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# Consent work in intimacy coordination and adult content creation

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## ABSTRACT

This article draws on the researcher's training and experience as a certified intimacy coordinator to examine how labour from professional sex work to intimacy coordination necessitates nuanced approaches to consent. What I call consent work – practices of communication, negotiation, and boundary setting – supports bodily autonomy while guiding portrayals of intimacy and nudity in film, television, theatre, and erotic media. I begin by discussing intimacy coordinators' communication and consent frameworks to create context for my ensuing investigation. Next, utilizing data from interviews with online sex workers, I explore their sophisticated personal and community-oriented harm reduction techniques that, without formal training, dovetail with those in the intimacy coordination industry. Continuing my qualitative analysis, I describe the ways in which my interlocutors' use of knowledge from consensual BDSM reflects the breadth of practices that inform consent work while illuminating the links between kink and intimacy coordination. Finally, I unpack how consent models remain entangled within systems of inequality and exclusion while owing much to marginalized communities' contributions to contemporary understandings of bodily autonomy. Overall, consent work and its capacious lineage contribute to the expanding literature on intimacy coordination and highlight the field's under-researched intersections with adult content creation.

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## Introduction

Performance pressures, physical proximities, emotional investments, financial concerns – these are just some of the forces that professionals who choreograph and perform many kinds of intimacy must manage. In so-called mainstream media, 'intimacy' usually refers to corporeal actions including hugging, kissing, nudity, and simulated sex.<sup>1</sup> Intimacy coordinators (ICs)<sup>2</sup> are increasingly employed in this arena to enable consensual performance. ICs are hired far less frequently in the adult industry, where 'intimacy' also involves un-simulated sex.<sup>3</sup> Despite the seeming polarization of the terms 'simulated' and

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'unsimulated', ICs and adult performers share a focus on what I call consent work – long-standing practices of communication, negotiation, and boundary setting that support and maintain bodily autonomy.

Building context for my analysis of consent work, I first detail four frameworks that ICs often use to organize communication and consent. I then discuss interviews with three adult content creators to examine how these performers have independently developed personal and community-based harm reduction methods that reflect key intimacy coordination ethics. Next, I explore the ways in which my interlocutors draw from BDSM (bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, sadism and masochism; also known as kink), to show links between BDSM, sex work, and intimacy coordination practices. This linkage leads me to investigate consent work's entanglement in privilege and inequality, epitomized through sex worker exclusionary logics, individuating notions of consent, and inaccessible training programmes. Lastly, I engage consent work's legacy, which has connected performers in sexually explicit media, kink practitioners, racially and gender diverse individuals, and numerous pioneers of bodily autonomy since long before the #MeToo movement drew greater attention to the need for consent in performance.

To better undertake consent work, ICs receive instruction in frameworks that facilitate communication, negotiation, and boundary setting. When I earned my IC certification in 2020 with the Intimacy Professionals Association,<sup>4</sup> my training emphasized nonviolent communication (NVC), a relational process of compassion described by psychologist Marshall B. Rosenberg (2015). Not all ICs are schooled in NVC, but any communication system ICs utilize advances NVC principles such as observing situations, actively listening, and non-judgementally dialoguing to foster considerate interactions that support performers while upholding the creative team's artistic vision. ICs apply these principles to make sets safer – a word I intentionally use instead of 'safe' to acknowledge that although risk can be minimized, it cannot be eliminated. This usage also highlights the productive labour of performers, ICs, and others to enhance safety and remain risk aware, a point I revisit in the section on BDSM. Thus, NVC concepts enable interested parties to communicate effectively and empathetically through constructive conversation, even amid tensions that may arise between directorial inspiration and the boundaries performers set. In advocating for actors, facilitating self-advocacy, and cooperating with various departments, ICs use NVC methods to ensure stakeholders feel respected.

Extensive communication training assists ICs in applying frameworks to manage consent. These are often summarized by the acronyms 5Cs, FRIES, and CRISP. The 5Cs – context, consent, communication, choreography, and closure – are also known as the Five Pillars of Intimacy (2022).<sup>5</sup> The first pillar, context, steers ICs to familiarize themselves with the scripted circumstances in which intimate moments occur. Next, consent is negotiated among performers, director, and crew. After this, communication concerning scenes of intimacy upholds consent around agreed content. Then, choreography is developed to match storytelling and movement. Finally, following rehearsal or production, performers resolve or set aside residual feelings to achieve closure. These five steps guide intimacy work but do not specify how consent maintains bodily autonomy, which is where FRIES and CRISP come in.

To make consent actionable, many ICs began to employ the Planned Parenthood Federation of America's mnemonic FRIES ('Defining Consent' 2022).<sup>6</sup> According to the acronym, consent should be freely given, reversible, informed, enthusiastic, and specific ('Sexual

Consent' n.d.). Freely given means consent is a voluntary choice made without pressure or while under the influence. Reversible denotes the ability to withdraw or modify consent at any time, irrespective of prior actions. Informed implies individuals can only consent if they possess the necessary information. Enthusiastic aligns with judicial affirmative consent models, emphasizing active willingness. Specific sets boundaries regarding interactions and limits. Each of these five parts designates elements of the communication, negotiation, and boundary setting that comprise consent work. Although untold numbers of ICs use FRIES to organize their labour, others believe the acronym cannot precisely address performance.

