

THE NEW KINK: HUMAN PUP-PLAY IN THE CONTEMPORARY MOMENT

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A Thesis submitted to the faculty of
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the requirements for
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Master of Arts

In

Human Sexuality Studies

by

Erik William Boyd

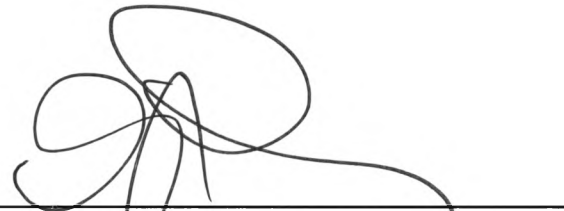
San Francisco, California

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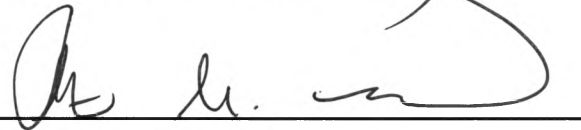
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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read *The New Kink: Human Pup-Play in the Contemporary Moment* by Erik William Boyd, and that in my opinion, this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in Human Sexuality Studies at San Francisco State University.

A large, stylized handwritten signature in black ink, featuring a prominent loop and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Allen LeBlanc, Ph.D.
Professor of Sociology

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several distinct, flowing loops and a long horizontal stroke at the end.

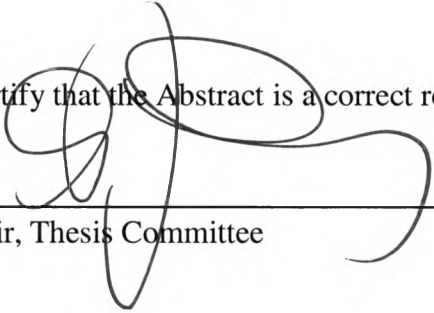
Rita Melendez, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Sociology

THE NEW KINK: HUMAN PUP-PLAY IN THE CONTEMPORARY MOMENT

Erik William Boyd
San Francisco, California
2018

This thesis presents personal narratives of 6 gay men who engage in a behavior known as pup-play (*also known as puppy play*). Pup-play is a form of role-playing in which people mimic the behavior of dogs. Bondage, discipline/domination, sadism, and masochism (BDSM) has been researched in detail. Although pup-play reflects BDSM in specific way(s), studies of sexual subcultures have not concentrated on pup-play. This research delivers a qualitative exploration of human pup-play among gay men living in Los Angeles and San Francisco. I exhibit through my findings that pup-mode (*also known as headspace, sub-space, pup-space*) can be therapeutic and could be a form of therapy for pup's who participate sexually in pup-play.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.



Chair, Thesis Committee

May 27, 2018
Date

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Introduction

What is pup-play? Pup-play is sexual or non-sexual role-play in which adult humans take on the physical and emotional characteristics of a youthful canine companion. Those who engage as pups in pup-play embody the physical posture of a dog (e.g. standing on all fours, sniffing, butt up in the air, crouching, panting, sitting, kneeling etc.). Pups also embody emotional/mental personalities and traits (e.g. loyalty, obedience, short attention span, unconditional love, curiosity etc.). In addition, pups mimic dog-like vocalization (i.e. barking, growling, whining etc.). Given the dearth of empirical research on pup-play, it is not currently possible to classify this social behavior or identify the exact origins of pup-play.

Pups often engage in pup-play by wearing pup gear including dog collars, leashes, knee pads, paws/mitts, hoods, tails (e.g., an insertable butt-plug or one worn around their waist as an attachment). Provided by an owner of a canine companion, human pups will often be given or asked to play with: dog bowls, pup bed, chew toys, doggie treats (e.g. treats suitable for human consumption). Pups often wear pup hoods, which are made out of leather or neoprene (e.g. spandex-like material). Pup hoods come in different colors and varieties. Pup gear can be purchased at local leather stores in Los Angeles and San Francisco like Mr. S, 665, Rough Trade, or online.

Pup-play is understood to have emanated from the larger subculture of BDSM. BDSM incorporates three subtypes of sexual variation. B/D stands for bondage and discipline, the act of using restraints, both physical and psychological. D/S suggests

domination and submission, wherein one person takes control while another gives over control. Lastly, S/M incorporates two complementary classifications: sadism, deriving pleasure from the pain or humiliation of others, and masochism, deriving pleasure from one's own pain or humiliation. Together these components create BDSM, which includes a diverse range of sexual behaviors and expressions that are often misunderstood (see Hébert & Weaver, 2015).

Much like canine training, human pup-play often involves aspects of BDSM, including instruction, obedience, discipline, submission, restraint, physical and non-physical rewards, and punishment. Human pup-play evolved out of BDSM and the leather community where leather women and men have developed a unique form of gender expression, integrating care and vulnerability with an aesthetic of heightened masculine appearance (Mosher et al., 2006). Research on BDSM identity formation among LGBTQ subcultures is not well understood. For example, Tucker (1991) explained a "second coming-out process," whereby LGBTQ Leather folk come out first as non-heterosexual (e.g. lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer), and then later as a fetishist or a kinkster. This exploratory research on pup-play would suggest that pups may go through unique "coming-out processes" since pup-play is on the fringe of BDSM, however, this topic has not yet been studied.

Although the origins of pup-play are still largely unknown, it is widely thought that its current popularity coalesced in the mid-nineties around the same time as the emergence of the gay bear phenomenon, another sexual subculture within the LGBTQ community (see Hennen, 2008). Though no one has yet systematically detailed the

origins and emergence of pup-play over time, it has been observed in practice for 15+ years amid private play parties at the International Mister Leather (IML) convening, which includes leather contests and a series of play parties, held every Memorial Day Weekend in Chicago, IL. However, since pup-play is understudied, 15 years is an estimate even though pup-play has gained its popularity roughly 5 years ago.

Background

Pup-play is one of the fastest growing fetishes and spiritual means of escapism for young gay men in recent years, drawing in a diverse crowd of people from all walks of life, eager to explore this new and exciting world. But what exactly does being a human pup mean? How do you go about enjoying yourself and defining pup headspace? Are there any rules? How do pups find community? These questions, along with others are explored in this thesis, which guides the reader through the personal narratives of six gay men who engage in pup-play.

Woof!: Perspectives Into the Erotic Care & Training of the Human Dog (Daniels, 2003) provides a broad overview of how to care for and train a human pup. *Woof!* is a ground-breaking text since there are not many books published on pup-play. Additionally, *Woof!* provides a general overview of pup-play from a handler's perspective on how to train and care for a human pup. Furthermore, some of the participants in this study stated during our interview that they read this book to gain a better understanding of pup-play so they could begin to explore pup-play more socially and sexually as *Woof!* is a general guide into the pup-play lifestyle.

Comparably, Wignall and McCormack (2015) constructed the first empirical study of pup-play. Their research design was exploratory, qualitative, and heavily driven by symbolic interaction. Symbolic interactionism is a conceptual framework which privileges peoples' narratives in understanding a social phenomenon, while recognizing the meaning of events and is situated within human interactions and how they are interpreted by others. The authors conclude that pup-play is a kink, primarily sexually driven, and can be a form of relaxation which is demonstrated through the existence of headspace (i.e. pup-mode or pup-space).

