

Lund University

Department of Sociology

# Breaking the Stereotypes

Exploring Control and Self-Expression of Modern-Day Freak Show

Performers



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## **Abstract**

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Freak shows have been historically depicted as dehumanizing spectacles exhibiting individuals with physical anomalies. Over time, these shows faded away, but human curiosity and fascination with difference and deviance have brought them back in a new form. The format and the content of these performances varies greatly from the traditional scene focusing on showcasing the behavioral differences of human fears and hidden desires. This research specifically focuses on the motivations, experiences, and risks associated with performers engaged in practices such as body modifications, body suspension, BDSM, and Shibari. Drawing upon theories of play and edgework, the study aims to explore the complex dynamics of contemporary freak performances.

Through a qualitative research approach with ten freak show performers this thesis provides rich and nuanced insights into their lived experiences. The findings reveal that freak show performers are affected by the constraints of the modernized world leading to feelings of disconnection from themselves, others, and society at large. They are thus driven by a desire for self-actualization, self-realization, and personal growth. The performances embody a unique blend of pleasure, challenge, and catharsis, allowing individuals to explore their boundaries and challenge societal norms. This research highlights the significance of understanding the agency and subjective experiences of freak show performers, challenging stigmatization, and societal perceptions of difference and deviance. This thesis contributes to the existing literature on play, edgework, and freak shows in the form of cultural resistance.

Keywords: freak; freak shows; BDSM; body suspension; edgework; dark play; subculture

## **Popular Science Summary**

Traditional freak show performers have long been the subject of curiosity and fascination inciting contemporary arts, such as popular entertainment found in literature, movies, and theater. The modern-day equivalent of these shows continues to push boundaries and challenge our perceptions. In this thesis, I explore the motivations and experiences of freak show performers through the lenses of play theory and edgework, examining how these performers navigate risks and find meaning in their activities.

Through interviews with contemporary performers in body suspension, BDSM, Shibari, and other freak show acts in the Czech scene, we gain insights into how they approach their performances as a form of play and edgework, embracing the thrills of risk-taking and exploring their fears and desires. I also explore the institutional arrangements that give rise to alienation and oversocialization in these communities, and how performers navigate these challenges.

Ultimately, this research sheds light on the complex world of freak show performances, challenging traditional notions of what is considered normal and acceptable. By understanding the motivations and experiences of these performers, we can gain a deeper appreciation for the diversity and complexity of human behavior and identity.

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# 1. Introduction

In a world where routine and predictability dominate, modern-day freak shows offer a fascinating yet unsettling alternative, celebrating the unique and the unusual while challenging our deepest fears and desires. Using their bodies to captivate and shock their audiences, the freaks give us a glimpse into the limits of the human body and mind. But what drives these performers to push themselves to the limits? Perhaps it is a desire for fame and recognition, or maybe it is a way to challenge societal norms and expectations. Whatever their motivation and experiences may be, this thesis will present their own perspectives and understanding.

To fully grasp the concept of freak shows, it is essential to first clarify the meaning of the term freak. The term has historically been used to describe individuals with physical anomalies and differences, often in a derogatory matter (Wardi, 2005:514; Durbach, 2012:39). Such individuals were commonly featured in freak shows, where they performed for public entertainment (Fordham, 2007:208). The use of the word had since held a negative connotation, as it reinforced the idea of these individuals as lesser and different from “normal” people (Durbach, 2009:1). These individuals were commonly referred to as “monsters” or “human oddities” (Backstorm, 2012:682). The historical use of this terminology to exploit and demean performers adds to the sensitive nature of its usage in the context of freak shows. The dictionary meaning of the term freak is however explained as “a very unusual, unexpected” (Oxford Dictionary, 2023) or “extremely unusual or unlikely” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023) and that is the meaning that freak performers take and identify themselves with.