In 2022, Intimacy Directors and Coordinators (IDC) recommended adjusting FRIES to CRISP.<sup>7</sup> Stating that Planned Parenthood's mnemonic speaks to 'actual sexual encounters', IDC modified the acronym to attend to 'crafted and simulated performances of romance and intimacy' because, as the organization explains, '[n]o matter how much art tries to imitate life, there are still some major differences' ('Defining Consent' 2022). I will describe IDC's modifications before discussing the issues they expose. Replacing 'freely given' with 'considered' and 'enthusiastic' with 'participatory', IDC's sequence becomes considered, reversible, informed, specific, and participatory ('Defining Consent' 2022). 'Considered' responds to the power dynamics inherent in hierarchical financial systems. It is not possible to 'freely' consent to performing intimacy when one's job is on the line, IDC holds, but a 'considered' evaluation of roles and choreography can empower informed consent even within stratified authority structures. Meanwhile, 'participatory' emphasizes performers' active involvement in creative decision-making to promote a sense of bodily autonomy without necessitating enthusiasm. Asserting that 'enthusiastic' is an ineffective barometer, IDC writes:

performing intimacy is a courageous and vulnerable act, and while some people may experience enthusiasm at the prospect, most folks [...] experience nervousness and uncertainty. [...] Intimacy in real life should be enthusiastic, joyful, and personally fulfilling. Intimacy in performance doesn't have to be in order for the actor to be fully on board with doing the job. ('Defining Consent' 2022)

To its credit, this statement grants that performers enacting intimacy engage in compensated labour constrained by capitalist economics. Importantly, the full CRISP mnemonic attempts to facilitate consent despite working environments that may hamper a performer's self-determination. Furthermore, IDC's treatment of intimacy as something 'vulnerable' that not all performers enthusiastically consent to admits the inextricability of 'uncertainty' and consent ('Defining Consent' 2022). This is valuable because it indicates the ongoing care that consent work requires, in all spheres. However, CRISP only addresses some paid performance contexts and not others, revealing two problems that plague IDC's framework and the intimacy coordination industry more broadly.

First, intimacy coordination easily upholds a facile distinction between 'art' (which 'tries to imitate') and 'life' (which is 'real'). Performance studies has deconstructed this distinction by showing the limitlessness of what can be interpreted as performance (Schechner 2013, 2). Yet IDC insists on partitioning 'actual' from staged representations of intimacy, implying that 'actual' sex is neither 'crafted' nor performed. Such partitioning excludes explicit adult content from CRISP and from the wider scope of intimacy coordination practices, and disavows the erotic labour that entertainers undertake in scenes of intimacy. Feminist studies scholar Jane Ward (2023) describes this disavowal in her exploration of how intimacy coordination for televised sex scenes illuminates the connections linking work, sex, and

feminism. Unfortunately, by claiming that it developed in 2018 (2023, 373), Ward furthers the common narrative that intimacy coordination emerged during the #MeToo movement. In fact, its increasing popularity at that time built on an established body of work, including – as is often mentioned – theatrical fight choreography, and although less frequently commended, marginalized groups’ efforts to secure bodily autonomy, which I discuss in greater detail later in this article. Subsequently naming this underappreciated work, Ward hails ‘people engaged in the lesser acknowledged forms of sexual labor [who] call forth the collective wisdom of feminist’ and, it is crucial to add, queer, trans, non-binary, kinky, racialized, and disabled

sex workers who have already elaborated many best practices for having sex, simulating sex, getting into character, getting out of character, negotiating one’s labor conditions, creating emotional and physical boundaries, resisting racism in the sex industry, and fostering pride rather than shame in one’s work. (2023, 391)

The elision of ICs from this legacy of ‘collective wisdom’ makes plain the insidious logic Ward critiques, exposing the fragile divide between sex work and performance in simulated sex scenes. The notion that intimacy coordination arose during #MeToo epitomizes the difficulty of accepting that actors in so-called mainstream entertainment have been performing sex work all along – as, perhaps, have ICs.

Recognizing marginalized groups’ contributions challenges typical narratives and uncovers the fact that intimacy coordination is rooted in eroticism enacted as labour. Still, the seemingly simple opposition of ‘real’ and ‘performed’ conceals the interplay of work and sex while perpetuating narrow views of intimacy – a second, and imbricated, problem with IDC’s schema and the intimacy coordination business. If ‘real’ intimacies ‘should be’ ‘fulfilling’, are unenthusiastic erotic experiences a failure? Are they fake? Can joyless intimacy be a choice? When intimacy is labour, is it automatically grim? How about those ‘doing the job’ and enjoying it? Positioned as distinct from ‘real’ everyday consensual closeness, is ‘intimacy in performance’ the only place where doubt can exist? The FRIES and CRISP acronyms raise these and other questions around what counts as performance, labour, and intimacy, calling for an examination of the ways in which consent is perceived and negotiated in realms that trouble the supposed distinction between the reality and the performance of sex. Thus, I now shift to analyse adult industry professionals’ sophisticated consent work, drawing upon the intimacy coordination frameworks I have detailed.