Similarly, Wignall (2017) examined qualitatively how human pups use social networking sites (SNS), specifically Twitter, to engage and communicate with other pups. Social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr are great platforms to communicate with other pups to openly express sexuality with other like-minded pups. Wignall's (2017) study draws upon 26 in-depth interviews with gay and bisexual men who participate in pup-play and how they use Twitter as an extension and exploration of their pup identity. Most importantly their study documents how the user of (SNS) is being used as a form of interaction and development of community among a sexual subculture in order to form a community of like-minded pups.

Terminology

Throughout my master's thesis, I will use terms such as "pup," "daddy," "sir," "boy," and "handler/trainer" in accordance with the use by the interview participants. Since this study is largely exploratory which revolves around kink sexual identity,

experience, and personality, it is important to remain mindful of how each participant labels their own sexual identity. Furthermore, I will be using kink when discussing engagement of pup-play as this is a form of kinky sexuality.

Pup-Play & BDSM in the 21st Century

Research studies regarding BDSM and efforts to “re-think” kink sexuality as a form of serious leisure (Newmahr, 2010) has grown exponentially over the last few decades. This highlights the benefits of labeling sex as a leisure activity, akin to other leisure activities, such as sports or working out. Additionally, illustrations of both personal and social movements in the construction of erotic life and how to construct power exchange have been published (Langdridge & Butt, 2004). For decades pathologizing attitudes regarding these practices continue to persist. This thesis is grounded in the literature that views BDSM sexuality from a non-pathological lens.

Despite the lack of research on pup-play, Wignall & McCormack (2015) were the first to study this social phenomenon through a symbolic interactionist theoretical framework and exploring pup-play qualitatively in the U.K. Their study was highly influential in constructing this thesis, which provides further research about pup-play and how they are a diverse sexual subculture. Their exploratory study expounded on Newmahr’s (2010) work on rethinking kink as serious leisure. Serious leisure can be working out, recreational sports, or rock climbing which can be intrinsically rewarding, pleasurable core activity that requires no special training to enjoy. In rethinking pup-play as serious leisure, it doesn’t require any special training and while being engaged, can be

widely pleasurable. This study adds to previous studies by focusing on the effects of pup-play for participants. Specifically, this thesis explores meditative techniques associated within their pup-mode and how euphoria could lead to therapeutic benefits while engaging in BDSM ‘scenes.’ Several studies have focused on personality and psychological characteristics (Hébert & Weaver, 2014 & Wismeijer et al., 2013) associated with BDSM sexual orientations. Wismeijer et al. (2013) research utilized quantitative questionnaires and aimed to compare scores of BDSM practitioners and a control group on various fundamental psychological characteristics. They conclude that BDSM can be thought of as a recreational leisure activity, rather than an expression of psychopathological processes. Yost & Hunter (2012) applied essentialist and constructionist narratives in their study about BDSM practitioners while understanding their initial attraction to kinky sexuality. This, in turn, will explain why pups are initially attracted to the pup community and why they continue to engage in this sexual behavior.

Early evidence of the desire to escape from self was provided by Roy F. Baumeister (1988), studies how masochism is essentially an attempt to escape from self, in the sense of achieving a loss of high-level self-awareness, hence, more precisely, masochism may, therefore, be classed with physical exercise, intoxication, meditative techniques, and perhaps even being a fan or spectator, all of which facilitate escape from normal self-awareness (p. 29). Additionally, BDSM can serve as an effective preventive to unwelcome thoughts or feelings, specifically anxiety, depression, shame or guilt. In the section called pup-mode, escapism will be looked at more closely in order to help define pup-headspace.

Alternatively, Lindemann (2011) examines the therapeutic benefits associated with engaging in BDSM sexuality and how sadomasochistic practices are a form of self-help, in the sense that they hold the potential to transform an individual by providing a window into their identity (p. 154). Both Lindemann (2011) & Baumeister (1988) concepts of BDSM practices will be further explored in the pup-mode section of my findings.

The primary purpose of this thesis is to learn more about pup-play in terms of discovery and personal experience of pup-play as participants themselves perceive it. Within the exploration of the pup identity, a secondary goal of this thesis was to explore the ways sexuality was conceptualized from a pup's perspective. Lastly, this study sought to give voice to an underrepresented sexual subculture within the LGBTQ BDSM community and begin building deeper understandings of how pups form their identities and experience pup subculture. Ultimately, this exploratory study aims to introduce readers to the world of pup-play.

Methodology

I interviewed 6 gay men with regard to their experiences as human pups.

Interviews were exploratory in nature and asked about their entry into pup-play, as well as their feelings and experiences as pups over time. In-depth, qualitative interviews with these men offered the best means of achieving deeper understandings of how they came to learn of pup-play, as well as what their eventful and day-to-day experiences have been as they became integrated into pup subculture over time. In addition to learning how their experiences may reflect pup-play's ties to BDSM, I also explore the meaning men give to their pup-play, and how their experiences as pups may bring them both rewards and challenges.

Interview Protocol

I utilized a qualitative research design to explore data regarding pup-play experience among gay men. Qualitative interviews are ideal for this research because interviews yield ample personal narratives of experiences, which then permits researchers to present those narratives in the participants' own words. A semi-structured interview protocol concerning pup-play was administered to 6 gay men who currently identify as pups, (3) from Los Angeles and (3) from San Francisco. I encouraged each participant to tell their personal story even if the scope went beyond the structured questions. By doing so, participants were able to organically depict their experiences and approaches to pup-play beyond the semi-structured protocol. Interviews lasted approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes. All participants received a \$5 Starbucks gift card for participating in this study.

Recruitment

I purposively recruited a sample of self-identified gay male human pups, ages 18 and over, who spoke English, and lived in the Greater Los Angeles and San Francisco Bay Areas. Once IRB approval was obtained, I identified venues that held pup events in the two study sites (e.g. The Bullet Bar and SF Eagle). Participants were recruited through face-to-face contact at these venues. I made initial contact with gay men who I knew were pups, asking if they would participate in academic research on pup-play. Some of the participants would ask at the end of the interview if I needed any more pups to talk to which I gave them the studies contact information in order for them to contact me directly. Supplementary information was given to those who responded positively. I allowed the participants to decide where the interview took place and what time and day were best for them. Most participants opted for a café, coffee shop, park, or their residence. All interviews were audio-recorded.

Participants

All participants self-identified as gay men and as human pups. Additionally, they also participate in fetish, kink, leather, and BDSM sexual communities. To be eligible, all of these men had to be 18 years old or older at time of interview and engage in pup-play. The mean age of for the sample was 31 years, and the range was 27 to 41 years. Most participants are from working and middle-class backgrounds. Information for this exploratory study comes from six gay men: four Caucasian; one Hispanic/Latino, and one Multiracial/ethnic. Table 1 holds descriptive data on the sample, includes pseudonyms for

each participant to protect their confidentiality.