In this thesis, freak shows are thus conceptualized as extremely unusual, unlikely, or unexpected performances including deviating elements. As such, freak shows can be viewed as a form of cultural resistance that challenges the norms and values of mainstream society. Freak show performers are engaging in a form of “carnavalesque” behavior, where they are able to challenge social hierarchies and subvert dominant power structures through their performances (Presdee, 2000). This form of carnivalesque behavior can also provide the pleasure of playing with the social and personal boundaries (Presdee, 2000:32). The construction and representation of freak shows in society can be seen as an example of how deviance is constructed and

represented in society, as freak shows challenge and subvert dominant norms and values.

## 1.1 The Issue, Aim, and Research Questions

Difference and deviance are not only stigmatized (Andrieu et al., 2019; Gorski, 2022; Simula, 2019), but in many respects even criminalized (Bennett, 2021:162). At the moment, freak shows hold a negative undertone due to the complexity of their infamous history. Individuals strongly affected by social norms, values, and expectations to a point when their identity is compromised can feel unable to fully express themselves (Lyng, 1990:870-878). This can further lead to alienation, a feeling of disconnect from others and society as whole, which can impact their purpose and meaning in life (Lyng, 1990:869-882).

Therefore, freak shows serve to promote the differences in human behaviors as well as in physical appearances. This thesis aims to shift the focus from treating deviance as a spectacle, an exhibition of human anomalies, to performances educating the audience about a wide range of behaviors, desires, and a more positive attraction to the unusual. Through their experiences we can recognize the meaningful aspects of their engagement, their drive, and encouragement of risky activities. More specifically, using Lyng's theory of edgework, I look into how they understand their personal and social boundaries, and how they navigate the associated risks. Moreover, play theory is used to further explore the role of freak shows in human behavior and society at large (Huizinga, 2014). To do so, I conducted and analyzed ten in-depth interviews with freak performers from the Czech freak subculture. As such, this thesis will focus on the following research questions:

- 1) What drives modern-day freak show performers to participate in the freak scene?
- 2) How do they experience and understand their own performances?
- 3) How do they navigate the risks associated with their shows?

Specific literature on BDSM and body suspension emerged in previous research which I explore in the literature review chapter. My contribution here is to explore performances deemed freakish or strange, that are falling outside of the mainstream entertainment content as a whole. Bearing in mind the history and evolution of freak

shows, this thesis intends to provide a deeper understanding of the meaning freak shows provide to their performers as well as their impact on contemporary society.

## 1.2 Key Terms

Initially, some key terms need to be defined as this study focuses on a freak subcultural community which can be unknown to the reader. Many different terms have emerged during this study, although I will only explain the main ones that are substantial in understanding the bases of this thesis.

Firstly, BDSM is an umbrella term that encompasses a variety of sexual and erotic activities that are consensual and diverse in its expression of power dynamics (Turley et al. 2017:325; Weiss, 2015:1; Sihvonen & Harviainen, 2020:1; Simula, 2017:211). The BDSM acronym commonly refers to bondage, discipline, dominance, submission, sadism, and masochism (Turley et al., 2017:325; Moser & Kleinplatz, 2007:35; Ernulf & Innala, 1995:632). Along with these, a variety of other sexual behaviors including fetishism and transvestism can be included if participants explore power exchange (Ernulf & Innala, 1995:632). The common thread that unites BDSM activities is that they are all agreed by everyone taking part, regardless of the specific activities or relationship dynamics involved (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2007:35; Simula, 2019:2). Furthermore, dominant and submissive terms refer to roles or identities involved within BDSM relationships where the dominant role takes control and exercises power over their submissive partner, who typically follows the commands (Simula, 2019:3).

Shibari is a Japanese type of rope bondage which falls under the category of BDSM (Lee et al., 2015:1751). The person who is being tied is then lifted in the air using the ropes (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2007:40). Shibari is often seen as an art form and is used in BDSM practices for erotic, sensual, or meditative purposes (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2007:40).

Lastly, body suspension, also known as flesh-hook suspension, refers to an “act of hanging the human body from hooks inserted into the skin” (Forsyth & Simpson, 2008:367). The hooks are usually attached to ropes or chains that are then anchored to a rig or a structure above the person, that is suspended in the air (Oddie, 1986:95). The practice of body suspension originated in Southern India and was used as a way



to demonstrate devotion and achieve spiritual purification (Oddie, 1986:98-103). Body suspension is seen as a more radical form of body modification (Horton, 2013:115-116).

