcomes (Byers 2011; Montesi et al. 2011) and sexual health protective behaviors (Noar et al. 2006). Despite its benefits (Anderson et al. 2011; Montesi et al. 2011), intimate partners experience difficulty engaging conversations about sex (Cupach and Metts 1994; Noland 2010). Individuals who practice or identify with bondage, discipline/domination, and submission/sadomasochism (BDSM) may experience an increased need for sexual communication, as their sexual practices are highly communicative (Beres and MacDonald 2015; Pitagora 2013). At the same time, because they enact a stigmatized practice and identity (Beres and MacDonald 2015), they may also experience more difficulty engaging an already challenging topic with their partners. As technology minimizes the experience of threat associated with challenging communication topics (Suler 2004), technology-mediated sexual communication (TMSC) might also alleviate some of the challenges associated with face-to-face sexual communication for this population. Historically, individuals who practice BDSM or other forms of kink have engaged technology in both the initiation and maintenance of their intimate relationships (Bardzell 2010). Given both the importance and challenges of sexual communication in BDSM relationships, the present study investigates how individuals use technology to facilitate sexual communication and maintain their sexual relationships.

Online Disinhibition in Mediated Sex Talk

BDSM and Kink

BDSM, or kink, a broader category of sexual identities and practices, are both highly communicative. BDSM encompasses individuals who engage in power dynamics (e.g., dominant/submissive, age play), pain (i.e., sadism/masochism), bondage (e.g., use of ropes, handcuffs, or other restraints), or other roleplaying scenarios. As a community, practitioners of BDSM enforce communal-based standards for consent (Beres and MacDonald 2015), which typically involve an emphasis on consent and boundary-setting (Kattari 2015) and intensified interpersonal communication (Pitagora 2013). Specifically, negotiation commonly constitutes an essential aspect of kink and BDSM (Kattari 2015). As a part of the *play*, a common term for specific sexual (or non-sexual) scenes engaged within the preferred dynamic, a bargaining process frequently occurs (Faccio et al. 2014). Further, BDSM relationships, typically involve a code of conduct or negotiated agreement (Baumeister 1988). As a part of establishing a negotiated agreement,

practitioners of BDSM may devote time specifically to communication prior to and after sexual activity (Faccio et al. 2014; Kattari 2015). This negotiation may encompass discussions of sexual history, sexual safety, health concerns (e.g., traumatic triggers, latex allergies), length of play, type of interaction, toy use, or anything that should be considered off limits (Faccio et al. 2014; Kattari 2015). In addition, BDSM or kink play may not always be physical, or may be talk-oriented or talk-supplemented (Beres and MacDonald 2015). For example, individuals may report on daily activities, ask permission to climax, or be given verbal directives as an aspect of their relationship. Thus, intensified communication may be expected or necessary within BDSM intimate relationships about a topic that is difficult to engage in any relationship.

In addition, stigma may be associated with the practice or identity of BDSM. Although BDSM is not characteristic of unhealthy relationships (Beres and MacDonald 2015; Pitagora 2013), its association with deviance and abuse by those outside the relationship often results in perceptions of stigma (Tripodi 2017). Given its stigma, individuals who practice BDSM, like other stigmatized relationships (Miller 2017), may be likely to find partners, communicate desire, initiate, or maintain their sexual relationships online (Sixma 2009). While past scholarship (Beres and MacDonald 2015; Faccio et al. 2014) establishes the communicative nature of BDSM and kinky relationships, and suggests that technology comprises an integral aspect of many BDSM sexual relationships (Bardzell 2010; Sixma 2009), less is known about how individuals in BDSM relationships use technology to communicatively maintain their sexual relationships. Sexual communication is taboo (Anderson et al. 2011), and thus comprises a face-threatening conversation.

Face-Threatening Sex Talk

Sexual communication is a face-threatening interpersonal behavior within relationships that may occur differently over multiple channels or modes of communication (e.g., face-to-face, various communication technologies like text messages, Skype, or virtual communities). Sexual communication constitutes an especially face-threatening form of communication (Cupach and Metts 1994; Noland 2010). Face describes to the positive social value a person claims for themselves during an interaction (Brody and Pena 2013; Cupach and Metts 1994), which can be saved or threatened. Face-threatening topics include embarrassing predicaments, overly emotional messages, and messages about taboo topics like sex or stigmatized identities (Brody and Pena 2013; Cupach and Metts 1994). Even within close relationships, sex comprises a taboo and face-threatening topic (Anderson et al. 2011; Noland 2010). Generally, individuals try to avoid face-threatening communication, and may be aware of and exploit the affordances of communication in mediated contexts to avoid face-threatening behavior (Pojanapunya and Jaroenkitboworn 2011). Increased control over self-presentation, among other features of digital spaces, may result in feelings of disinhibition that decrease the perception of threats to aspects of personal identity.