## Consent work in adult content creation

In early 2024, I conducted interviews with five adult content creators, focusing on their tools and strategies for working successfully.<sup>8</sup> Using purposive and snowball sampling, I selected interview partners<sup>9</sup> who were knowledgeable about and willing to discuss sex work with me. Over their choice of phone or encrypted Zoom call,<sup>10</sup> interlocutors and I followed a list of 12 semi-structured questions. Data generated from these interviews utilizing inductive coding illustrate many parallels between how ICs and sex workers handle consent. Yet in mobilizing well-considered personal and community-oriented processes of harm reduction and risk awareness, interview partners do not draw from formal IC training. Rather, they build on a long and frequently unacknowledged lineage of consent work that precedes intimacy coordination and arises in multiple forms of erotic and self-actualizing labour.

To explore consent work in online adult environments, I centre insights from three key interlocutors, thematically mapping their choices alongside core intimacy coordination ethics. I begin with Solomon Davis, a 26-year-old English-born, half-Swedish, predominantly heterosexual cis male.<sup>11</sup> An award-winning porn performer, professional dominant, and sex educator, Davis enjoys creating playful, BDSM-themed material that challenges stereotypes. During our interview, he recounted an anecdote that aptly situates well-being as a priority for adult entertainers and ICs. As Davis recalled, a producer once reprimanded him for concentrating on how a scene felt rather than on how it looked. What looks good sells, he was told, not what feels good. But now, Davis says, he has been vindicated: the industry is changing to better reflect performers' needs and audiences' desires to see performers feeling good.

Davis' concern for making 'unstimulated' sex feel good, instead of prioritizing aesthetics, might seem to clash with ICs' work to support cinematographers and ensure choreography plays well on camera. Yet although aesthetics are important in intimacy coordination, and feeling good is less about pleasure and more about a sense of physical and mental security, these drives may not be at odds. Both intimacy coordination and sex work are 'creative labor on erotic culture' (Barclay 2023, 25) that aims to elaborate sexual and sensual expression, whether referred to as simulated or unstimulated, while advocating for performers' needs. The common goal is to sustain agency – even if that agency can be more pleasure-oriented in sex work – and concurrently generate compelling performances.

Cat Noir, a 30-year-old Caucasian female from the UK, exemplifies this blend of performance and agency in her consent work. A content creator and OnlyFans model, Cat Noir describes her material as weird, silly art influenced by cutesy, risqué, goth, emo, and Japanese e-girl styles. She creates, in part, to broaden the diversity of intimate practices portrayed by women in online sex work. Her thoughtful methods for keeping herself safer in her business involve upholding strong boundaries and approaching communication with a high level of introspection. She posts limits on her profile, furnishes detailed narratives of segments, and often engages in conversations to delineate the nature of her role. If subscribers are acquaintances, she is clear that her sex work is restricted to contact inside that structure. Fans who see Cat Noir while out buying groceries, for example, will not receive dirty talk. If patrons disrespect her boundaries, she calmly explains her choice to discontinue their subscriptions.

Cat Noir's meticulous precision directly reflects intimacy coordination's 5Cs. Her curated descriptions, bio, and posts outline when and where the fantasy takes place (context), clearly establish limits around the client-worker relationship (communication), and enumerate what she will provide to those paying for her services (consent, choreography). She distinguishes between personal and professional circumstances, implementing the reversibility and specificity present in FRIES and CRISP.<sup>12</sup> Her calm, non-judgemental dialogues with subscribers balance consideration and individual empowerment, paralleling NVC techniques. ICs could gain insight into negotiating consent from studying how Cat Noir secures her bodily autonomy.

Cat Noir and Davis each explained that their aptitude for negotiating consent arises partly from learning through mistakes in community with other sex workers. Cat Noir relayed key capabilities she has obtained from missteps, including how a boundary breach taught her to avoid entering too deeply into a client's fantasy. Davis mentioned refining his routines after experiencing burnout from overworking. Both interlocutors

spoke openly about the time they needed to recover and grow following errors, with Davis absorbing much since joining the adult industry at the age of 19 and Cat Noir honing her skills over the years subsequent to her start in explicit content creation in 2020. These years also afforded opportunities to connect with like-minded colleagues. Davis and Cat Noir commented that misjudgements impart substantive lessons especially when discussed with sex worker peers.