Table 1. Participant characteristics

Name	Age	Sexual Orientation	Ethnicity	Breed of Dog
Steve	37	Gay	White	Bull Terrier
Ken	29	Gay	Spanish, German Cherokee	Rottweiler
Travis	28	Gay	White	Beagle
John	27	Gay	White	German Shepherd
Sam	26	Gay	Latino/Mexican	Wolf
Paul	41	Gay	White	Beagle

Analysis

Interviews took place between June and September 2017 and were audio recorded. The analysis was based on audio-recordings of the interviews, which I listened to repeatedly as I conducted a thematic analysis of the men's narratives (Berg, Lune, & Lune, 2004). Additionally, while conducting the interviews, I often wrote notes in full view of the participant asking them beforehand if it was okay for me to do so. I kept a smaller journal or slips of paper handy to jot down notes. I often dictated notes on my iPhone on my way home, and generally wrote a document summarizing my notes after each interview. In addition, I kept a separate journal in which I recorded my personal responses and reactions to my exploratory study, including my positionality with the BDSM sexual subculture, thoughts, feelings about my own 'scenes.'

Each audio transcript was de-identified and the participant was assigned pseudonyms for data organization. All interviews were recorded on the researcher's laptop and saved on their password-protected computer. I listened to each audio transcript multiple times while concurrently pinpointed and coded prominent themes in order to capture concept, terminologies, and concerns brought up by participants. If a concept spoke directly to the experience of engaging in pup-play, that concept was coded and documented.

The study utilized an emergent coding approach to document participants' experiences as pups. This approach allows critical and organic themes to surface across participants and focusses shared experiences that are particularly salient and meaningful (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). Codes were then structured into central themes, which explained the overall nature of the theme along with subthemes falling under the central themes. After gathering all themes and subthemes, I was then able to organize them in a fashion to find further similarities and dissimilarities, allowing me to develop a more nuanced analysis of the personal experiences of these pups.

The final stage of analysis is to produce a general description of the experience of the pup-play. The personal narratives of these six pups were analyzed in the manner designed to help me identify both personal and collective themes that help us understand what pup-play is and how these gay men experienced it.

Findings

Each of these six men shared their personal narrative of pup-play and how they engage in the pup-play/kink community. By becoming pups, they attempted to leave their own realities behind and engross themselves in a shared world of fantasy, where they are able to experience therapeutic benefits and a realm of sexual freedom.

Therefore, for these men, the aim of pup-play is to suspend ordinary life for a period of time and escape into their pup-mode, which is formed by their own inspiration. Pups adopt the character of explorers, traversing through a multidimensional sexual kink community. Once embodied in their pup persona, each participant was able to create new and multiple identities through the embracing of sexual roles and participation in pup-play – allowing the body to become vital to the experience while achieving sensation and offering sexual pleasure. Hence, sexual context does not automatically mean genital sex, since the pup-play experience, enables emotions and sensations to become altered. Constructions of BDSM in terms of sexual pleasure can be reformed and fashioned to be more befitting to the subculture of which they are apart. This aspect of pup-play experience can be sexually rewarding for pups. Participants can be left with a sense of well-being, empowerment and sensation experienced during pup-play as cathartic or spiritual, which despite being independent of the sexual component, is still reflected as central and rewarding part of the experience.

Three common themes emerged throughout the data: 1) Routes to Pup-Play, 2) Forming Community, and 3) Pup-Mode. Subthemes give sharper understanding into the lives of these human pups.

Routes to Pup-Play

As participating pups described how they became involved in pup-play, some common themes emerged. A common theme in their attraction to pup-play was their desire to more fully accept their true sexual selves. For all six participants, this search for authenticity permits them to live pride fully amongst LGBTQ and BDSM, fetish, kink, and leather communities. Such narratives of seeking and finding acceptance in pup subculture opens a conversation about how human pups shed their humanness (e.g. engrossing themselves in the ‘scene’) and subsequently experiencing sex, liberated from human restrictions such as shame, humiliation, and stigma.

Throughout my master’s thesis, I use terms such as “pup,” “daddy,” “sir,” “boy,” and “handler/trainer” in accordance with their use by participants in the interviews I conducted. Since this study is largely exploratory and revolves around sexual identity and experience, it is important to remain mindful of how each participant labels their own sexuality. In conjunction with BDSM, I will be referring to pup-play as a sexual driven kink activity when engaged between two consenting pups.

Each participant’s introduction into pup-play was unique, yet all six of these men hold concurrent kink identities in addition to being a pup, meaning they enjoy kinks, fantasies, and fetishes other than pup-play (e.g. daddy/boy play, flogging, piss play, fisting etc.). Some participants knew from a young age they enjoyed being on all fours or enjoyed barking like a dog. Some were in relationships with male doms, daddies, or sirs who familiarized them to pup-play to enrich their sexual vitality. Others were in

relationships that did not fit within pup subculture and went out seeking to fulfill their sexual desires by exploring pup-play.

While participants agreed on the general characteristics of pup-play, differences existed in their perspectives as to how they all learned about pup-play and how pup-play made them feel initially. Since this thesis is exploratory in nature, with the lack of pre-existing academic literature on which to build, there are no widely understood rules of how one gains entry into pup subculture or community. In my thematic analysis of these data, the following themes emerged: discovery, learning, and service.

Discovery, Learning, and Service

During my first interview, Steve describes in detail how he learned and discovered how to be a pup. Steve said:

It started when I was 14 years old. I basically was, I had a boyfriend at the time who was kind of like into the dominant/submission thing and we were trying to think of other ways to try like, something new and that would like came to me as an idea. I had no idea that there was a community at the time I just kind of got brought into it and realized that it, I've really felt it I connected with it, I identified with it, and it just seemed, it seemed right, right away and so I kind of did it off and on after that. That relationship lasted about 4 years and we did it a lot. And after that, I kind of did it off and on for about 5 or 6 years and then came back to it strongly in 2014.

Steve also explained how he found out about the pup scene and how he found the pup community.

I mean it started at 14 like I said when I started finding out about there being an actual pup scene, probably 18 or 19 years old. For the longest time, like I thought it was just me and when I found out that there was a scene I became more interested in it. Although I still kind of had cold feet about it and didn't really get into it until probably 28 somewhere in there and that's when I started doing it a lot more privately and then eventually publicly in 2014 which would've been 34.

Steve embodies multiple kink identities other than pup play. He was also highly involved in the leather community in Los Angeles, CA. During our interview he stated in 2014 is when he decided to run for a leather title and through that experience, he started to publicly embrace his pup persona.

Steve brings into the conversation that pups can learn how to be pups from their handlers, daddies or sirs. However, Steve explains there are resources online where pups can get important information they're seeking:

They could learn them for their handler or trainer or even other pups but I recommend everybody go online and look at Sirius Pups website. He's one of the ones I know that came out around the same time I was coming up in the pup scene his, he has very set rules he regimented it like some old guard system of some sort and I tell people to check that out because I think that a good way to play by it like you can, not have to take necessarily all the rules and incorporate them into

what you do and have fun with it. It gives you guidelines because for me it's definitely an individual experience.

Offering a similar perspective, Travis explores what he found most appealing while engaged in pup-play and expounds on those feelings:

I just felt it was a right fit and maybe that's how it was appealing because I felt like I could explore my, my pup energy it was easier for me to like just be like it was easier for me to act.