Online Disinhibition Effect in Multimodal Relationships

One reason technology may mitigate the face-threatening nature of sexual communication is because technology-mediated communication (TMC) often incurs disinhibition effects. The online disinhibition effect describes the processes of disinhibition that sometimes result in increased online disclosures compared to face-to-face communication (Suler 2004). Online disinhibition can occur in benign ways, such as when individuals share their feelings, desires, and personal information, or by reducing the deleterious effects of social anxiety on interpersonal communication (Green et al. 2016). Alternatively, disinhibition can be toxic, as with trolling or harassment (Lapidot-Leffer and Barak 2012). Suler (2004) argues that at least six technological affordances contribute to the disinhibition effect: dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination, and the minimization of status and authority. In college student populations, sexting is an example of disinhibited behavior, along with alcohol use and hookups (Dir et al. 2013). In addition, previous scholarship has explored the potential benefits of engaging the Internet to equip individuals with sex-related information and skills due to its disinhibiting nature (Barak and Fisher 2001). Disinhibition may also explain why practitioners of BDSM are more likely to use online spaces like Second Life to explore aspects of their sexual identity or engage in cybersex (Craft 2012; Sixma 2009). Although the disinhibition effect has been applied to BDSM relational initiation in particular online spaces, less work has explored how disinhibition may occur in maintaining an existing sexual or overall relationship, which is important to explore because close relationships are increasingly characterized by multimodality that is subject to various channel effects.

Today, close relationships are multimodal (Caughlin and Sharabi 2013). Individuals communicate across multiple platforms with important others, including sexual and romantic partners. Sexual communication occurs off- and online in close relationships, as sexting is becoming increasingly prevalent among existing partners (Klettke et al. 2014; Manning 2013). Disinhibition may occur in mediated sexual communication, which may have consequences for face-to-face sexual communication or behavior, or the overall relationship. The communication processes by which individuals manage the experience of disinhibition that may occur in some aspects of their sexual communication, but not others, may be revealed in an examination of how individuals in BDSM relationships use technology to communicate about sex within those relationships. For example, instant messaging is positively associated with the quality of adolescents’ existing friendships given its potential to stimulate intimate online self-disclosure (Valkenburg and Peter 2009). In addition, technology-mediated communication may mitigate adverse interpersonal processes, like social anxiety (High and Caplan 2009). These and other examples of enhanced online self-disclosure (Valkenburg and Peter 2009) suggest that certain channels’ increase in controllability of online self-presentation and self-disclosure may facilitate ease in sexual exploration within digital spaces (Valkenburg and Peter 2011).

Communication is an integral part of the practice and identity of BDSM. However, sexual communication is still difficult (Anderson et al. 2011; Noland 2010). How technology is used to navigate an especially stigmatized and face-threatening

type of communication may reveal strategies for mitigating discomfort in sexual communication. While the literature on the BDSM community suggests new media and technology play some role in those relationships, and that these relationships are heavily rooted in communication, the exact role of technology in sexual communication within BDSM relationships is still unknown. Thus, this study poses the following research question:

RQ1: How do individuals involved in BDSM/kink relationships use technology-mediated communication to maintain their sexual relationships?

Methods

Instrumentation and Sample

In the present study, I employed a survey methodology as a means to ensure anonymity as well as to engage a larger segment of the BDSM community. I posted the research call on sexual minority listservs, the/bdsm subreddit on Reddit.com, the BDSM tag on Tumblr.com, and on Facebook groups. The research call asked for participants who identified as being in at least one BDSM and/or kinky relationship, had met their partner in person at least once, and had used technology at some point in the last 3 months to communicate with a partner about sex. Participants who had multiple partners were asked to keep one specific partner in mind throughout the survey for consistency. As part of a larger study on BDSM sexual communication, the questionnaire was hosted on Qualtrics.com, and composed of both scales and open-ended questions. The portion of the questionnaire with open-ended questions is what is discussed in the present paper.