### 1.3 Historical Background

The allure of the extraordinary, the mysterious, and the different has captivated humanity for centuries, fueling people's fascination with those who possess unusual bodies or talents (Fordham, 2007:210). Public displays of individuals with physical differences and unusual talents for entertainment purposes have a long and rich history, dating back to ancient times (Backstorm, 2012:682). Stone Age cave paintings have already revealed representations of horrendous human-anomalies, depicting the praise of those with abnormal looking physical characteristics (Kerchy & Zittlau, 2012:3). People with physical or behavioral differences were commonly referred to as 'freaks,' 'monsters,' 'lusus naturae,' or 'human oddities' (Bogdan, 1988<sup>1</sup>). No matter the name, individuals exhibiting unique physical, behavioral, or mental characteristics have always been viewed as deviating from societal norms.

Not so long ago, the traditional form of freak shows gained widespread popularity in both the U.S. and on the European continent (Bogdan, 1988; Kerchy & Zittlau, 2012). Freak shows became known in Europe as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Eklund, 2019:179), but peaked in popularity in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Backstorm, 2012:682). American freak shows were inspired by English fairs, where almost all forms of human variation could be seen for a fee (Bogdan, 1988). Both types of shows were similar in that they featured people with physical and behavioral abnormalities as the main attraction. However, they varied greatly in the treatment of the so-called 'freaks' or 'lusus naturae' and public's social acceptance of diversity (Bogdan, 1988; Kerchy & Zittlau, 2012).

As cities expanded, the interest in and the popularity of freak shows also grew (Gerber, 1990:17), thanks to various advertising campaigns and performance techniques that fueled public curiosity and interest (Backstorm, 2012:683). The freak shows were marketed as educational and inspiring, featuring live human performers as the main attraction of the exhibits (Fordham, 2007:208). Phineas Taylor Barnum

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<sup>1</sup> The page numbers for Robert Bogdan's (1988) book: "Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit" was unavailable at the time of writing this thesis.

(known as P. T. Barnum) became one of the most influential characters who contributed to the growing popularity of the freak shows (Tyrrell, 2020:171). P. T. Barnum's dime museum eventually became the most famous amusement site, where freaks were the main attraction and the center of entertainment in mainstream American culture (Bogdan, 1988). They toured around Europe in 1844-1847 and visited royal courts in many European countries (Putova, 2018:95). The dime museums, that were previously known for all kinds of exhibits, later gained recognition for their freak shows. Showcasing freaks for entertainment was followed by the travelling circus, the fairs, amusement parks, and carnivals (Bogdan, 1988).

The fall in popularity of freak shows was caused by several reasons. Shifts in societal norms and attitudes, advances in science, as well as various reforms and activism efforts led the concept of monstrosity to become both acceptable and medicalized. The deformed body was consequently removed from public view and from society (Brodesco, 2014:295). Social attitudes towards the display of ethnic and mentally impaired groups underwent a change as a result of activism for their rights (Backstrom, 2012:683). Moreover, the expansion of exploratory efforts in the continents, and the legends and myths surrounding lost tribes and unique individuals, were challenged, and proven to be unfound (Bogdan, 1988). Therefore, the public perception of these exhibitions shifted towards disapproval and condemnation (Backstrom, 2012: 683). Freaks became pitiful creatures in need of medical assistance rather than fascinating and entertaining performers (Cross, 2021:6). The travelling circus, museum displays, amusement parks, fairs, and carnivals as a traditional form of entertainment was additionally replaced by television and movies as a new preferred leisure activity for the mainstream population (Backstorm, 2012:683). On the other hand, European based freak shows noticed their decline in the post-war period. While Nazism grew in popularity, immigration of foreigners who could take parts in the freak business was restricted (Putova, 2018:101). In response to this disappearance, the introduction of horror movies provided society with new, fictional monsters like Dracula, Frankenstein, the Mummy, vampires, and werewolves. This allowed for voyeurism to be fulfilled through a screen (Brodesco, 2014:295). In this way, while traditional forms of freak shows slowly disappeared from mainstream society, freakishness remained (Cross, 2021:xii).