He includes:

Like, express myself in a very specific way that didn't feel I could before. I think before I was a little more reserved about that. Then now I'm like definitely now I'm a lot less reserved when I hold myself up in like crowds or bars I think pup play really, the pup community really brought that out of me, being able to like, like let me express my energy and myself and be more comfortable in environments and maybe that is an excuse for me to just be like I don't know if I want to use the word excuse but, I guess that is what was appealing to me because it lets me express like my true self or I don't know if I want to say true self, but, it lead me to express a side of me that I was wanting to.

Paul expounds on his realization of pup-play. His experience at International Mister Leather (IML) put pup-play into a more cultivated perspective and he came to terms with his pup characteristics and personality.

He says:

I met this guy at IML ... he was acting like my handler and I was acting like his pup basically in sex that weekend and I kind of joked like after the first 24 hours I was like you can collar me if you want for the weekend and he did ... We had a really nice connection that weekend.

When questioned about how it made him feel about himself and being a pup, he elaborates in more detail as to his feelings while engaged in pup-play:

It felt very playful and very natural ... Strong, confident ... Authentic.

On a similar note, Sam from San Francisco voices his experiences with pup-play in an explicit way. His interpretation of pup-play and feelings are dissimilar when compared to other participants. When asked about his experience with pup-play Sam provided the following interpretation.

The thing is pup play got popularized really fast and I mean I've always been like ... a rebel ... when things get popular it kind of bugs me ... but when being a puppy became a trend and everyone got a hood and everyone ... thought it was okay to just be a puppy and that there was no learning involved that's what kind of bugs me.

Steve from Los Angeles describes encouraging pups who may have never thought of engaging in pup-play before during his interview. Steve describes his friend and how he developed into a pup.

I feel like it helps people, it like overall you know there's a few small problems with it, but overall, I feel like it helps people it helps bring them out. A good example of that would be some friend of mine I'm not going to say his name, but a friend of mine that I met because of one of the contests that I threw and he basically I got to watch him develop over, over a year and he ended up being a close friend and um, I just saw him grow leaps and bounds and it was mostly because of him taking like the ideals of a pup into his mind and like going out there and making people happy trying to make a difference in the world and do good things that's what pups try to do all the time.

For example, Paul, a prominent figure in San Francisco illustrates his difficulty maneuvering through San Francisco's pup community when he was learning and discovering this new kink in his life.

The community here was hard to engage with ... I reached out to a bunch of people and they didn't get back to me ... So, I kind of decided to do my own thing and I just started engaging in pup-play in a lot of my kinky sex.

Paul was able to gain a stronger understanding of human pup dynamics through kinky sex, "I was very sexually active at that time in my life", hence, he distributed knowledge he gained and decided to co-construct his own community of pups after he grew into his pup persona. Through his respective exploration, Paul co-created a pack structure, which is one of many still active in San Francisco and a variety of other cities in the continental United States and abroad.

Forming Community

In exploring all six participants' personal narratives, they all spoke about how pup-play aided in forming lasting bonds with other pups and how those connections developed into a community of like-mindedness. All participants in this study talked about moshes, social gatherings where pups come together as a collective group to 'pup-out.' These moshes typically are held at leather bars (i.e. Woof as the SF Eagle and Pound Puppy at The Bullet Bar in North Hollywood). During this study, I traversed local leather bars in San Francisco, attending woof's monthly event at the Eagle in SOMA to gain a deeper understanding of pup group dynamics, gatherings and moshes.

Steve explains moshes in this way:

When you have like the personal time of moshing with them that's when it comes out um, like after I moshed with somebody I've bonded with them I feel like I can hang out with them because there's a side of you that, you have to let your guard down when you're doing it.

This realization of bonding with someone relates to connections, bonds, or associations pups have with each other in similar moshes or social gatherings. These bonds can be a one-time-only or they can develop into a long-lasting dynamic.

Packs, Networks & Moshes

Steve, my first participant in this exploratory study was asked if pup packs and puppy communities feel like a family. His response:

Yea, definitely it feels like a pack yea, it's everybody is kind of um, they, they'll kind of have their niche and they're all a little bit different but there's something that makes all of them special uniquely.

During our interview, when asked to describe larger groups of gay men who participate in pup-play, Steve from Los Angeles goes into detail about pups from observations he witnesses among his own community:

They're some of the nicest people I've ever met and some of the most dedicated to the community and they look to the community at large a lot of the time it's not just the pups, it's the leather community, everybody. Pups end up volunteering for everything, that's the truth, I see them volunteering at every event I go to and they volunteer at my events and they seem to really like to help people and make people happy and in general that's one of the missions of pups is to make people happy.

This above-mentioned quote is really powerful since Steve shares characteristics that pups exude in his community of leather women/men or at functions he attends where pups are volunteering and helping out. Steve did express towards the end of this quote that "They seem to really like to help people and make people happy and in general that's one of the missions of pups is to make people happy." Here, it can be implied it's a mission of pups to help, however, due to the lack of literature and research this mission should be looked into more deeply and see if pups have missions they live by while engaged in the BDSM communities.

During our interview, Steve explains sometimes at bars when moshes are being held you can't really tell whether or not a pup is enjoying themselves. The following quote explains why private play parties are more efficient for moshing and pupping-out with other pups, Steve says:

Because I mean I've seen people go into it with their guard up and they, they're never successful in connecting in the mosh because they have their guard up. It's the minute that it comes down that like everyone starts to have fun and playing and it's interesting to because in a bar setting you can't really get people. The best parties I've ever been to are at houses or at a home or potlucks or whatever because at a bar there's a lot of people who are looking on, onward looking and I think it makes them nervous so they don't really play as much. Pups do tend to be a little self-conscious.

In terms of identity, pups tend to be more authentic when they're around those of like minds without gawking spectators. So, it's excellent that local leather bars allow for social bonding practices for pups at local bars. In terms of being sexual, pups would prefer to express their sexual side at a private party so they can truly enjoy their experience without interruption.

When pups mosh, there is a lot of non-verbal communication occurring between pups who mosh together. For most, they all are on all fours playing with toys, wagging their tails, wrestling, listening to commands while mimicking what real canines would do while playing at a dog park with their human owner. Steve depicts how non-verbal cues

work while moshing and how other pups test the waters with other pups who are also likeminded but may have never moshed before. Steve replies:

It's interesting because you can look at somebody or look at another pup and when you're moshing they're just like you and you're just like them and you kind of get curious about each other and then you can sort of test the waters and it ends up being you'll sometimes really like the person and you start roughhousing sometimes biting a little bit sometimes just um, tossing a toy around and it's for some reason because you don't have any of the things that are bothering you from the day in your head it's all very open and you mainly feel love from it and kind of like find happiness and it's really simple what you're doing is so like basic like tossing a toy around or whatever that your mind can almost relax and kind of take the person's essence in a little more like you can kind of feel who they are more because there's no guard up I guess that's a good way to say it.