Participants ($n = 162$) identified as having at least one BDSM and/or kinky relationship at the time they participated in the present study. Participants identified their gender as cisgender women ($n = 96$, 58.2%), cisgender men ($n = 39$, 23.6%), genderqueer ($n = 7$, 4.2%), genderfluid ($n = 6$, 3.6%), transgender men ($n = 6$, 3.6%), or otherwise under the transgender or gender non-conforming umbrellas ($n = 8$, 4.8%). Participants described their sexual orientation as bisexual or pansexual ($n = 81$, 49.1%), heterosexual ($n = 62$, 37.6%), gay or lesbian ($n = 7$, 4.2%), asexual spectrum ($n = 5$, 3%), or otherwise under the LGBTQ umbrella ($n = 14$, 8.5%). Most participants were white or Caucasian ($n = 136$, 82.4%), two or more races ($n = 12$, 7.3%), Asian or Pacific Islander ($n = 8$, 4.8%), Latinx or Hispanic ($n = 5$, 3%), Black or African American ($n = 1$, .6%), and Native American ($n = 1$, .6%). Ages ranged from 18 to 55 years old ($M = 29.01$, $SD = 8.68$).

Data Analysis

To address the research question, participants responded to two open-ended questions: (1) how, if at all, they use technology to communicate about sex with their partner(s) and (2) how, if at all, they use technology to have sex with their partner(s). In total, I analyzed 321 responses from 162 participants using pattern-coding (Miles

et al. 2014). Responses ranged in length from a few words (i.e., "we sext sometimes") to several paragraphs. Pattern coding (Miles et al. 2014) is a second-order coding technique that involves identifying patterns among qualitative data. First-order coding involved a thorough read-through of the data while identifying broad, in vivo themes within the text. In second order coding, I used pattern coding to synthesize meaningful, broader themes from first-order coding into "parsimonious units of analysis" (Saldaña 2015, p. 236). Often, pattern coding is paired with quantitative data. However, because the present study focuses on an explication of the qualitative processes of communication technology in maintaining BDSM sexual relationships, a deeper description of the patterns rather than a numeric description better addresses the research question.

Results

From coding participant responses, I identified four major patterns, with eight related patterns. The first major pattern is that *technology is disinhibiting*. Related subthemes include *negotiation* and *fantasy exchange and channel selection*. The second major pattern is *multimodality*, with subthemes of *checking in before or after scenes via technology*, *planning*, *foreplay*, and *preference for face-to-face*. The third major pattern is *relational maintenance*, with subthemes of *24/7 hierarchical maintenance*, and *sexting as relational maintenance in long-distance relationships*. Lastly, individuals also identify instances of *sexual communication medium changes as relational progress*.

Participants communicated about sex or engaged in sexual activity with their partners over a variety of technology-mediated channels, including text messages, email, Snapchat, Skype, Fetlife.com (including events, public message boards, and private messages), via phone calls, Discord, Slack, Microsoft Word and Excel documents, online tests or kink lists, Kik, Google Docs, shared Pinterest boards, Facebook messenger, What'sApp, Tumblr.com (e.g., sharing blogs/links, private messaging), sharing articles, porn videos, and erotica, Wire, teledildonics (e.g., remote controlled vibrators), Second Life, and other unidentified private messaging services. For participants, engaging in BDSM emphasized that sex is communicative, and complicated what *sex* meant for participants. All but one participant identified using technology, at least once, to communicate about sex with their partner, but not all participants identified *having sex* over technology, or specified that they did not consider technology-mediated sexual activities or TMS as *sex*, which emphasizes definitional ambiguity in what counts as sex. Specifically, 44 participants said they do not use technology to "have sex" with their partner, whereas only one participant, who identified as gray-asexual, said that they do not use technology to communicate with a partner about sex. The remaining 118 participants did identify technology-mediated sexual activities that they believed to qualify as sexual activity.

Only one participant identified communicating about sex or engaging in sexual activity over technology as riskier than in person. For example, this participant said:

We occasionally might have what could be described as “cyber sex”, this can include exchanging photographs of an erotic nature. Though our preference with each other (and with others) is meet up in person. We are conscious of privacy risks that come with communicating in the fashion to external parties and take steps to mitigate these risks (Participant 121).

No other participant brought up perceived risk, or positioned technology as riskier than face-to-face sexual activity or communication. In contrast, most participants identified that technology resulted in easier sex talk, or diminished their perception of risk. The remainder of this section addresses the research question by describing the patterns I identified within participant responses.

Disinhibition

Largely, participants emphasized that technology results in less shame or embarrassment in disclosing stigmatized desire or aided in moving past personal feelings of shyness. The first pattern of disinhibition describes participants’ feeling disinhibited in mediated sexual communication with their partner. For example, these participants noted, “Depends on if it comes up in conversation. Feels safer online though cause I can think about what to say” (Participant 51); as well as, “Sometimes there are things I just cannot bring myself to say out loud. Embarrassment or shame or whatever. I can text/message these things. I write my husband explicit emails on a regular basis as well” (Participant 79); and “We use email to communicate about feelings, fantasies, and anything that is easier to write down than to talk about” (Participant 155). Further, this participant wrote:

Vaguely every now and again just to communicate arousal. More commonly I use it to communicate interests to him that I could never bring myself to say face to face simply because I am shy. It is much easier to write it down than to speak it for me (Participant 162).