## 2. Literature Review

As previously mentioned, freak shows have held a significant and controversial place in popular culture, reflecting societal attitudes towards deviance, diversity, and human difference throughout history (Bogdan, 1988). Freak shows are, however, frequently associated solely with exploitation, victimization, and dehumanization (Lorek-Jezynska, 2021:159). This is due to the notoriety of the traditional form of freak shows, which have been widely considered as vulgar, despicable, and lacking in refinement (Bogdan, 1988). Although modern day freak shows have adopted elements from the traditional ones, they are, nonetheless, more diverse in the type of content, the medium used, and the message they aim to convey (Fordham, 2007:210).

Previous research conducted on freak shows primarily focuses on the historical perspective (Bogdan, 1988; Durbach, 2010). Moreover, the current understanding and significance of modern-day freak shows is very limited due to the lack of research conducted on these exhibitions. While a growing body of literature has emerged in the BDSM subculture (Turley et al., 2017; Weiss, 2015; Forsyth & Simpson, 2008; Sihvonen & Harviainen, 2010), the research on radical body modifications such as scarification<sup>2</sup>, body suspension, branding, cutting, and flesh stapling remains an under-researched phenomena (Horton, 2013:115; Forsyth & Simpson, 2008). Many of the BDSM communities organize shows and events which can be considered freak performances due to the extreme and unusual nature these show portray (Faccio et al., 2020:1644). Additionally, body suspension subculture has a strong overlap with the BDSM community (D'Avalon, 2020:3), thus identifying the existing knowledge gained from previous research on how the BDSM and body suspension subcultures function and how they understand their experiences can contribute to broaden the understanding of various forms of freak shows.

### 2.1 Pain and Pleasure

People who are unfamiliar with BDSM and freak performances often assume it is an unpleasant experience solely consisted of violence and torture (Weiss, 2015:4). Individuals immersed in the BDSM scene nonetheless highlight the positive aspects

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<sup>2</sup> Scarification is a form of modification that involves the practice of intentionally creating scars on the body, through cutting or burning the skin, for cultural, aesthetic, or personal reasons (Scarification: History, Process, Aftercare, and More, n.d., Breuner et al., 2017:1, Ayeni et al., 2007:217)

that motivate them in the engagement of painful acts (Forsyth & Simpson, 2008:370-371; Turley et al., 2017:329). Pleasure and enjoyment have been found as fundamental components experienced by everyone involved (Simula, 2019:222; Williams, 2009:211; O’Doherty & Cherrington, 2023:1292). Furthermore, Turley et al. (2017:329) suggests that sexual, emotional, and physical pleasure is a primary driver in BDSM experiences. In a similar vein, Lindemann (2011:157) depicted BDSM is commonly used for more therapeutic purposes describing how practitioners use BDSM to deal with past trauma or sexual repression. Moreover, participants acknowledged psychological revitalization and recovery stemming from its practice (Lindemann, 2011:157). Body suspension, on the other hand, has been more associated with spirituality and profound euphoric pleasure (Forsyth & Simpson, 2008:370)

Moreover, freak show practitioners can view pain as pleasure, humiliation can be considered enjoyable, and performativity is viewed as authentic (Sihvonen & Harviainen, 2020:12; Forsyth & Simpson, 2008:371); all of which demonstrate the attraction of these performances for practitioners and their motivations to engage in the scene. Hurt and harm is however to be distinguished (Holt, 2016:923). Hurt can result in enjoyment, whereas harm is to be avoided as it can cause damage and is viewed as a negative characteristic (Holt, 2016:923). Moreover, even though people often assume pain is only a negative emotion, body suspension performers rather see it as an “opportunity for personal growth and spirituality” (Horton, 2013:125) and BDSM practitioners can perceive it as pleasurable (Sihvonen & Harviainen, 2020:12).