During my third interview in Los Angeles, CA, Travis talks about how being a pup facilitates networking with pups who live in different cities or states. Travis goes into detail about how networking with other pups has assisted in making new friendships and aided with his freelance photography.

In my interview with Travis, I ask him to elaborate on a time where being a part of the pup-play community helped him in any way. Travis's quote below highlights how pup-play facilitates bonds and networks between pups.

I mean daily, I don't know it helps me all the time especially with my photography and with my own business, with like being able to reach out to people and saying I need help with this or like anything. Like I feel I can go to the pups and be like oh, I need your help with this project or something there's always someone there to help me or like. Say I have to go to, I don't know, New York or something and I don't know anyone who lives there and I can reach out to a pup friend of mine and be like hey, I don't know anyone who lives in New York that I can stay with do you and they would like instantly find me somewhere I could stay and then I would make new friends in New York with these other puppies.

John from San Francisco reveals how being a pup makes him feel while engaging with another pup. During our interview, he explains how pup-play makes him feel about himself. He explores deeper feelings of pleasure that comes from engaging in pup-play:

Empowered ... not an excuse to be myself, but a way to be myself ... Being myself in all facets ... Being with people that make me happy.

Group Dynamics and Bonds

All six participants commented on bonds and group dynamics with other pups, boyfriends/partners, daddies, handlers, sir's or mentors/trainers. These varieties of bonds for all six participants are sexually charged since all six engage in pup-play sexually. Whether it be one-on-one or in groups, all six pups in this exploratory study engage sexually and express their sexuality openly in the fetish, kink, leather and BDSM

communities. All six did discuss times where they engaged non-sexually depending where they were at the time, however, they all preferred to engage in pup-play sexually and they feel truly satisfied when sex was involved with their play.

When discussing how younger pups who feel ostracized when navigating the larger LGBTQ community, Steve explains how the pup-play subculture can be more welcoming:

Well, the pup community has been known for being very welcoming to people in general just to at least let people want to try it, and I think that is why the community grows all the time because people are comfortable with what they are doing and like pups are inviting. Those are some of the people who are disenfranchised come from other places that they've been rejected from or felt rejected from and they see this community that seems to be happy.

Steve goes deeper, by explaining how pup-play is linked to the leather 'scene' as well as BDSM. During our interview, I asked Steve since he's been a pup for 21 years where does pup-play fit in terms of leather, kink, and BDSM. He replies with the following quote about where pup-play belongs:

I think that it actually developed out of the leather scene if I'm correct. I pretty much know I'm correct because ... I was in the leather scene before I was in the pup scene like I identified as a pup for a long time. It's kind of more quietly and I was still in the leather scene because it's the closest thing you can find to it for a long time and now it's kind of slowly moved away from the leather scene and I

think it was one of those things where like a master and a slave in a relationship would the master could take the humanity away from the slave, put them as a dog which makes them just more you know degraded of whatever and ah, I think it developed out of that and just kind of pup wild fire, honestly this ended up creating these ah, monster pups in a way. I just kind of started from that and became something much bigger out of it.

During our interview, Travis describes his bond with his daddy who resides in San Francisco, CA. In his quote, Travis describes the bonds pups could have among fetish, kink, leather, BDSM communities. Travis replies:

I mean there are a lot of different kinds of bonds people have I guess. So, like a pup and their handler and there's like, you could be like a Master and a pup or like daddy and a pup or. I identify with, me and my daddy's relationship is like dad and pup or like dad and boy. I mean you don't even need to have like I guess a more dominant role though in your life. You could be like pup and pup or like your boyfriend and you're a puppy or your girlfriend and you're a puppy or whatever your prerogative is or what you like to do. I think the bonds are limitless, endless. I've seen so many different types of bonds and relationships or like, like polyamorous, I don't know it goes so far."

Ken also explains how being his daddy's service dog gives him enjoyment and empowerment that he is servicing and making sure his daddy is taken care of. Ken said:

You know I love it because when you're in that mindset you're, you have to be present. You can't be in your head; you have to be attentive. You have to be, you have to listen, and you have to understand what is in the unsaid. You have to know the exchange of power ... But the fact that I'm surrendering and guarding him like I'm his dog. I protect him, I make sure he's okay. And that when I kind of go, like I say this all the time like a joke but, Yea I'm a service dog like I really get great enjoyment out of serving my daddy and making sure that I can protect him and I can you know, um, you know, be who I really am around him. Especially what you call pup characteristics or whatever.

Similarly, Sam in his interview brought up how he's a service dog for his daddy/mentor. Here is what Sam explained about his tags on his collar and his bond he shares with his daddy:

From the moment I get there I put my stuff down and put on my collar and I put it on and it stays on for the entire weekend.

This quote signifies ownership and the exchange of power that the handler and pup share while they are engaging in pup play or any kind of play.

When I'm there, I'm usually in a jock-strap the entire time. If we sit and watch TV I'm with him or lying next to him or laying on the ground in front of him.

Sam elaborates on his experiences with his daddy being his first handler and how enjoyable that experience was for him while being a service animal for him too was enjoyable.

With him, it's like a trusting ... He was one of my first handlers after the triad and he really helped me come into my own you know, find my place. He is very much able to treat me like a puppy like the way I want to and I enjoy it. I enjoy being in that service mode. On my collar, there are 3 tags, a dog license, a tag with my pup name on it and a service dog tag. That's what I enjoy most about puppy play is the service part of it. Ah, and being under the control of the person who put on my collar.

During our interview, I asked Sam to explain why he sees his daddy as a father-like figure. This is how Sam responded:

Because he's really like, he's taught me a lot. He's always been supportive.

He's someone I trust like that's why it's so easy to give him my collar and submit to him for the entire weekend because I trust him completely, and I really do.

Etiquette and Personal Space

When interviewing each pup in this study etiquette came up during our conversations centered around stigma, drama, or any negative experiences they may have tolerated while in pup-mode or just as a pup. One example of etiquette came from Sam. Sam goes into great detail about etiquette and how mad and pissed off he can get when people don't understand the proper etiquette.

For example:

You don't grab on a puppy's tail. If someone is wearing a collar you don't grab the collar ... I've seen people get really pissed off when people don't know the etiquette.

Sam goes further in his explanation recalling a time where his pup-tail (e.g. insert able butt-plug) was pulled out. He explains his reaction in the following quote:

The only time I got really mad, I was at a party and someone pulled my tail out ... I turned around and I was livid ... are you fucking kidding me, you don't fucking do that. That's the only time I've gotten really mad.

Stigma and Drama

With any community, there will be stigma or drama that will have negative connotations when being observed or shamed by onlookers, even if those onlookers identify as LGBTQ. This ignorance can affect pups in finding their footing with pup-play while making their experience more problematic. For some, being a part of a pup pack or group can help mitigate stigma and/or drama being fueled from unknowledgeable observers. These packs offer a supportive safe space to share feelings, check-in, and to gather collectively to help each other.

A good example of drama and stigma within the pup-play community is how Paul explains his perspective:

Where I've felt or noticed the stigma the most is just the non-kinky gay community ... I feel it more from the non-kinky gay male community ... Oh my god, what's that?