These exemplars demonstrate disinhibition communicating about sex over technology compared to face-to-face. Thus, participants engaged technology as a medium because they felt it was easier to disclose or discuss desire over technology.

Some participants emphasized layers of stigma and barriers to communicating face-to-face that technology helped overcome. For example, this participant wrote:

My partner and I are both autistic and rape survivors, so verbal communication face to face isn’t a strong point for us. Instant messaging has been a critical tool in keeping our marriage together and communicating our needs sexually and otherwise to each other. We often cannot say what we need or how we feel unless we are using hangouts or facebook messenger to do it (Participant 90).

Thus, technology may be engaged to maintain sexual relationships as a result of its disinhibiting effect as well as by providing additional tools in needs communication.

Although most participants referred to themselves when describing instances of online disinhibition minimizing their discomfort communicating about sex or facilitating their ability to fully communicate their needs and desires to a partner,

some participants placed the disinhibition effect onto their partner rather than themselves. For example, this participant wrote:

In the beginning of our relationship, communication wasn’t what it needed to be. My partner was reluctant (re: shy) to talk about what needed to be discussed. In any relationship, especially one involving sex, communication should be open and honest. Double so if it involves any sort of kink/BDSM. My partner would be more open via text/messaging, so we used that avenue to discuss certain topics until my partner felt comfortable voicing wants/needs/limits. They HAD to be discussed, and if technology made it easier, I was fine with that being the mode of communication until the trust had been built to have these conversations face-to-face (Participant 115).

Therefore, while participants generally noted disinhibition from their own perspective, some also acknowledge that disinhibition eases the difficulty of sexual communication for a partner.

Negotiation

As a result of online disinhibition, participants described technology as a suitable medium for negotiating limits, boundaries, preferences, and consent, among other issues. These responses generally implied a degree of multimodality in sexual communication, suggesting that although the negotiation occurred via technology, sex acts would likely take place face-to-face, although there were exceptions to this pattern. Negotiation occurred via technology because participants, to some degree, felt more comfortable communicating about what was perceived as an important component of their sexual behavior over these mediums. For examples, this participant wrote: “Both of us are sexually open and highly value communication; we regularly discuss our sexual interests and limits through internet messaging” (Participant 71). Further, this participant said:

Technology allows us to broach topics in a non confrontational way. My primary is my dominant and we use texting as a form of consent negotiation. It provides a space that is free from physical pressure to acquiesce to activities suggested. It allows for calculated responses which we both value. My primary and I also use an excel spreadsheet filled with 200+ kink activities. I list my interest (hard limit, soft limit, interest from 1 (I’ll do it for you) to 5 (let’s do this all the time!)) And he plans scenes accordingly. He has also filled it out for me so we can better communicate about our interests. All of my partners and I explore fantasies and sexual desires via text, shared porn gifs/videos/writings, and sexting. Snapchat is fun for teasing pictures and videos. All of my partners are on fetlife.com and are friends with me. When I rsvp to an event they can see and vice versa. We can choose to go to events together or not. They can see my interests and I, theirs, which sparks conversations and explorations (Participant 24).

These participants described that technological tools facilitated both disinhibition, thereby easing a sensitive conversational subject, and a means to plan and explore varying sexual interests together, thus resulting in a more comfortable process of negotiation.

Fantasy Exchange and Channel Selection

Relatedly, participants identified that technology facilitated exchanging particular fantasies with both increased ease due to disinhibition and additional depth given the selected channels. Specifically, participants emphasized that email was better suited to describe lengthy fantasies or broach topics that required more thought and time. For example, this participant wrote:

I like to use email to talk to my partners about difficult topics (which includes but isn't limited to sex). It lets me organize my thoughts and write them out in long form, without the length constraints of texting or the fear of saying the wrong thing when communicating in person. However, we will often switch to talking in person once I've had a chance to marshal my thoughts. It's easier to read someone face-to-face, and it also helps remind us of what we're in this for. It's a lot harder to feel anxious that my partner doesn't love me due to some difference of opinion when they're cuddled up next to me while we talk it out. If we tried to do that via some technological medium, there are times when my adrenaline would be through the roof and fight-or-flight would kick in (Participant 12).

As this response demonstrated, participants thought about which channel was appropriate for a given conversation, determining that sometimes email allowed for disinhibited and long-form communication, but that face-to-face communication could also result in disinhibition if a partner provided a high degree of comfort.