Just as Davis and Cat Noir benefit from peer-to-peer knowledge exchange, ICs develop expertise in community.<sup>13</sup> Some intimacy coordination courses frame practice-based exercises as chances to acquire proficiencies as a result of mistakes, and some ICs are particularly open about misunderstandings they have experienced in relation to their own and others' limits (Barclay 2023, 55, 168). Sharing stories allows ICs and erotic entertainers to apply the 'I' in FRIES and CRISP, ensuring they stay informed regarding best practices across a connected network. Even so, it can be difficult to disclose having misread a consent-led situation. Cat Noir and Davis' openness to divulging errors might offer ICs models for integrating accountability into caring for personal and interpersonal boundaries. Additionally, community-driven learning could uphold the significance of teamwork and shared fulfilment while helping resist budgetary pressures in intimacy coordination and explicit productions.

Pat Collins is a 32-year-old adult videographer from the UK who brings another dimension to consent work through his cooperative approach to content creation. Collins' self-described semi-sensual, fun, and beautiful style builds a more inclusive and collaborative interpretation of online intimacy. He reported how one team he associates with stops filming when they feel good about their efforts, prioritizing comfort and mutual satisfaction over pushing performers for financial gain. Collins construed this as a 'for us' strategy, meaning those involved make what they want to see rather than designing outputs to maximize earnings. This highlights the possibility and importance of enjoying the process of production as a counterpoint to exploitative profiteering. Collins' method balances anti-exceptionalizing 'sex work is work' discourses and anti-work politics that would abolish paid employment altogether (Weeks 2011; Berg 2021), acknowledging the tension between acceding to economic realities and finding pleasure in the work.

All three interviews clearly emphasized managing monetary realities alongside well-being. Davis' project parameters aptly illustrate this emphasis. First, he films entirely with groups that use safeguarding procedures – whether based on consent forms or pre-shoot discussions incorporating cast and crew. Second, he works exclusively with individuals who have valid STI-negative certifications and with whom he feels chemistry. Third, he only does for money what he would otherwise do for free. The burden of participating in unenjoyable scenes with unfavourable companies and performers is far more consequential than the cash he could earn. Capital, he contends, comes and goes, but emotional pain is lasting. Of course, there is a critical distinction between disliking something and experiencing a consent violation. The former refers to preference or discomfort, stemming from factors such as differing interests, physical or psychological misalignment, or mental strain. In contrast, the latter occurs when limits are disregarded or overridden. However, as Davis solely consents to performing in certain scenes, creating any other content may elicit feelings of distress or harm. This holds significant implications for ICs, whose role extends beyond preventing serious instances of coercion, manipulation, and assault to addressing consent violations including minor boundary breaches.



Cat Noir and Collins apply equivalent care systems. To protect her emotional wellness, for example, Cat Noir recently announced to followers that she would take a short break due to family circumstances. Using the downtime to reset herself, she navigated possible disruptions to revenue by offering a discount or complementary video to discontented subscribers. This enabled her to maintain a sense of control over her work–life balance. Collins endeavours to foster comparable well-being and financial oversight, personally and among performers. In a methodical review process subsequent to editing, he and performers watch their footage to gauge their collective comfort. If a segment is deemed unsuitable, they remove it. More explicit pay-per-view material may achieve greater profitability, but Collins proactively reassesses his and the performers' wants before, during, and after filming sessions, accommodating preferences on a case-by-case basis instead of unilaterally opting for sequences that sell.

Thus, my interview partners remain aware of the pressures that income exerts on negotiating boundaries, a concern ICs and adult content creators share. While ICs do not work in exactly the ways these interlocutors describe, the similarities thematically explored here show how practitioners in each arena support and centre the performer. Most ICs are not trained mental health professionals, but many operate with trauma-informed approaches (Barclay 2023, 47) and all aim to empower actors to feel in command of their well-being and decisions – financial or otherwise. Further, all three interview partners offer a consideration of economic constraints akin to that outlined in CRISP. They give precedence to care over cost, proffer discounts or free videos, and defer to performers' limits. In some ways, intimacy coordination reflects a corresponding monetary rationale, with day rates and kit fees increasing short-term budgets but contributing to better outcomes for cast and crew. Hence, in both spheres, best practices often involve accepting financial trade-offs that place performers' sense of security above fiscal benefits. The fact that sex workers can navigate this calculus and also heed the potential for pleasure is a point ICs could learn from in their efforts to push back against extractive capitalist systems.

### **Kinking consent work**

So far, I have detailed how interlocutors' independently developed techniques resemble intimacy coordination frameworks, and have shown where the IC industry has room for growth in areas influenced by adult media. ICs might also gain knowledge of consent work from how interview partners utilize strategies from BDSM to foster communication, uphold autonomy, support well-being, and adjust to variable boundaries. For instance, in a kink context, Cat Noir watched transparent discussions around wants and intentions configure the negotiation of desire. In one such discussion, she heard 'if it's not a yes, then it's a no'. The idea now allows her to honestly confirm the scope of her content creation agreements while appreciating that 'yes' and 'no' are situational in nature. Modes of talk in BDSM inspired Cat Noir to use straightforward communication when navigating shifting risk in her profession.