Similarly, John, when questioned about drama and stigma within the pup-play community he said the following:

I think that most of the drama comes from ... Again, that social anxiety and/or just social awkwardness because people can sometimes become you know upset that they're not invited to certain things or like the pack mentality, that pack structure ... Like that has always was the biggest source of drama people feeling like it got cliquey I guess. But can also cause a little bit of drama because sometimes people don't really understand ah, social constructs of a huge group with some many opinions and different kinds of bodies and genders and types of interests and kinks and I think that complexity could make it difficult. But that's the most interesting thing.

In contrast, Steve said that some of the drama and/or stigma might come from those who don't participant sexually when engaging in pup-play:

The bad feelings all have to do with the separation between people who play sexually and people who play not sexually. Sometimes they can look down upon the people who do it sexually. Which is kind of, it's been more recently, like more in the past couple of years that's been prevalent because the pup scene has grown so much that, that I think you know, it's dividing just like everything else does

and um, that side of it is probably the only thing that's been negative for me because I feel like people looking down on, pups looking down on other pups is, is a bad thing. Like it's, it's actually adding more of the human side of it into it and it's causing a bit of a rift between them.

In this particular quote, we can see how pups recognize separation and stigma by whether or not a pup likes to engage sexually or non-sexually in pup-play.

Pup-Mode

When discussing the sexual element of pup-play, the majority of participants discussed “headspace” (e.g. pup-mode, pup-space, sub-space) as a central motivation for engaging in this role-play behavior. All six participants in this exploratory study engage in pup-play sexually and they hold concurrent kink identities. Approximately all participants discussed pup-mode and the effects of achieving headspace. Comparably, they described that achievement in terms of a meditative state of mind where they can begin to unwind and their day-to-day stresses become less visible so their thinking becomes more clear or sharp. For some, they depict transcendence into pup-mode in terms of relaxation, where they get out of their heads, stop overthinking, over analyzing and being in the moment (i.e. the present, the now). This ‘euphoric’ state of mind allowed these participants to transcend entirely into their pup-mode where they feel unrestrained while expressing their inner pup without interference from external stimuli.

Each personal narrative below gives context on how pup-play can be primal or instinctual in terms of how participants embody a persona of a dog. Although participants

stated they had animalistic characteristics when in full pup-mode, participants also distinguished the boundaries of their sexual appetite about pup-play while distancing it from stigmatized cultural associations it has with zoophilia (e.g. bestiality). All participants either owns their own dog or grew up with dogs and discussed that pup-play is not associated with having sex with animals.

What is Pup-Mode?

All six participants discussed their pup-mode (i.e. headspace, pup-space, sub-space) coupled with more primal and instinctual thought processes. In terms of cognitive processing, all six stated that when in pup-mode, the reduction of stresses was minimal so they could be in the moment.

For example, Ken explains his primal and instinctual self while transcending into pup-mode:

Feels really good having that plug in and panting, there's a human aspect but it's in the back of your mind. You are very much animalistic in that sense.

When questioned on how he puts aside his human thoughts, desires and thinking when transcending into pup-mode, Steve said:

I think it kind of happens very naturally for me ... the minute you try you'll know if it's for you or if you can do it even. Some people can't do it; they get there; they feel stupid and they stand up and walk away. But usually, it's inside that you start

feeling it. Or you'll get down there and its so much fun that you just want to keep doing it because it's fun.

Steve goes further in regards to how pup gear makes him feel when in full pup-mode:

In general, when I get into headspace it's usually because of how my handler is treating me or how other pups are treating me or just getting down into the gear.

People say that the gear doesn't help. I disagree I think that it does. Cause usually I put my mitts on; that's when I start feeling it.

When probed to go into more detail about emotions and thoughts he has while in full pup-mode Steve said:

Thoughts are definitely fewer, like your head kind of clears out in a lot of ways and I think that's just part of the experience is like when you're being treated like a dog you start emulating a dog in a lot of ways and it brings out a more like, like it comes out very organically. You don't have a lot of thoughts ... you tend to be like really happy, it could be really sad, but they usually tend to be really happy ... fun or boisterous ... sometimes with other pups when you met them you have a strong connection or even primal I would say like more aggressive between each other but still fun. I think it's a very deep part of the people that have it like it's really deep inside of them. It's a huge part of their core.

For example, Steve continues to describe his thought process while attaining pup-mode:

If you're in headspace which is like, some people can't even get into headspace but like if you're in headspace like I get into headspace I love it, like I, literally feeling more natural and happy then I can in most situations so I said that feels really good and it feel right um, I also know people who fake it in a way when their like over exaggerate it when their doing it so can be sort of like theater to some people and I've seen some people who um, like do it but I think they're doing it because like it's like a thing to do. I've see a lot of different kinds of pups but I'm noticing in general when they get into pup-mode like that's pup-mode, headspace.

Steve continues to describe how pups find or realize pup-mode:

It happens different for most people. I've seen some people who they can just go right into it. I've seen people, we take 10 minutes of sitting there as a pup to really get into it people do it quietly, loudly, and some will bark and get into it. It's usually the handler too I think a lot of the time inspires people into it or people that are tossing the ball and all of that.

Furthermore, Steve uses a mirror as metaphor for someone who is new and how looking into a mirror with or without your pup hood on can help in finding their pup-mode. Steve explains:

Yea. Well you know like I told people that one of the best ways to start learning to get into pup-space is to look in a mirror like pup-space getting rid of your

conscience and look in the mirror and kind of observe yourself and you'll find it, that's kind of how I found it.

Paul explains in detail his feelings while in pup-space and how he can express himself with animalistic instincts:

It allowed me to enter into this different headspace where I could really express more animalistic instincts that seemed like less constrained by what I have seen sex was supposed to be.

He goes onto explain his thought process while in pup-mode:

My thoughts stop being like sort of, I'm not controlling them anymore ... it just flows and it's very instinctual it feels and I don't have no idea if this is happening. There's a more primitive part of my brain that just takes over.

John brings up notions of being able to free the mind while being in pup-mode (i.e. headspace, pup-space, sub-space) to aid with transcending into pup-mode more smoothly. During our interview while discussing pup-mode John said the following:

Being able to free your mind ... free and open with your feelings are important when trying to get into pup-space ... meditate ... being able to get along with other people ... don't come into pup-play closed minded or with any preconceived ideas or notions.

John also goes further into describing pup-mode as meditating:

They're able to disconnect real life and being able to get into a heightened headspace where they know it's for a short period of time but they are meditating in a way and they're able to come out of that headspace feeling happier ... refreshed ... they're usually nicer people.

Ken from Los Angeles conveys how pup-play is more sexually charged and his feelings are more sexual because he's a very sexual pup. Here are some of his descriptions regarding pup-play in a more sexual context:

You do what makes you feel good and you're sharing this moment and you're actually in the moment of sharing this really sensual sexual experience with somebody and trusting them.

Below, Ken describes how he identifies as a dog and how he interacts with his daddy:

When you're a dog or a canine or you identify as whatever for me it would be a dog I get so aroused by the fact that I'm giving my handler or my Daddy my absolute trust and make sure I'm taken care of, that I have water, that I have food. I think it had to do to the fact of like being, being in the moment. Being who you are. And, I mean, like I said you can't take yourself too seriously when you do stuff like this but when it, when it's to the point where it gets your dick hard and somebody else's dick hard and you're having fun it's an adrenaline rush, you're completely showing yourself and showing what you like and the person who's seeing it appreciates it finds it sexy and loves it.