Other participants emphasized fantasy exchange over technology and channel selection choices. For example, this participant wrote, "Sometimes when we are proposing a complex scene we will email about it rather than talk about it" (Participant 17). Further, this participant noted:

We sometimes use text messages to tell each other what we are thinking or fantasizing about, or to make suggestions if there's something in particular one of us wants to do that night. More recently, we've gotten in the habit of sending more complete written fantasies as emails to one another when one of us is traveling (Participant 38).

Emailing fantasies or more explicit scenes appeared to constitute a sexual maintenance method during travel as well. Participants described specific choices in which medium was best suited for exchanging complex fantasies.

Multimodality

Although responses in nearly every theme emphasized some degree of multimodality by accentuating that technology either complemented, supplemented, or replaced

face-to-face sexual activity or communication, responses within this pattern emphasized the multimodal nature of sexual relationships above some other thematic issue (i.e., disinhibition or maintenance). Multimodality referred to communicating via multiple channels. Participants emphasized that their relationships involved communication across multiple technology-mediated and face-to-face channels. For example, "We communicate about sex over technology just as well as face to face. Sometimes topics are breached in one medium and returned to in another" (Participant 55); as well as, "We occasionally use technology to talk about sex, but generally in the context of things we'd like to do the next time we see each other in person" (Participant 59); and, "We talk about how things went or what we might want to try next time" (Participant 73). These exemplars demonstrated that participants communicated across multiple modes, and may return to topics discussed in one modality when communicating within another.

Checking In

Participants described instances in which they used technology to check in either before or after a particular play scene or face-to-face sexual activity. For examples, this participant wrote, "To check in after and make sure feelings about what took place are still the same and things are okay" (Participant 145), and this participant noted:

There has been one issue regarding sex that I brought up with my Master via a text then phone call as it couldn't wait until we next saw each other. The issue was very quickly resolved. We then spoke about it again the next time we saw each other (Participant 161).

These exemplars demonstrated that technology may be used to check-in after sexual activity, given perceptions of constant availability via technology and increased convenience and urgency compared to face-to-face communication.

Participants also emphasized that checking in was a multimodal experience. For example, this participant wrote:

Usually to discuss ideas for new experiences, and/or how we felt about previous experiences. It is generally a continuation of previous conversations that we've had, continued because one or both of us has to go to work or run errands. (Participant 77).

This response demonstrated both that technology may be used to plan or check in on how partners felt about previous sexual experiences, as well as the continuation of multimodal communication. Conversations that occurred over one medium (face-to-face) were often continued over another (technology-mediated). For another example, this participant wrote:

I use messenger or texting to ask questions about my partner's preferences, both for general knowledge and for planning scenes. This includes planning which toys to bring/which clothing to wear when I see her next. If we're physically in the same place, I communicate face to face instead. If we're not in

the same place, I might also use messenger to send pictures of aftermath from scenes (e.g. bruising) and express my happiness with the relevant scene (Participant 137).

This response also described channel selection choices, as technology may be used when a partner is not physically present.

Planning

In addition, this pattern emphasized a difference between *talking* about having sex, and actually having sex. Highlighting multimodality distinguished more between discussing fantasies with a partner and engaging in some sexually gratifying act, of which talking was sometimes but not always included. Distinctions between sexual talk and sexual acts emerged as especially prominent in responses that described planning future face-to-face play scenes or sexual activities. For example, this participant wrote:

We use technology to communicate about certain aspects of our play/sex. For example, we send each other articles on things we want to try, so we can read them and then talk about it in person when we see each other next, or think up ideas for scenes that we want to do! Or, items we want to purchase regarding our lifestyle (Participant 95).

In addition, this participant wrote:

Trying to schedule time together. We usually don't specifically mention sex, but between our work schedules and having a toddler to care for, we have to juggle and shift activities and so usually there is a mutual expectation of sex if we ever get an evening alone together (Participant 36).

Either implicitly or explicitly, participants used technology to plan sexual activities by scheduling time or by describing desired sex acts. For another example, this participant wrote, "Often arranging the logistics of sexual activities—who has protection, what toys to bring etc. etc." (Participant 85). Thus, participants used technology to orchestrate the logistics of particular sex acts, for scheduling, or for describing desired sex acts.

Foreplay

Also emphasizing the multimodal nature of sex, participants described sexual communication over technology as a type of foreplay to increase arousal for face-to-face sexual activity. These responses also sometimes reinforced the planning-role of technology for face-to-face encounters. For example, this participant wrote:

We'll say what we want to do to each other, talk about dates with other partners (we're polyamorous), talk about fantasies, plan outings to buy toys or send each other listings of toys we're interested in, request specific things in bed, talk sexy about how much we're looking forward to XYZ, talk about how

we've fantasized about the other person while masturbating, etc. It's good foreplay for in person sexual contact (Participant 25).

