

“Much More than Just Consent Around Sex”: Lessons from the Kink Community

By Isabel Koyama

Deck: *Step into a world where consent is measured not by the absence of “No,” but instead, an enthusiastic “yes.”*

QUARTZSITE, Ariz. – Malene Comes sharpened the edge of a stick with her jack knife and wrapped a fistful of sticky dough around its pointed edge.

“This is a Danish tradition I used to do as a child,” she said, leaning the stick against the edge of a dusty fire pit.

The afternoon sun hung low over the sprawling desert community now made famous by the film “Nomadland.” “Isn’t it dramatic?” Comes said, pointing out the distant blue mountain range cutting desert from sky. She twirled the stick of bloating dough intermittently to keep the crust from charring, while her dog, Cinnamon, wove between cactuses nearby.

Her shirt read “Make Racists Afraid Again” — a bold choice for a woman living alone in a long-term visitor community dotted with Trump flags.

For the last seven years, Comes has called herself a “free bird,” reinventing herself along interminable roads as the miles ticked by on her odometer. In a previous life, she was married and settled down with a high-paying job at Apple. But she traded it all to live nomadically on the edge of society, working here and there in spurts. “To me, work is about survival, not about making anybody else a lot of money,” she said.

Comes reflected that perhaps it was the act of embracing an unconventional lifestyle that finally lent her the courage to set foot into a world she’d been meaning to explore for a while: the kink community.

She made an account on FetLife — the Facebook of the alt-sex world — where she found a diverse, complex and seemingly endless virtual community of people with all manners of kinks. Identifying as “submissive,” or someone who receives action from a partner in the dominant role, she crafted a bubbly, yet forthright, bio describing her personality and telegraphing her boundaries. Now, she sees a dominant “play partner” two or three times a month – one she vetted through extensive discussion.



Comes moves a camping chair closer to the firepit with her dog, Cinnamon, underfoot.

Comes has taken consent seriously for much of her adult life. In her 20s, she volunteered as a rape crisis counselor in California for a number of years. Two decades later, she has found consent to be foundational to the kink community. From playing with fire to giving someone a hug, asking permission seems to be normalized when entering someone's physical space.

"It's much more than just consent around sex," Comes said. "In the kink world, for me, you can't go beyond the kissing and the feeling each other up into actual full-on kink without some detailed conversation. That would just not be okay."

Using the Same Verbiage

Comes was among eight members of kink communities around the country interviewed for this story. Without fail, they all echoed her pillars of consent negotiation.

"It's very jarring when I've been a bunch of people in the lifestyle, and then I'm around vanilla people," said Kat, a 25-year-old member of Phoenix's kink community and self-proclaimed relationship anarchist. "Vanilla people just touch me without thinking about it. And it's a very weird invasion of my space, because I'm so used to people asking before invading my space at all."

Kat went on to say that consent is important not only during kink, but also beforehand. "If I'm going to tie someone up, they need to know that that's going to happen so they can consent to it," she said. "I believe strongly that [there] needs to be enthusiastic consent. For me, it needs to be a 'Hell yes. I so want to do this. It's going to be great!' for it to happen."

Shelly, a member of Phoenix’s longest standing kink organization Arizona Power Exchange (APEX) who prefers not to disclose her full name because she is not fully “out,” concurred that discussions of consent should leave no room for doubt. “Everyone understands what’s going to happen,” she said, “but they’re also using the same verbiage.”

Shelly understands this intimately, as she tends to relinquish control almost completely during kink play – though in her personal and professional life, she is the boss. She swears by educational resources and even shared with me her favorite YouTube [explainer video](#) about consent.

Consent negotiation is essential to kink, as playing with pain comes with risks. Though penetrative sex isn’t always involved, there will likely be props around — like ropes, needles, flogs, harnesses, fire, cages, chains, scissors or even food.

“What we do is not safe or sane, and we know that,” joked APEX member Chris Deaton while discussing acronyms for remembering consent etiquette. Deaton is also on the local dungeon’s executive committee in a leadership role. Deaton’s Zoom background was staged with Arizona State University gear, a cage gallowing as a side table and a black T-shirt with the phrase, “Got Consent?” written in bold white.

In a community where many keep their kink identities private to protect from discrimination and hate, Deaton is an outspoken advocate. He and his partner, Elisha, have led workshops on everything from “Kink 101” to emotional intelligence. He underscored that kinksters play with hurt, not harm.