Davis also brought up kink, saying he has come to understand much about sex work by enjoying BDSM since his youth. This assertion mobilizes what race, sexuality, and feminist studies scholar Mireille Miller-Young calls 'hyperconsent' (2014, 195). Writing on Black women in the porn industry, Miller-Young describes hyperconsent as a way sex

workers articulate long-standing fascinations with sex and pornography to affirm agency and comfort in their labour. Hyperconsenting to his kinky adult work, Davis credited BDSM with inspiring his content, teaching him to consider each performer's preferences, and illuminating how personal relationships cultivate greater trust on set. As head of his own production company, Davis oversaw consent and boundary setting by drawing on negotiation tactics from kink. He allocated time for cast and crew to exchange views on a variety of questions and catalogue limits around risk, contributing to a safer and more intimate environment. Davis now advocates for this dialogical style as an entertainer, noting that the best producer with whom he ever worked applied almost identical BDSM-inspired procedures that assisted him in feeling valued and at ease. He added that a kinky ethos instructed him in aftercare – establishing before an intense experience what co-participants will want when it concludes and then meeting those wants, often to create distance between the self and the role assumed during kink play. Exercising ongoing aftercare, Davis continues to check in on co-performers in the days and weeks following a shoot.

It is notable that two interview partners referenced BDSM because kink is, like sex work, a realm wherein tenets of consent became codified systems.<sup>14</sup> This systematization is evident in the mnemonics kink practitioners use to manage consensual contact (Taormino 2012). Specifically, the acronyms SSC (safe, sane, and consensual)<sup>15</sup> and RACK (risk aware consensual kink)<sup>16</sup> have become integral to BDSM since 1983 and 2001, respectively (Stein 2000; Switch 2001). While SSC remains popular, many prefer RACK due to its emphasis on risk awareness over safety.<sup>17</sup> Using the word 'safer' rather than 'safe', this article aligns consent work's productive labour with RACK's risk-aware ethos. Regardless of preference, these ethical apparatuses promote participatory decision-making in kink play, foster dialogue, and organize negotiation, all of which entail a rigorous accounting of the terms of consent.

Beyond such codified systems, BDSM also illustrates consent's fluidity. Intimacy coordination frequently frames consent linearly, as an arrangement entered into after signing labour agreements, reading scripts, and discussing boundaries. This can make consent seem like a contract (Barclay 2023). Although some players conceptualize kink similarly, even using contracts on occasion, much BDSM acknowledges the ambiguity involved in negotiating consent, as Cat Noir displays in mentioning that yes and no can be contextual. Anthropologist Margot Weiss (2011) and gender and sexuality studies scholar Ariane Cruz (2016) suggest that kink necessitates exploratory processes that leave space for trial and error – in parallel to how my interlocutors and other entertainers learn and adapt in real time. ICs may recognize that discoveries arise through mistakes, and may stress that consent is reversible,<sup>18</sup> but intimacy coordination commonly follows limits set prior to a scene. Conversely, the way BDSM prioritizes ongoing, dynamic discussion can allow boundaries to shift during an interaction – even if not all kinks take up this potential.

As BDSM embraces shifting desires, it also engages with less flexible identities often imposed upon individuals and groups without their consent. Cruz (2016) and Weiss (2011) underline how kink regularly features hierarchies based on race, gender, class, ability, and age, complicating the ways in which self-determination can manifest. Within such hierarchies, consent is not a neutral, singular compact between equals, but a force to be negotiated with and through identity – perhaps especially when BDSM

players lean into difference as a component of their kinks. Thus, as BDSM emphasizes, social structures shape the possibilities for consent, uncovering the limitations of intimacy coordination practices that treat performers as equally empowered to make choices concerning bodily autonomy.

Nonetheless, the kink-related techniques my interview partners employ – namely, managing communication, negotiation, and boundaries – are part of the same consent work that powers intimacy coordination. Like Cat Noir, ICs aid actors in upholding limits and clearly expressing themselves, using NVC and other mnemonics to do so. ICs also connect with cast and crew members to check in regarding boundaries and comfort, as do Davis and Collins. Additionally, aftercare's rationale pervades the fifth 'C' – closure. ICs use candid conversations to understand performers' needs after scenes, rehearsals, or shoots, and implement closure rituals such as a high five or a decompression chat to encourage a return to equilibrium. Sometimes called 'de-roling', these rituals enable actors to step back from their characters the way aftercare helps BDSM participants separate from their play. Director and researcher Kari Barclay (2023, 140) suggests 'de-roling' may be another form of aftercare, bridging kink and intimacy coordination. While de-roling is limited in duration, Davis' mention of ongoing aftercare underscores that consent can extend past the initial agreement, requiring care and communication even when an interaction has ended. This prolongation challenges bounded approaches seen in intimacy coordination for budgetary reasons, illuminating how, despite the performer-forward financial considerations examined earlier, costs do constrain ICs. Overlaps and divergences like these spotlight the significant but often overlooked links connecting consent praxis in BDSM and intimacy coordination while indicating that kink has more to teach ICs about consent.