This response both described the type of planning that might occur via technology, as well as reinforced that this planning could act as foreplay for future face-to-face sexual activity.

For another example, this participant wrote, "We definitely use it to share our kinks and boundaries which is sometimes a hard conversation to have in person. Also dirty talk via text kind of becomes like extended foreplay" (Participant 14). In addition to emphasizing that erotic talk via text messages served as foreplay, this participant reinforced the pattern of disinhibition, because talking about desire and boundaries face-to-face sometimes felt more challenging than disclosing that information via technology.

Rare TMSC

Fewer participants did note that while they and their partner sometimes communicated about sex via technology, TMSC occurred with relative infrequency in their relationships, and they preferred having those conversations face-to-face. For examples, this participant noted:

Usually we communicate what we want to do the next time we see each other in real life. I recently had chats with someone (is not met in-person) who asked me my top 3 favorite things to give, and 3 things to receive. While I answered, I prefer to save these conversations for in-person (Participant 21).

In addition, this participant wrote, "We really talk about sex and all that in person. Phone sex and sexting has always been pretty cheesy. We sometimes post nudes to our Snapchat story that only us three can see though" (Participant 96); further, this participant noted, "We try to do all this in person but I may send a picture and be like 'let's try this'" (Participant 96). These responses underscored that face-to-face discussion may be more valued, especially for something as intimate as sex. These responses also reinforced the multimodality of sexual communication by positioning technology as an occasional means of communication within a face-to-face relationship.

Relational Maintenance

Participants acknowledged that sexual communication was an important aspect of overall relational maintenance, and that technology was a tool for maintaining both a satisfying sexual relationship and a satisfying overall relationship. Frequently, participants used technology to aid in mutual masturbation while not together in person or through erotic text messages and phone calls. For example, "Mutual masturbation via video chat, sending of erotica and pictures" (Participant 26). In addition, some general relational maintenance occurred in the form of using text messages to send flirty check-ins or sexual teasing. However, use of technology to maintain two specific types of relationships most commonly characterized responses emphasizing

sexual relationship maintenance. Specifically, participants described technology use within 24/7 hierarchical relational maintenance and maintaining long-distance relationships (LDRs).

Hierarchical Relational Maintenance

A specific type of BDSM or kink relationship is called 24/7 relationships, and they are typically hierarchical in nature. These relationships involve not breaking the hierarchical sexual dynamic (e.g., dominant and submissive) even while not engaging in a particular sex act. Unsurprisingly, technology facilitates maintaining this dynamic given the affordance of more constant availability. For example, this participant wrote:

Though not explicitly sexual, is sexual by nature for us (at least) if not most other D/s couples generally. Following my rules (even ones like not being able to eat until my Dom had begun to eat) are inherently sexual because they reinforce my submission to my Dom, something that I find arousing. So in that sense, much of our communication through technology is sexual (Participant 46).

For another example, this participant wrote:

I keep a tumblr journal at my partner's request to document my feelings about the relationship, our sex life, etc. we frequently send each other sexual things we find appealing on tumblr and talk about them over text or Skype (Participant 78).

In addition, this participant described:

We message each other fairly often about our relationship dynamic and my submission to him, and these conversations often contain a sexual component. We also have inside jokes about kink in general/the kink community, so things like that get brought up occasionally. I sometimes have assigned readings about D/s relationships and interactions that I am required to message him about when I am finished, which often also contain a discussion of sex (Participant 81).

These exemplars demonstrated that technology could facilitate maintaining a more complex sexual relationship by allowing individuals to communicate with their partners more frequently throughout the day, share writing or reading assignments, and so on.

Relatedly, participants mentioned using technology to engage in sexual roleplaying with a partner. For examples, this participant wrote, "We use it to role play" (Participant 112); as well as this participant said, "We often use technology to roleplay to feel closer to each other" (Participant 31). Further, some participants engaged specific platforms like Second Life to carry out fantasies that would be challenging to enact face-to-face. For example, this participant wrote:

Using our avatars in Second Life we live out an ongoing Domme/sub relationship, which might include any scenario, from a romantic night at a dance party to a torture scene in a dungeon. It's also useful for being able to act out scenes or fetishes that may be a hard limit in real life (e.g., rape, bisexual, etc.). Away from that, we also do frequent Skype video/audio calls to play together. She gives me commands and I have to follow or earn punishments (Participant 72).

Thus, the unique affordances of particular technology-mediated communication channels facilitated engaging sexual relationships characterized by consensual power dynamics or hierarchical complexities.

