



# Demographic Characteristics, Mental Health Outcomes and Kinky Practices among LGBTQ+ Individuals

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## ABSTRACT

LGBTQ+ individuals practice kink at higher rates than their cisgender and heterosexual counterparts; however, little research has looked at correlates of kink participation among this population. The current study includes 472 participants who completed the survey and responded to an item about kink participation. All participants were English speaking LGBTQ+ adults. We assessed differences between kink practitioners and non-practitioners on measures of demographics, cognitive flexibility, satisfaction with life, anxiety and depression. Results revealed demographic differences but no differences in other dependent measures. Implications, limitations, and future directions are discussed.

## Literature Review

- Kink and BDSM-related activities having been historically pathologized as deviant within the field of psychology . Therefore, a growing body of research has aimed to compare kink practitioners to non- practitioners on demographic and psychological measures.
- Prior research has found no differences between kink practitioners and non- practitioners on measures of psychopathology (Cross & Matheson, 2006), personality psychopathology (Connolly, 2006), and psychological distress (Richters, de Visser, Rissel, & Smith, 2006). No studies to date have compared these groups on measures of depression or anxiety.
- In contrast, only one study to date has compared these groups on positive psychological variables and found that those who practice kink reported higher levels of extraversion, openness to new experiences, conscientiousness, and subjective well-being compared to a non-kink comparison group (Wismeijer & Van Assen, 2013).
- LGBTQ+ individuals are more likely to practice kink compared to their cisgender and/or heterosexual counterparts (Rogak & Connor, 2018);
- However, little research has looked at the correlates of kink participation or compared kink practitioners and non- practitioners on measures of mental health, positive psychological functioning, or demographics in an LGBTQ+ sample.

## Current Study

The current study compares LGBTQ+ kink practitioners to non-practitioners on demographics, cognitive flexibility, life satisfaction, anxiety and depression.

## Hypotheses

We hypothesized that LGBTQ+ kink practitioners will have lower levels of anxiety and depression, and higher levels of cognitive flexibility and life satisfaction, compared to non-practitioners.

## Participants

As part of a larger study, the original survey of LGBTQ+ adults intentionally oversampled binary trans and non-binary individuals. 473 individuals participated. One was removed due to missingness. The final sample included N=472, English speaking, self-identified lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer identified adults, age 18+ and living in the U.S.

## Procedures

Participants were recruited through Community Marketing, Inc. After giving consent, participants completed a 30 minute confidential, online survey via Qualtrics survey software and were paid \$30 for completion.

## Measures

- Demographics variables
- Kink Participation: “Do you participate in Leather, BDSM, or Kink-related activities? (Yes; No)
- Cognitive Flexibility Scale (Martin & Rubin, 1995;  $\alpha = .92$ )
- Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener et al., 1985;  $\alpha = .79$ )
- Anxiety: GAD-7 (Spitzer et al., 2006;  $\alpha = .92$ )
- Depression: PHQ-9 (Kroenke & Spitzer, 2002;  $\alpha = .89$ )

## Results

Table 1

Sample Demographics						
	Full Sample	Kink	Non-Kink			
	N=472	N=161	N=311			
Characteristic				t	df	p value
Mean age (SD)	36.83 (13.32)	34.34 (13.17)	37.04 (13.41)	-0.54	470	0.59
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	$\chi^2$	df	p value
POC				1.02	1	0.31
White	237 (50.4%)	76 (47.2%)	161 (52.1%)			
Person of Color	233 (49.6%)	85 (52.8%)	148 (47.9%)			
Geographical Environment				0.51	2	0.78
Urban	240 (50.8%)	84 (52.2%)	156 (50.2%)			
Suburban	180 (38.1%)	58 (36%)	122 (39.2%)			
Rural	52 (11%)	19 (11.8%)	33 (10.6%)			
Polyamorous/ Non-monogamous				66.81***	1	<.001
Polyamorous/ Non-monogamous	154 (32.6%)	92 (57.1%)	62 (19.9%)			
Monogamous	318 (67.4%)	69 (42.9%)	249 (80.1%)			
Education				6.87**	1	<.01
Less than bachelors	198(42%)	81 (50.3%)	117 (37.7%)			
Bachelors or greater	273 (58%)	80 (49.7%)	193 (62.3%)			
Income				6.34*	2	<.05
Less than \$50k	315 (66.7%)	113 (70.2%)	202 (65%)			
\$50k-\$99.9k	111 (23.5%)	40 (24.8%)	71 (22.8%)			
\$100k or greater	46 (9.7%)	8 (5%)	38 (12.2%)			
	N=429	N=148	N=281			
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)			
Sexual Identity				17.12***	1	<.001
Monosexual	244 (57%)	64 (43%)	180 (64%)			
Plurisexual	185 (43%)	84 (57%)	101 (36%)			
	N= 444	N= 149	N= 295			
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)			
Gender Identity				3.37	2	0.19
Nonbinary	144 (32.4%)	53 (35.6%)	91 (30.8%)			
Binary Trans	146 (32.9%)	53 (35.6%)	93 (31.5%)			
Cisgender	154 (34.7%)	43 (28.9%)	111 (37.6%)			

## Results (Continued)

Table 2

Mental Health Outcomes				
	Mean (SD)	F	df	p value
Satisfaction with life		0.1	1	0.75
Kink	18.82 (7.78)			
Non-Kink	19.51 (7.66)			
Cognitive Flexibility		2.24	1	0.14
Kink	51.99 (5.5)			
Non-Kink	51.65 (6.02)			
Anxiety		1.22	1	0.27
Kink	16.64 (6.52)			
Non-Kink	15.56 (6.11)			
Depression		2.11	1	0.15
Kink	19.48 (7.1)			
Non-Kink	17.87 (6.74)			

- Hypotheses were analyzed using one-way ANCOVAs.
- After adjustment for education, income, age, and plurisexual status, there was no statistically significant difference in depression,  $F(1, 462)= 2.11, p = .15$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .005$ , anxiety,  $F(1, 462)=1.22, p = .27$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .003$ , satisfaction with life,  $F(1, 457)=.1, p = .75$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .00$ , or cognitive flexibility  $F(1,461)=2.24, p = .14$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .005$ , between kink practitioners and non-practitioners.

## DISCUSSION

- This study was one of the first to examine correlates of kink participation in an LGBTQ+ sample. Results indicate more similarities than differences between these two groups.
- Similar to prior research, LGBTQ+ kink practitioners were more likely to have annual incomes lower than 50k (Gamberling et al., 2015), and have other identities that challenge normative relationship paradigms, such as polyamorous and plurisexual (Sprott & Hadcock, 2017).
- In addition, we found no differences between kink practitioners and non-practitioners on measures of mental health (Richters, de Visser, Rissel, & Smith, 2006).
- Our finding that kink practitioners were no different than non-practitioners on measures of positive psychological functioning is in contrast with prior research with hetero/ cisgender kink practitioners (Wismeijer & Van Assen, 2013).

### Suggestions for future research:

- Examine psychological correlates of specific identities related to kink participation such as, top/dominant vs. bottom/submissive.
- Examine other factors which may impact mental health among LGBTQ+ kink practitioners such as anti-kink stigma and past victimization.

### Limitations

- Sample is skewed to white adults living in urban areas.
- Kink participation was assessed using a single dichotomous variable.