Nevertheless, when asked about his experience engaging with pup-play and how pup-play makes him feel about himself, Sam replies:

I'm always overthinking ... analyzing my own thoughts and feelings and things like that ... pup-play is one of those times when I don't have to ... I'm usually not thinking about how I'm feeling ... It's a state of not caring ... pup-play is a happy feeling ... a suspended disbelief ... like suspended ... carefree.

Empowerment

In this study, all six pups strive to leave their own everyday realities while participating in a communal world of kinky sexuality, where they are able to experience sexual freedom. These six participants expressed that participation in the pup community has allowed them to proudly express their sexuality with themselves and others. During the interview process, my participants used words like empowerment to explain their engagement with pup-play and the feelings associated with their experience. Additional personality traits were used: Primal, instinctual, humanized, evolving, carefree, playful, natural, strong, confident and authentic. However, other identifiable benefits like exchange of power, being myself, and state of not caring were also used to explain how they feel while engaged in pup-play.

Within this topic, it is important to consider the relationship between an individual's personality versus their BDSM role or 'scenes.' Nearly all participants when asked about how they felt about pup-play and feelings while engaged said it provides them with a platform to express their authentic personality. A selected few stated that

even without the gear and labels of being a pup, those around them would still identify them as a puppy because of their radiating energy.

Many of the participants in San Francisco, CA, especially used singular words to describe how being a human pup made them feel about themselves. The participants I interviewed in Los Angeles, CA also used singular words, and elaborated on topics like exchange of power, being myself, and state of not caring.

Escapism and Meditative Transcendence

John, a 27-year-old cis-gender gay man used empowerment to describe his feelings of engagement with pup-play. During our interview, John repeatedly stated: “Being myself in all facets,” “Not an excuse to be myself, but a way to be myself” and “Being with the people that make me happy.” Below John explains escapism, when asked in what ways do you feel you’re escaping yourself. He responded with:

Depends on what’s happening or what is going on ... heavy or intense bondage session ... impact play ... pleasure with that impact of pain ... you can go into a hypnotic state where you come out of it afterward... I know I had a good time, you know you had fun without re-living the whole entire process.

When involved sexually, Steve explains in detail escapism:

Absolutely. I think that’s part of the reason why it can become so like common for someone to do it, it’s because they feel the escapism from it and they like the

escapism from it, especially people who have complicated lives I've noticed tend to be really into it so.

When asked about personal identity and if pup-play is symbolic, escapism, fantasy or a combination, Steve responded:

Well like I said, I see the archetype as something real, like it's something inside you that, like for me anyway it's something that's real, it's a part of me that I identify as but um, I also identify as a human and I think it's a very important thing to do is to know that you still have that side of you but not to let it affect how you're when you're a pup.

When asked about pup-play being a fantasy, Steve replies with the following:

Well I wouldn't really say that it's a fantasy world because for me it something that's inside of me already and it's there all the time, especially the more you do it and practice it, the more that you mosh, the more that you think about it you can actually identify with it in a lot of ways and some of the ways you identify with it are more positive, helpful and the way you can apply it to yourself only.

Travis explains how pup-mode is Zen-like, he elaborates with the following quote:

I mean, if I'm in a sexual environment I'm definitely happy. I'm still happy I mean a lot less silly I guess but silly can be sexual too at times. I'm definitely super engaged in like my sexuality. I guess it helps me, pup-play helps me get into a sub-space or a pup-space or like this space of like your sexuality where

you're some people describe it as a Zen state where you feel content and relaxed and everything. It helps me sexually be more, more like relaxed and confident in myself.

Similarly, Steve expounds on the experience of pup-mode and how his mind becomes clearer when engaged in pup play:

I think there is a lot of people who do it just for that reason and I'm included to a degree. There are a lot of reasons why I do it. I say one of those is definitely it's, it's becoming like a meditation it's almost like it makes you feel better about life and it makes you feel like happier and like you can be connected to people in a way that's more um, primal or like instinctual.

Steve, describes in detail the meditation aspect of his pup-mode:

The meditation side of it, that side of it really is a big part of it for me because I have a very active mind like all the time and I do a lot of things so I need that part of it. It creates a solace in a way for me like where I can feel connected to another person but not have to be bamboozled by their bullshit all the time.

Steve describes in his quote below about how he's been meditating since he was young:

I was kind of trying to think less, and less, and less, almost achieving a state of meditation since I've been meditating since I was younger but like taking it to it's almost like a primal instinct it's like inside you and you can find it within the

eyes, that kind of how of how I found it in the eyes. Like connecting with aside of yourself.

Steve also continues to describe pup-mode and how he engages in pup-play for the relaxation aspect that comes from engaging:

It's like if they're not getting their way sometimes they seem, like they I, think sometimes you can hold a personality back or a person back, um, in that way. Just in maturity sometimes unless it's like that complete opposite of that like. With me, I'm an extremely mature person and extremely normal and successful guy when I'm doing my regular everyday life. When I go into pup-mode, it is purely for the relaxation, peace of mind, and the fun of it.

Throughout his experience with pup-mode, Steve goes into great detail of a particular experience when he was done with a pup 'scene' and doesn't remember certain things because he was fully immersed in pup-mode:

There have been times when I've come back from it and don't remember what I did, but not all the time. But sometimes I can come out of in that feels like another body.

Steve speaks about how a dog's mind is simple and while engaging in pup-play makes things clearer for him. This is what he shared during our interview:

Basically ... things that are complicated in your life start to fall away and you start realizing ... it's like basically, it's like a meditation in a way. But you go into it

and everything that you have that's causing you stress in your life kind of fades away because the mind of a dog is very simple in a lot of ways.

Steve then elaborated even further to discuss how pup-play makes things clearer and his thoughts as to why other pups continue to engage in pup play:

It feels really good and I think that that's part of the reason why people continue to do it ... then on top of that everybody that I've met that's a pup has the same experience with it so.

Along those same lines, John explains this meditative state of mind even though he never meditated before:

They're able to disconnect real life and being able to get into a heightened headspace where they know it's for a short period of time but they are meditating in a way and they're able to come out of that headspace feeling happier ... refreshed ... they are usually nicer people.

John, when questioned about pup-play being meditative in nature he brings up meditation and spirituality into conversation, however, he doesn't prescribe to either.

John said the following about meditation during our interview:

Identifying and finding that, whether it's spiritual or sexual personality in your puppy is always different with everyone ... I think it could be ... I don't subscribe to spiritual meditation myself ... I know pups whose persona are very spiritual with a back story and they connect to it on a different level.

John brings up a powerful example of how those who go to the gym work out to release stress or aggression while explaining how sex can do the same. This coincides with Newmahr's (2010) concept that kinky sex is a form of serious leisure.

Some people go to the gym to work out and get their aggression out on that day
... others use sex to get stress out of their bodies.