Performers engaged in the freak scene can also find pleasure in the negotiation of boundaries. For instance, Pitagora (2013:32) observed how some performers may test the limits of what has been agreed upon without breaching them, unless transgression is what is desired. In similar vein, Forsyth and Simpson (2008:371) noted how performers might just simply try to push their personal physical boundaries as far as their bodies allow. On this account, set rules and boundaries are particularly important to be understood by participating members (Holt, 2016:923), especially since many performers seek pleasure in testing their limits and negotiating boundaries (Fanghanel, 2020:273; Forsyth & Simpson, 2008:371).

## 2.2 The Importance of Safety

Previous research has heavily focused on the aspect of safety (Ernulf & Innala, 1995; Forsyth & Simpson; 2008, Weiss, 2015), as risk and danger are, after all, factors present in most freak performances (Turley et al., 2017:328; Forsyth & Simpson, 2008:378). Yet, practitioners still strive for controlled and consensual practices (Weiss, 2015:4). Shibari bondage can, for example, become easily dangerous when practiced without safety precautions as the rope can restrict air flow and vessels, and damage nerves (Ernulf & Innala, 1995:650). The use of safe words, symbols, pre-scene negotiations and rules is thus critical to allow for safe practice (Weiss, 2015:4; Ernulf & Innala, 1995:650; Forsyth & Simpson, 2008:378).

To ensure this risk-free environment, BDSM and body suspension practitioners implement various ways to educate themselves (O'Doherty & Cherrington, 2023:1290). Safety measures workshops are highly promoted in these communities (Ernulf & Innala, 1995:650). Commonly, experienced BDSM practitioners mentor those with less experience (Bennett, 2020:172). The focus of these workshops is to promote education and to acquire specific skills (Spratt et al., 2019:57). Workshops can focus on basic medical knowledge, proper techniques, (Bennett, 2020:172), or address issues such as consent perplexity (Boyd-Rogers et al., 2022:3171).

Consent holds special significance, as it emphasizes the importance of participants' agreement to engage in potentially painful or violent activities (Dunkley & Brotto, 2020:660). Given this, consent distinguishes BDSM practices from criminal behavior to expression of desire (Newmark, 2010:149). Negotiation of play, mutually understood safe words and symbols, communication of desires and boundaries, and protection of harm are key safety measures participants discuss prior to BDSM practice (Holt, 2016). Engaging in this conversation about consent increases the safety and well-being of the individuals involved (Dunkley & Brotto, 2020:674). However, Fanghanel (2020:282) suggests that consent is a gray area rather than a black and white issue as it is surrounded by trust and risk. With this in mind, consent violations still occur in BDSM practices (Fanghanel, 2020:270).

### 2.3 Stigma, Criminalization and Normalization

As many authors criticize, both BDSM and body modification practices are highly stigmatized, misunderstood, and marginalized (Turley, 2022; Horton, 2013; Keagy, 2017; Lane, 2017; Williams, 2009; Bennett, 2020; Wright, 2006). BDSM activities are especially misunderstood in terms of consent and pain infliction (Turley, 2022:3), while in body suspension the focus on the physical can overshadow the emotional, personal, and spiritual experience (Horton, 2013:131). The misunderstanding of not seeing pain as pleasure, but rather as abusive, is especially controversial; leading to the criminalization of such behaviors in many instances (Bennett, 2020:164). Furthermore, practitioners often breach social, sexual, and gender norms, resulting in a deeper problematization of this subculture (Turley, 2022:3). Stigmatization of these acts strongly impacts the individual experience, as well as the legal consequences (Turley, 2022:3). However, the representations of BDSM practices are becoming more mainstreamed within the popular culture (Weiss, 2006:112). For example, the trilogy *50 Shades of Grey* became extremely popular within mainstream culture. Moreover, the criminalization of BDSM has been critiqued for being incompatible with the core values of freedom, privacy, and liberty (Anthanassoulis, 2002); for treating BDSM as violent rather than pleasurable; and for its simplification of the nature of consent (Bennett, 2020:165-166). Nevertheless, BDSM and body suspension practitioners face severe discrimination and legal sanctions (Williams, 2009:208; Horton, 2013:116).