He also studies kink and polyamory from an academic standpoint at Arizona State University and is a trained dungeon monitor – a role much akin to a referee – who makes sure no one is harmed and everything is consensual at APEX.

One brisk morning in March, Deaton met me at APEX’s spacious headquarters — a boxy industrial building on the outskirts of town — to give me a tour of the spaces where kink “[scenes](#)” used to play out on a daily basis. That is, before the pandemic forced their doors temporarily shut.

Not much has gone on since then — the calendar on the wall still displayed workshops and parties from March 2020 — but unlike many other dungeon spaces and kink groups, APEX survived COVID-19.

The inside was dark. Heavy drapes blotted out the willful Arizona sun from six play spaces, ensuring the community’s privacy while they play. “We take privacy very seriously,” Deaton said, flicking on the fluorescent lights in one room to reveal a Crayola-purple human-sized cross.

The biggest set pieces were stored in the main room just off the kitchen, a space of about 600 square feet with eye-catching props everywhere. There were cages, human-sized boxes with holes in the sides, platforms with hooks and leather straps, cold chains snaking on the floor, crosses for restraining people, metal sheets for playing with fire, and a massive, mounted spiderweb woven of steel.

Stage lights crisscrossed the high ceiling. Couches and chairs leaned against the walls, their cushions piled up as if in a hastily-made fort. Several pride flags signaling allyship with various marginalized groups hung on the back wall.

The second floor was home to more play spaces, including a medical-themed room and a closet that had been remodeled into a pho-jail cell. There were also nooks dedicated to after-care (a ritualized time for hanging out, cuddling and reflecting after play).

Deaton said aftercare is an essential aspect of kink culture that often gets overlooked, even though it is an essential conversation in the process of negotiating consent.

Fighting the Stigma

Deaton and several other sources expressed that consent was preached in the kink community long before it became a buzzword in American consciousness. Even still, these ideas largely fell on deaf ears in mainstream society because the kink community is so stigmatized and misportrayed in mass media (think “Fifty Shades of Grey”).

“There is so much from our community that we could teach the rest of the world if they would just get over the stereotypes,” Deaton said.

“It’s not as fun and exciting and crazy as you think. But at the same time, some parts of it are,” Shelly explained. “People can lose jobs over this. People can be misunderstood.”

Advocacy organizations, like the [National Coalition for Sexual Freedom](#), have been at the forefront of challenging mainstream — or “vanilla” — ideas of kink.

Susan Wright, a spokesperson for the coalition, said the organization has been advocating for the “alt-sex” community since the 1990s, working to destigmatize kink through education and research.

“We’re really a vanguard of this whole discussion,” Wright said.

Wright said they’ve conducted surveys with local kink groups and advocates across the country to define consent in kink. One “consent counts” [survey](#) concluded that 57.5% of respondents from the

kink community had been nonconsensually touched in a public place, whereas 24% had been nonconsensually touched in a kink or alt-sex context.

Among other things, this [research](#) led the organization to devise recommendations for law enforcement and legislators on how to deal with cases where there is power exchange or roleplay happening.

“There’s still a large number of states that don’t have a clear definition of consent,” Wright said.

But decriminalization is difficult, said Wright, because many states still misconstrue consensual bondage, dominance, sadism and masochism (BDSM) as sexual assault.

“We always saw this as a two-pronged effort: depathologization and decriminalization,” said Wright, a member of the queer kink community herself.

The national coalition has made significant progress, however, in medical spheres – but not without a fight.

Up until a decade ago, kink fetishes as a whole were characterized as a mental illness in the “Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders,” a bible in the field of psychology. It was not until there was a lengthy, multi-phased [battle](#) between the American Psychological Association and the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom, that the manual printed a revision depathologizing kink in its fifth edition.

Still, Wright and other interviewees acknowledged that the kink world, much like mainstream society, is not perfect.

“I don’t think it’s an easy culture to break into,” Comes told me. As a woman who assumes a submissive role, Comes was approached by a tide of men when she first came out as kinky.

Not all of them would prove to be safe partners who shared her values.

“I have issues with cultures that are very patriarchal,” she said.

Nevertheless, she found a community of mostly like-minded people and, after having lived in both the kink and vanilla world, reflected that a lot of lessons could be taken from kinksters regarding consent norms.

“We can’t do what we can’t talk about,” Comes said.