Scholars have attended to BDSM's relationships with pornography and sex work (Rubin 2011; Khan 2014; Cruz 2016; Smith and Luykx 2017), yet the intersections of kink and intimacy coordination remain understudied. IC and academic Joy Brooke Fairfield noted that '[m]ore research is needed on how current consent-based performance training borrows from the influences of queer, sex-worker, [and] kink [...] community practices' (2019, 74). There is some documentation of this borrowing. For example, as Barclay charts (2023, 123), 'BDSM's consent focus has attracted the interest of those choreographing sexuality in performance', and at least three prominent ICs have formulated their methods by referencing kink practitioners and procedures.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, a small but growing number of ICs declare professional kink-related specializations, showing that, like two of my interlocutors, ICs make use of BDSM-informed intimacies (Fairfield 2019, 68; Barclay 2023, 123).<sup>20</sup> Investigating erotic media creators' ways of mobilizing kinky tactics alongside their own versions of intimacy coordination exhibits consent work's relations to BDSM, intimacy coordination, and sex work, drawing together all three areas.

My interviews reveal many similarities allying consent work in intimacy coordination and online adult content creation. Negotiating boundaries around sexual interactions, handling interpersonal connections, and prioritizing performer well-being, interlocutors demonstrate sophisticated consent strategies, developed without formal IC training, that align with kink and intimacy coordination ethics. Yet perceived differences between navigating simulated and unsimulated sex acts obscure this alignment and occlude intimacy coordination and explicit erotic performance's shared drive to create consensual and compelling intimacies. In the next section, I continue to explore how,

although sex work offers valuable insights for ICs, power structures mire consent in privilege and exclusion. Despite this, consent work maintains the potential to disrupt traditional conceptions of intimacy, especially by highlighting minoritized communities' contributions to contemporary understandings of bodily autonomy.

### Consent work and its impacts

The adult entertainers I interviewed were familiar with intimacy coordination. Each praised its benefits and envisioned ways to involve ICs and their expertise in the production process. Davis recommended having an IC on set for any performer who wanted support. Cat Noir proposed integrating IC services into existing platforms like OnlyFans, and Collins suggested devising an open-source IC information-sharing resource for the porn industry. Hopeful as these ideas are, while Cat Noir mentioned that intimacy coordination guidance could assist when client demands might compromise creative independence, Davis expressed concerns about ICs undermining that independence by attempting to guide performers already adept at self-management. Moreover, Collins, Cat Noir, and Davis stated that their production environments do not require ICs because creators feel comfortable negotiating and setting boundaries, reflecting confidence in coordinating their own intimacy. Such confidence indicates that those who produce adult content can impart critical lessons for ICs on consent, even though the intimacy coordination industry currently marginalizes sex work. Recognizing this, and actively engaging with sex worker knowledge about consent, would fit the 'put ourselves out of business' model that some IC voices espouse (Pace, Rikard, and Villarreal 2022, 2). As an IC and critical sexuality and performance studies scholar, I agree with this model's aim: to empower everyone to uphold a culture of consent.

At the same time, I acknowledge that consent work's entanglement in broader systems of inequality complicates the model's aspirations. As this article's unpacking of acronyms and discussion of identity in BDSM evinces, consent work is deeply imbricated with privilege. The sex worker exclusionary reasoning built into conceptualizing CRISP illustrates how persistent hierarchies mean privilege affects who is granted and who is denied access to consent's purview. My exploration of consent work across the connected yet disparate realms of intimacy coordination and erotic labour has shown some effective ways to navigate practices of bodily autonomy. However, neoliberal late capitalist libidinal economies easily co-opt consent to minimize rather than engage with oppression. These economies substitute personal choice for collective, structural change. Consent and fluid power dynamics become attenuated stand-ins for sexual liberation politics, permitting pervasive inequalities to be individuated and dismissed as private issues of deficient boundary setting or poor communication. Thus, presuming each individual is equipped with the same tools to determine their own intimate life represents deeply flawed logic.

Operating within the invisibilized architectures of personal choice, consent frameworks that promote safety can restrict as much as they allow. While beneficial, harm reduction around sex and sexuality contributes to a regulatory network that criminalizes sex work and supposedly 'non-consensual' activities like HIV non-disclosure or the giving of beatings in BDSM. Instead of reflecting consent work's nuances, this network assumes a universalized understanding of safety that serves litigious, statutory definitions of

enthusiastic ‘yes means yes’ consent. As sex and gender scholar Gayle Rubin writes, ‘[i]n sex law, consent is what distinguishes sex from rape. But consent is a privilege which is not enjoyed equally by all sexualities’ (2011, 134). Sex law upholds the stratification of sexual behaviours, endeavouring to control consent’s valences while failing to recognize its complexities. In addition to implying that consent is uniform and universally applicable, outlawing specific sex acts and sexualities perpetuates biases and enables surveillance that disproportionately targets some races, genders, abilities, classes, and sexual labour while abjecting embodied knowledge from these sources.