### 2.4 Community

Keeping this in mind, the BDSM community advocates the motto “Safe, Sane, and Consensual” or “Risk-Aware Consensual Kink” (Holt, 2016; Zambelli, 2017:479). As such, practitioners thrive to achieve a safe environment with the emphasis on boundary maintenance and consent (Holt, 2016:922; Fanghanel, 2019; Forsyth & Simpson, 2008:378; Lane, 2017:9). With this in mind, violation of rules occurs and is handled from within the community due to the stigma received from the mainstream culture (Holt, 2016:917). This approach allows the community to maintain their own norms and values without external interference, but it can also lead to unequal treatment and lack of accountability for those in power within the community (Holt, 2016:927-928).

### 3. Theory

The overall purpose of this thesis is to explore the motivations and experiences of contemporary freak show performers along with their successful navigation of risky pursuits. To understand this, play theory and the concept of edgework will be used to make sense of performers' perception of social norms and thrill-seeking behaviors. By examining these connections, a deeper understanding of the performing individuals is indicated as well as the subcultural community at large. Play theory and edgework help with understanding what drives individuals in the involvement of risky acts and making understanding of their perspectives. By incorporating edgework, this work seeks to explore how these performers perceive the boundaries of social norms and expectations while pushing their bodies to the limits by engaging in high-risk activities.

#### 3.1 Play Theory

In this section I will introduce play theory mostly developed by authors like Johan Huizinga, Roger Caillois, and Miguel Sicart. The following section thus introduces an overview of play theory mostly from these authors' perspectives. Firstly, I introduce play theory. Secondly, I clarify the role of play in culture and provide its significance in such context. I then present play characteristics that emerge in previous literature. And lastly, I explore the concept of dark play which recently received increased attention in relation to BDSM performances (Trammel, 202:37) as they entail elements of risk and danger.

##### 3.1.1 What is Play?

To play is to live (Sutton-Smith, 2008:95; Sicart, 2014:1). Huizinga (2014:28) advocates that play is a fundamental aspect of human culture: that is to say, play is a source of joy and gratification (Caillois, 2001:6). This acquired pleasure is then conveyed to our everyday lives (Sutton-Smith, 2008:95). Sicart (2014:5) suggests that not only is play an essential part of our lives and our well-being, but through play we experience the world around us and feel the power of freedom. Therefore, an activity we would be forced to do would no longer be considered play, but rather an obligation (Caillois, 2001:6). As such, Huizinga (2014:9) endorses that it is not just a simple, frivolous activity; but a deep and meaningful feature of human experience. It can

allow individuals to transcend the ordinary (Huizinga, 2014:4), and breakout from responsibility and routine (Caillois, 2001:6) into a state of heightened imagination, creativity, and pleasure (Huizinga, 2014; Caillois, 2001; Sicart, 2014). This implies, play is an activity that is separate from everyday life. Furthermore, it can inspire individuals to explore and negotiate their personal values, such as self-expression or personal growth (Sicart, 2014:5), but also it can foster social cohesion by bringing individuals together who share their differences from the outside world (Caillois, 2001:4). To summarize, through playing we can find meaning in life (Huizinga, 2014), we can express our desires or our aversions (Sicart, 2014:6), and we can develop meaningful social groups (Caillois, 2001:4).

### 3.1.2 Play and Culture

Huizinga (2014) emphasizes play is interlinked with culture. He argues that play has been around since before civilization and it could be seen already in primitive, savage societies (Huizinga, 2014:15-16). Since then, play has been a part of human development and culture, intertwined with religion and rituals (Huizinga, 2014:15-16). He further posits that play is not only a leisure activity but more importantly, an essential element of human culture that has been refining civilization and influencing art, law, language, religion, and other areas of human culture (Huizinga, 2014). Play is a fundamental aspect of society that is present in all cultures and all periods of history (Huizinga, 2014). Through play, individuals are thus able to get involved in the world around them, and develop new skills and abilities (Huizinga, 2014). In this sense, play can be seen as a vital element of social learning and personal growth in connection with cultural evolution (Huizinga, 2014).