Maintaining LDRs

Participants in long-distance BDSM or kinky relationships described technology as pivotal in maintaining their sexual relationship. For examples, this participant wrote, "We use messaging and phone calls, plus Snapchat for pictures, to have phone sex and to keep the "spark" so to speak" (Participant 11); and this participant noted, "Sexting has been wonderful to help make being apart for long periods of time bearable. We are used to seeing each other daily so it has been a difficult adjustment" (Participant 51). Further, this participant said, "I enjoy texting things of a sexual nature regularly because it keeps us connected even when we are unable to physically be with one another" (Participant 14). These exemplars emphasized that TMSC facilitated relational maintenance when partners were unable to be geographically close.

Some participants also mentioned the use of or considering the use of teledildonics, technology specifically designed to facilitate long-distance sexual activity. For example, this participant wrote:

We frequently mutually masturbate over video calls (Skype) when apart, and regularly have sexual conversations when we message each other. I also have a sex toy that can be linked to a remote/messaging app that we both have on our phones (Participant 71).

Further, this participant noted:

We have both masturbated on camera while Skyping or snapchatting to each other. We have also used Skype and snapchat to describe how each on is masturbating without showing it on camera. Additionally we are seriously considering buying remote controlled Sex toys like Lovense Lush, Hush Nora and Max, but so far we have not used teledildonics in our relationship (Participant 65).

These exemplars demonstrated that in addition to more traditional channels like video-messaging or phone sex, new technologies increased the possibilities for maintaining sexual relationships with distance, even in often more complex sexual relationships like those who practice BDSM.

Although participants described technology as important in maintaining LDRs, they also sometimes positioned technology as their only option for maintaining their

sexual relationships, thereby suggesting that face-to-face sexual activity and communication might be preferable if it were an option. For example, this participant wrote, “At the moment, the only form of communication with a long distance relationship. Before this it would be often when I’m not with her physically” (Participant 103); or, this participant wrote:

We message each other about it, talk about it in a general sense, or sext each other. Again, because it is our main mode of communication, we have no choice but to use it to talk about sex with one another (Participant 6).

For another example, this participant said:

We communicate about sex using technology the same as we do when we are able to meet in person. Discussion about sexual desires and fantasies tends to be more common via technology solely due to the distance involved and the inability to directly act on those desires. In person they would generally simply be acted on (Participant 3).

Thus, technology proved consequential in maintaining LDRs, but some participants indicated they would prefer face-to-face contact when possible.

Technology Use Change Through Relational Progression

Although less common, a pattern also emerged in which individuals described the change in their sexual communication or sexual activity via technology, specifically aligning with their relational progression. Typically, these responses characterized technology use as frequent in early stages of a relationship, either before they met their partner, or while still figuring out one another’s boundaries and preferences, highlighting the potential for technology’s disinhibiting effect on negotiation. However, these responses indicated that they commonly engaged this negotiation online, and then enacted it in-person almost exclusively once a relationship was more established. For example, this participant wrote, “We used to negotiate scenes in detail on FetLife but not anymore” (Participant 158); and this participant noted, “We did a lot at the beginning of our relationship; sharing images and sexual messages. Now we very rarely use technology to have sex” (Participant 85).

Other participants indicated that it was more common to use technology when their relationship was long distance or marked by frequent travel, but now that their relationship was geographically close, technology was less important. For example, “I generally don’t. I have in the past while in a long distance relationship, but I prefer sex in person when possible. When I do, though, it’s generally over text messaging, with a combination of talking and pictures” (Participant 12); and another participant noted, “Not anymore, but when my partner used to travel for work, we would use video chat to do sexual activities” (Participant 36). Other participants emphasized that although relational progression changed the frequency of the use of technology, it was still a part of how they maintain their relationships. For example, this participant wrote:

Before we moved in together it was daily. We sexted, we had phone sex, we mutually masturbated over video chats. Now that we live together we only have phone sex when one of us is away but we sext daily (Participant 79).

These responses demonstrated that technology use may be more common in LDRs than in geographically close relationships, but those individuals may still possess technology as a tool to maintain their relationships during instances of travel or distance.

Discussion

The present study sought to investigate how individuals in BDSM or kinky relationships leveraged communication technologies to maintain their sexual relationships. From an analysis of 321 open-ended survey responses from 162 participants, results indicated that technology was disinhibiting, particularly in negotiation, fantasy exchange, and channel selection, multimodality within checking in, planning, foreplay, and preferring face-to-face sexual communication and activity, relational maintenance, particularly within 24/7 hierarchical relationships and LDRs, as well as changes in sexual communication mediums with relational progress. These patterns emphasized that technology use, common in increasingly multimodal sexual relationships, provided a means for reduction in the perception of threat typically experienced in sexual communication via increased disinhibition. As one participant said, “Sometimes it’s easier to type things than to say them” (Participant 43). In addition, responses emphasized some degree of definitional ambiguity in what counts as sex, supporting past research that describes definitions of sex as influenced by identity (Manning 2014; Rubinsky and Cooke-Jackson 2018). First, I review the present findings in light of extensions to the online disinhibition effect in sexual minority relationships. Next, I describe sexual communication in increasingly multimodal relationships.