Intimacy coordination training and certification also abject such knowledge. Amidst a swiftly growing profession and surging demand, accreditation helps ensure ICs are qualified. Yet official endorsements imply that only sanctioned ICs and their techniques are valid. A costly gatekeeping mechanism (Pace 2022), certification opposes the ‘put ourselves out of business’ model mentioned earlier. People like my interview participants have, for years, been developing practices to advance agency and address concerns related to intimacy, nudity, and eroticism without the title of IC, but training programmes limit the authorization to champion consent to a select group. Specially trained ICs are useful in countless circumstances, including when performers feel disempowered. Young racially and gender diverse actors, in particular, may desire support navigating production hierarchies and may seek opportunities in which their bodily interactions follow explicitly agreed terms, affirming the importance of intimacy coordination. Nonetheless, while ICs can assist in these situations, many with intersecting identities regularly rely on their own intricate risk management procedures to manoeuvre through the entertainment industry. This illuminates the need to validate the somatic cognition of those, from sex workers to BDSM practitioners and other minoritized groups, who possess existing strategies for employing communication, boundary setting, and negotiation methods to maintain bodily autonomy.

Numerous individuals and collectives have long drawn on lived experience and innovative tactics to shape the contemporary landscape of consent within and beyond film, theatre, and sex work (Dunn quoted in Fairfield et al. 2019, 78; Villarreal 2022). Intimacy coordination’s relationship with fight and movement choreography is increasingly well documented (Fairfield et al. 2019; Feidelson 2020; Villarreal 2022; Barclay 2023), as is the position’s rapid uptake after #MeToo campaigns brought it to mainstream attention (Barclay 2023; Ward 2023). Still, some pioneers remain relatively obscure, making a comprehensive genealogy of intimacy coordination and consent work difficult to trace. Even so, a multifaceted, if fragmentary, history helps spotlight consent work’s widespread applications and enduring significance, countering logics that exceptionalize pornography production and BDSM as inherently riskier and more exploitative than other forms of erotic expression. By presenting my interview partners as one node in such a history, I acknowledge the ways their practices are linked to and neglected by the intimacy coordination industry. I locate the roots of consent work not in that industry but, rather, in a longer legacy of sex work, kink, and the labour of people of colour and queer, transgender, and non-binary individuals (*Gender Euphoria* June 2023; Mackie-Stephenson 2023).

My interlocutors see intimacy coordination as beneficial, yet the inverse hardly seems accurate. Adult entertainers’ proficiencies in managing consent and boundaries are overlooked, despite having much to teach intimacy coordination, because consent is tangled

in privilege and inequality, often reducing bodily autonomy to an issue of personal choice. Spanning multitudes, however, regulatory systems criminalize certain sexualities and behaviours en masse while failing to make space for consent's complexities. Consent work can expose some of these complexities by supporting diverse and inclusive depictions of intimacy. My interview partners, for example, believe it is essential to display an array of sexual preferences. Davis' BDSM material, Collins' beautiful video, and Cat Noir's silly scenes all stand against stereotypes and stigma, and fans have thanked each for providing an assortment of content. This underscores the valuable expertise of marginalized individuals and groups, even as formal IC accreditation structures exclude this expertise from the profession. Intimacy coordination's affiliation with stunts and stage fights, and its prominence post #MeToo, are important parts of consent work's story. However, any chronicle of consent work would be incomplete without addressing the labour of sex workers, kink communities, and others customarily considered peripheral.

## Conclusion

Applied uniquely across sexual pursuits and cultural contexts, consent work has the capacity to challenge biases through its multifaceted history and developing nature, as modes of communication, negotiation, and boundary setting continue to evolve to uphold bodily autonomy. Yet only an intimacy industry bold enough to appreciate its own legacy and broad enough to accept multiple perspectives can effectively accomplish the political work of accommodating heterogeneous experiences. Intimacy coordination acronyms and communication tools may represent attempts to establish best practices, but differences among practitioners reveal disagreements over definitions of consent, labour, performance, and intimacy. A number of ICs and intimacy coordination organizations, for instance, are convinced the work should focus wholly on simulated sex, hindering the integration of intimacy professionals into the porn business, ignoring what people like my interlocutors can contribute to discourses around intimacy coordination, and disregarding the material they create.

Investigating consent work in intimacy coordination and online erotic content creation illustrates deep connections between how individuals in each field facilitate portrayals of intimacy. Combining intimacy coordination frameworks with interview analysis, I have linked adult entertainers' techniques for navigating consent and boundaries, some drawn from BDSM, with ICs' efforts to ensure safer and more consensual interactions on set. I have also shown that consent work is entangled in systems of inequality. While a genealogy of intimacy coordination remains elusive and requires further research, acknowledging its relationship to strategies developed in sex work, kink, Black feminism, queer cultures, and other minoritized populations and practices demonstrates the ongoing relevance of consent work within and beyond mediatized intimacies. Together, these topics advocate for an expansive interpretation of consent work as erotic labour that has the potential to embrace diverse knowledge while promoting bodily autonomy.

## Notes

1. In addition, ICs support scenes involving mental and emotional intimacy or requiring specific knowledge of protected characteristics such as gender, race, and ability.