### 3.1.3 Defining Play Characteristics

Several play characteristics can be found in previous literature (Huizinga, 2014; Caillois, 2001; Sicart, 2014). However, I will be focusing mainly on Sicart's (2014) play interpretations, as they seem to best fit contemporary reality. These features are nevertheless accompanied by Huizinga's and Caillois' contributions. In the next sections I will provide an overview of the nature of play and the characteristics relevant for this thesis.



Firstly, according to Huizinga (2014:7-8) and Caillois (2001:6), play is characterized by its voluntary nature, meaning that individuals willingly engage in play activities. In other words, play is not imposed or forced upon them; it arises from their intrinsic motivation and desire to participate (Huizinga, 2014:7-8). This voluntary aspect of play allows individuals to exercise their autonomy and engage in play for the sake of enjoyment, pleasure, and self-expression (Caillois, 2001:6). However, Sicart's (2014:114-115) perspective of this attribute slightly differs. He argues that play is not always a voluntary activity in the sense that individuals are not always in full control of the play experience. For instance, play is often situated in specific contexts, and influenced by external factors, which can limit players' agency and choice (Sicart, 2014:6-7). Nevertheless, Sicart (2014) recognizes the importance of players' active engagement and the ability to make choices for themselves.

As Huizinga (2014:8) states, play entails "...a stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own." This implies, play is contextual, that is, it happens only in certain contexts; such as at specific locations, or with particular people and objects (Sicart, 2014:6-7). For example, a playground or a performing stage can signal play. Similarly, Caillois (2001:6) implies that play is a separate activity from every day's ordinance. This contextual characteristic is closely linked with its rules (Sicart, 2014:8). In this sense, rules can serve as a framework within which play operates and help shape the play experience within a given context. This means, rules "...allow the creation and shared identification of a context of play" (Sicart, 2014:8). While Huizinga (2014:11) endorses the importance of rules, Sicart (2014:8), on the other hand, implements their development in that they can be flexible and interpretive. As we are evolving, the rules for play keep adapting with us (Sicart, 2014:8). Regardless, rules can provide meaning to play experiences, while allowing for the exploration and creation of new social and cultural norms. They are thus changed frequently, yet they are needed in all contexts of play (Sicart, 2014:8) as well as location, people, and things (2014:6-7).

Moreover, play is appropriative, as it dominates the context in which it occurs (Sicart, 2014:11-12). In other words, the setting changes to play when the latter occurs, such as a stage becoming a playground during a freak show performance, or a rope turning into a 'toy' when used in a shibari performance. In sum, the appropriative aspect of play highlights its ability to draw from and transform elements of the surrounding

world, allowing players to engage in imaginative and creative experiences. “Play is disruptive as a consequence of being appropriate” (Sicart, 2014:14). Meaning, it borrows elements from other domains of life, such as cultural practices, objects, or roles, and incorporates them into the play context (Sicart, 2014:14-15). This play’s ability to challenge, disrupt, or temporarily suspend established norms, rules, and conventions can, however, have a dark side as it may “...force an emotional response in those who do not recognize they are actually playing (Sicart, 2014:15). Having said that, by breaking away from routine and disrupting structures, play can open up a space for creativity, self-expression, and transformative experiences (Huizinga, 2014; Caillois, 2001; Sicart, 2014).