Therapeutic Benefits

A common thread emerged in the data pertaining to seeing pup-play as meditative and relating to therapy. Each individual's interview was different in terms of how they described meditation and how pup-play could be therapeutic. When asked if pup-play could be therapeutic, Ken responds with the following:

Yes, I've had multiple sessions where I feel at ease, I feel better, its kind of, there's a sense of stress lifted because you got to do something you really like and you had a great time doing it. It's literally, after sex you are like, oh my God, yea, like I don't care about anything anymore. This feels really good.

During our interview Ken furthered our discussion by explaining his feelings of catharsis:

When you pup-out, normally you get this sense of catharsis and you get this sense of like, that was so fucking fun and that was so hot like you just feel really great release of energy and release of all kinds of shit really. Because you are not thinking about shit that's worrying you anymore you are thinking about here and now you are thinking about in the moment.

Travis stated that he felt pup-play was meditative in nature when in headspace. Since other participants have mentioned during their interview that pup-play could be therapeutic, I asked Travis if he feels that by engaging in pup-play if he has ever felt it to be therapeutic for himself. Travis said:

I think it makes me enjoy the moments that I'm in instead of overthinking or overanalyzing situations and in the moment with people that I'm with or experiences and I'm able to really enjoy what I am doing and then later I can look back and I sometimes think about things I've done with people or like all of the experiences I've had at San Francisco Pride a couple weeks ago and like all the fun I had with, I don't, I think if I wasn't in like a pup-space or a pup-mode that weekend and being around everybody and with so much love and support and overthinking and analyzing it could've been a really tragic weekend and like sitting there overanalyzing and stimulating your brain like, negative thoughts and you can really like get stuck in the middle of the crowd and you start like think, overthinking things and getting into a weird space you can definitely turn a really positive experience into a negative one. So, that's how I think it can be therapeutic and it just has a good time and like let go and enjoy the moment and if something weird comes up like brush it off I mean unless it's something urgent that needs to be dealt with then like an emergency. I think life's too short to create drama and chaos all of a sudden and ruin everybody else's time around you.

Discussion

In the United States, there is a dearth quantity of empirical research on pup-play. This exploratory thesis focuses on this kinky social behavior of pup-play in the United States. By interviewing 6 gay men who engage in this social activity, I developed a deeper understanding of pup-play that was rooted in personal narratives of those who engage in this role-play behavior. I contend that pup-play does qualify as a kink and/or fetish, tends to be sexual and is a source of meditative transcendence, escapism and could be therapeutic. This study is exploratory, small-scale, and focuses on gay men in two California settings. Future research could usefully look at other samples that allow for examinations of the relevance of, for example, gender, sexual orientation, and race/ethnicity, which would allow for the study of how pup-play experience may differ significantly among these factors, and at their intersections.

This study does not provide evidence for the general classification of pup-play as a form of zoophilia (Aggrawal, 2011). Approximately all participants were vocal in their belief that pup-play was not a form of bestiality. While this thesis was exploratory in nature, I strived to tell a story about pup-play from personal narratives produced by my participants. Showing how they experience pup-play, learning about pup-play, how does pup-play make them feel, and how pup-play is a sexual form of role-playing behavior these narratives depict an illustration of how enjoyable engaging in pup-play can be. Through each interview, three classifications of pup-play emerged. First, what are the routes into pup-play and how does one learn how to be a pup? Second, once involved in this sexual sub-culture, how do pups go about discovering community? Finally, there are

beneficial elements connected with pup-play in terms of escaping the self, transcending into a euphoric headspace (i.e. pup-mode, pup-space, sub-space), and how headspace can be a form of therapy for each individual pup. As Lindemann (2011) concludes when erotic behavior is seen as 'sex therapy' in the sense that it allows us to evaluate the content of these claims as they emanate from the kinksters themselves. Furthermore, it is important to recognize Baumeister (1988) study on *Masochism as Escape from Self*, where he eloquently connects escape, therapy and masochism:

Where the escape and therapy hypothesis differ, that evidence appears to favor the escape hypotheses. Evidence for the therapeutic value of masochism is lacking, and patterns of masochistic activity appear to resemble patterns of narcotic use more than of medicine use. Masochism does not effect a permanent transformation of the self that cures its problems. Rather, masochism effects a temporary transformation or concealment of the self that enables the individual to forget her of his problems (p. 53).

A key element of engaging in pup-play that emerged out of the interviews was the presence of pup-mode (i.e. headspace or sub-space). Newmahr (2010) states the physical, emotional and psychological intensity of BDSM combine with its marginalized status to generate intense emotional responses that players often find cathartic. This aligns with all six participants' narratives on how they feel when in pup-mode. In order for pup-mode to work, it requires mental challenge and the ability to use skills, concentration, focus, and decreased awareness of external stimuli (e.g. everyday stresses). However, pup-play is a playful and joyful experience, not as intense as other BDSM scenes in which headspace

is also achieved. Further research is required to determine whether or not feelings experienced amount to pup-mode (i.e. sub-space), and what implications this has for exploring pup-play as a sexual and social kinky behavior.

Future Directions

My research focused on exploring pup-play since becoming popular among the BDSM sexual minority community. In doing so, I wanted to get a deeper understanding into this social behavior and how pups experience and learn about pup-play. Given the limitations of my sample, quantitative research which can test for generalizability of these findings to a broader population would be central and a vital addition to the literature on sexual kink communities.

Further exploratory research is needed to examine pup-play dynamics and those who participate in it. Future studies should focus on all sexual variations of who engage in this form of kink behavior. For example, exploring (e.g. lesbian, trans, bi-sexual, gender non-conforming, heterosexuals) would give a better context on who engages in pup-play and how they experience kink in the form of sexual role-play. There must be more sexuality research that focus on pup-play and the dynamics of the kink community.

Conclusion

The ways in which gay men get involved in, and experience, pup-play are not well understood, and research concerning pup subculture is only just beginning to develop. This small-scale, exploratory study of six gay men in the Los Angeles and San Francisco Bay Area leads me to conclude that pup-play can be understood as a way of

providing a momentary or powerful escape from awareness of self as a symbolically constructed kink identity. Pup-play definitely means different things to different people who are engaged in this sexual behavior, and this research study reveals the multiplicity of sexual stories relating to initial pup-play curiosity and participation. The leather/kink community is extremely influential as expressed in this thesis from each personal narrative from a pup's viewpoint. Many pups in this exploratory study participate in BDSM sexuality while holding manifold kink and fetish identities. Focusing on therapeutic benefits of pup-play among this population of sexual minority kinksters is a relatively new area offering many opportunities for more research and resource development. Whether learned or 'born this way', the adaptability of initial interests and meanings of pup-play offers an alternative description that often characterizes sexual minority kink communities.

In summary, the aim of this exploratory thesis on pup-play was to gain a deeper understanding of pup-play. Additionally, it will be the first empirical study developed in the United States. Findings indicate the pup-play is a kink, which tends to be sexual depending on the setting and context in which engagement happens. I provide clear descriptions of participants' experiences of pup-play and have used existing literature to argue that pup-play is a sexual kink behavior and I contend that it can provide participants with therapeutic benefits while in pup-mode.

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