2. While here IC stands for ‘intimacy coordinator’, it can also mean ‘intimacy coordination’, both of which are terms predominantly used in film and television. In theatre, the position is titled ‘intimacy director’ or ‘intimacy choreographer’. Intimacy professionals also work in live art, gaming, and other types of performance.
3. In 2020, the Adult Performance Artists Guild (APAG) introduced the ‘On Set Steward Program’, an intimacy coordination correlate meant to place experienced performers on set to support safety (‘APAG Announces’ 2020). Little information is available about the programme’s progress, and efforts to obtain updates from the APAG were unsuccessful at the time of writing. Beyond this, only a small number of individuals seem to be employed as ICs in the porn industry.
4. Since certifying, I have worked and consulted on over 10 film, theatre, and live art productions, taught numerous intimacy coordination workshops, and given lectures in the arts and education sectors. I was drawn to intimacy coordination, in part, because of my many years as a cast and crew member in the entertainment industry, during which I script-supervised several adult films. I have not yet had the opportunity to serve as IC on a production featuring so-called ‘unsimulated’ sex.
5. I first encountered the 5Cs in a 2019 workshop led by Jessica Steinrock of Intimacy Directors and Coordinators (IDC). Aetiological note: IDC’s Pillars are attributed to the now defunct Intimacy Directors International (IDI), which existed from 2016 to 2020.
6. Use of the abbreviation amongst ICs has been documented since 2019 (Barclay 2023, 54).
7. Beyond IDC, many consent-based practitioners and academics have criticized all or part of the FRIES acronym. See, for example, IC and educator Raja Benz’ comments in the podcast *Gender Euphoria* (July 2023) and multiple authors’ remonstrances against enthusiastic consent in *Unsafe Words: Queering consent in the #MeToo era* (2023). CRISP is, in part, an attempt to acknowledge these critiques.
8. My small sample size – constrained due to production schedules and the inability to compensate interlocutors – calls for greater diversity and further research.
9. To mitigate hierarchical interviewer–interviewee dynamics, I understand interlocutors as co-creators, signalling a participatory model of knowledge generation via sociologist and queer theorist Robin Bauer’s (2014) ‘interview partner’ framework.
10. After each call, I immediately transcribed the conversation, deleted the recording, and stored all files on a secure drive for privacy and protection purposes.
11. I introduce each interview partner by the identifiers they requested I use.
12. Digital content presents unique challenges to reversibility and specificity given that sharing is difficult to control, even with recording-protected assets, legal restrictions, and limited access. While these challenges are noteworthy, they fall beyond the present scope.
13. In addition to working with one another informally, ICs have publicly codified their methods through collaborations with actors’ unions such as the Screen Actors Guild – American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) and directors and producers guilds such as the Director’s Guild of America (DGA) and Producers Guild of America (PGA), to name just a few public-facing partnerships. Although perhaps lesser known, an expansive network of organizations create and elaborate best practices in adult entertainment, including the Free Speech Coalition (FSC) and APAG in the USA and the Support Network for Adult Professionals (SNAP) in the UK.
14. I do not intend to position BDSM as a distinct sexual domain in which practitioners are better at consent. There is much debate over whether engaging in kink qualifies one as part of a sexual minority, complicated by the fact that large numbers of people have experience with practices deemed ‘kinky’, a term that remains fluid (Bauer 2014, 5). Rather, I aim to establish that kink play often emphasizes consent as a formative concept, to the extent that some aficionados claim an activity is not BDSM without consent (2014, 13).
15. SSC distinguishes consensual kink ‘from the typical association of [BDSM] with harmful, anti-social, predatory behaviors’, an association against which the abbreviation’s creator slave david stein pushed in the 1980s that lingers to this day (stein 2000).



16. RACK was proposed as an alternative to SSC because '[n]othing's perfectly safe [... and] risk is an essential part of the thrill. [...] Negotiation cannot be valid without foreknowledge of the possible risks involved in the activity being negotiated. [...] Hence "risk-aware" instead of "safe." [...] The "sane" part of SSC is very subjective. Who's making the call? [...] "Consensual" is the crux, implying negotiation which implies being able to distinguish fantasy from reality [...] The "kink" part went in [...] because SSC doesn't tell you what you should be SSC about' (Switch 2001).
17. Mnemonic devices like SSC and RACK, akin to FRIES and CRISP, attract both endorsement and opposition. The reworking of one acronym into another connotes growth and intentionality while, paradoxically, oversimplifying the challenges inherent in systematizing consent.
18. Reversible and contractual consent can conflict in intimacy coordination. On a network television or feature film production, once an actor signs a nudity rider granting the rights to their image, and once that image is captured, the actor may reverse consent and ask for different choreography, but anything that has already been recorded is the property of the production company and can legally be included in the final cut. This represents an important divergence from Collins' approach to discarding content that performers do not want used.
19. For more on this, see Feidelson (2020) and Paumgarten (2015) (cited in Barclay 2023).
20. When I teach 'Introduction to Kink and BDSM for ICs', a recurring continuing education workshop with sliding-scale tickets offered through the Intimacy Professionals Association, I aim to equip ICs with theoretical and practical tools to better choreograph kink. Such trainings are in high demand.

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