Disinhibition in BDSM Sexual Communication

Extensive documentation of the online disinhibition effect exists in previous literature, indicating that affordances of various mediated channels result in increased disclosure and reduction in perceptions of threat, thereby increasing feelings of disinhibition (Hollenbaugh and Everett 2013; Lapidot-Lefler and Barak 2012; Suler 2004, among others). Although some scholarship has begun to attend to where sexual activity fits into online disinhibition, suggesting that cyberspace may be an empowering site for sexual relationship initiation (Whitty 2008) or that texting might be a problematic site for sexual risk-taking (Dir et al. 2013), less work has examined how disinhibition affects sexual relationship maintenance. The present study found patterns of disinhibition in TMSC for individuals in BDSM relationships.

BDSM is a stigmatized sexual identity and practice (Beres and MacDonald 2015), thus increasing the face-threatening nature of both relational initiation and proposing sexual fantasies, disclosing sexual preferences, requesting sexual acts,

or negotiating boundaries. In long-term relationships, sexual communication can be even more face-threatening (Noland 2010) because in addition to personal identity threats, relational threats may occur, as one worries what a close other thinks of them. Disinhibition as a result of technological affordances appeared to mitigate the face-threatening nature of sexual communication within BDSM relationships, allowing individuals to more fully disclose and negotiate their sexual preferences to a partner. In addition, technology sometimes enabled enacting particular sex acts that would be difficult to engage face-to-face, or to maintain LDRs via communication technology specifically designed to maintain long-distance sexual activity, like teledildonics.

Multimodality in BDSM Sexual Relationships

Close relationships are increasingly multimodal, as we talk to our relational partners face-to-face, on the phone, via text messages, and through other mediated channels (Caughlin and Sharabi 2013). If we take seriously the channel effects of various communication technologies (Walther 2011), then examining how this multimodality affects interpersonal communication processes like sexual communication warrants continued investigation. The present study attends to this dilemma by explicating some of the communication processes that occur within sexual communication in BDSM relationships. In the present study, sexual relationships were characterized by multimodality. Participants described discussing complex fantasies using suitable channels (e.g., email, excel sheets), and enacting these face-to-face or over a higher cue channel like Skype or Google Hangouts. Similar to past research that suggests individuals may creatively engage mediums like phone sex or sexting and then enact sexual activity face-to-face to overcome feelings of shyness (Manning 2013), participants described the importance of technology in aiding uncomfortable but necessary discussions about sex. Thus, multimodality not only characterized BDSM sexual communication, but may be a productive tool in needs communication and enabling satisfying sexual and overall relationships. Future research should continue to investigate how multimodality emerges in other aspects of relational maintenance for sexual minority relationships. Further, how specific platforms may be creatively leveraged toward satisfying sexual relationships (e.g., Second Life, excel, Google Docs) may also warrant further inquiry.

Limitations and Future Research

Although the present study makes important contributions to the study of online disinhibition and sexual minority relationship communication, several methodological limitations deserve attention. A survey methodology enabled me to obtain a large and diverse sample to assess patterns across more than 100 participants, however, survey methodologies have several limitations. First, I was unable to ask follow-up questions in several instances that warrant them. In addition, survey methodologies tend to attract more educated and less racially diverse samples. Results should be interpreted in light of these limitations. Future research

may continue to investigate the processes by which technology influences interpersonal communication in sexual minority relationships by engaging interview methods to assess more in-depth experiences. Further, LDRs constituted a pattern within the data. LDRs may be common for sexual minority populations who are less likely to meet partners in their immediate geographic location (Lever et al. 2008). While the present study attended to how technology enables sexual relational maintenance in LDRs, future research may better explicate these processes by focusing specifically on that relational type.

In sum, the present study extends notions of the online disinhibition effect to sexual relational maintenance in a particular sexual minority population, that is people who practice BDSM or kink. Practitioners of BDSM engage the disinhibiting effects of technology to negotiate, initiate, and maintain sexual fantasies or particular relational dynamics that they find satisfying. Creative leveraging of technology facilitates more open partner communication about sex, even among participants who identified as shy or introverted. However, participants also noted that face-to-face sexual activity held a privileged position over technology-mediated sexual activity, typically positioning TMSC as a means to facilitate satisfying face-to-face sexual activity.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest There are no conflicts of interest.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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