Hence, play is personal, creative, and autotelic (Sicart, 2014:16-18). Its personal value can be found in the freedom to choose how to play, what to play, and whom to play with. Individuals can therefore decide to engage in activities that resonate with their personal desires, needs, and aspirations to express their identity, preferences, and agency (Sicart, 2014:17-18). The creative aspect refers to this freedom to express oneself and engage in exploration of limitless possibilities through its performance (Sicart, 2014:17). It can inspire individuals to explore new ideas, think creatively, and engage in activities that foster innovation and self-expression (Sicart, 2014:17). Finally, play is inherently autotelic as it is an activity pursued for sheer enjoyment and pleasure rather than for any external reward (Sicart, 2014:16-17). Thus, the focus is on the process of play itself, not on achieving a specific outcome or goal (Sicart, 2014:16-17). This implies that the personal, creative, and autotelic characteristics of play make it important for human culture, as it allows individuals to creatively and spontaneously engage in activities that contribute to people’s happiness and cultural development.

Sicart (2014:67) proposes that play is unconventionally aesthetically pleasing. For instance, as Huizinga (2014:7-10) suggests, through the creation of something beautiful, such as art, a music performance, or poetry. Play can also be beautiful in the sense that individuals fully immerse themselves in play and become fully lost in the experience. It has a captivating quality that both inspires us and encourages us to be creative (Huizinga, 2014:10). In this sense, Sicart (2014:61) notes how playful elements create memorable experiences and reveal new ways of thinking or seeing the world.

Lastly, Sicart (2014:11) introduces play's carnivalesque characteristic. In this regard, play has the ability to create a temporary space where social norms, hierarchies, and expectations are subverted, inverted, or suspended. This aspect of play challenges established social structures and allows for moments of freedom, creativity, and liberation (Sicart, 2014:3-4). Individuals engaged in this form of play can thus explore and challenge themselves, as well as their personal and societal boundaries by temporarily engaging in activities that may be unconventional, or even transgressive (Sicart, 2014: 3-4). Play can also be carnivalesque in the sense that it can mock events or institutions (Sicart, 2014:3-4). Furthermore, Sicart (2014:3-4) observes how this form of play engages with darker, riskier, and potentially harmful traits. Here, freak show performances could be considered a good example of this carnivalesque characteristic, as they often thrive in shocking responses through the engagement in risky acts.

To conclude, it is important to state that not all the abovementioned characteristics are necessarily present in all play, as the nature and expression of play can vary greatly depending on the individual, the cultural context, and the specific situation or activity involved.

#### 3.1.4 Dark Play

When we think of play, it often evokes positive feelings. We usually associate it with happiness, joy, bliss, and cheerfulness. However, according to O'Grady (2012, 2013), play can have both a light side and a dark side. It can range from being humorous, theatrical, enjoyable, and socially engaging to being ominous, unsettling, and even fatal (O'Grady, 2012:90; Trammell, 2020:33-36). While this side of play is often solely associated with its carnivalesque nature (Trammell, 2020:37), it can also result in what is known as "dark play" (Sicart, 2014:23). The aforementioned disruptive and carnivalesque elements of play to temporarily suspend societal norms, rules, and customs can lead individuals to exploration of taboo subjects, controversial ideas, and intense emotions that might be unsettling or discomforting to some (Sicart, 2014:23). In this regard, it can delve deeper into darker aspects of human experience and emotions, notably pain, torture, and violence (Trammell, 2020:37). As such, it can cause physical or emotional damage, nevertheless, this type of play can remain

pleasurable (Sicart, 2014:3; O’Grady, 2012:90). BDSM acts, for example, have been considered a form of play that is torturous yet enjoyable (Trammell, 2020:37).

The disruptiveness that dark play demonstrates in the retreat from the prevailing culture provides opportunities for both individual and collective experimentation (O’Grady, 2012:97-100). This temporal escape from the constraints of societal expectations can provoke individuals to challenge the mainstream and explore aspects of psyche that may be repressed in conventional settings (O’Grady, 2012:97). As such, dark play can mischievously engage with exploration of societal boundaries and challenge its conventional expectations. Moreover, it can also foster creativity and can lead to new cultural practices and forms of expression (O’Grady, 2012: 100-101).

### 3.2 Edgework

The term ‘edgework’ was first introduced by Hunter S. Thompson (1971). Edgework as a concept was then further developed by a sociologist Stephen Lyng (1990) and, subsequently, taken to heart by a host of cultural criminologists Keith Hayward. This section provides an overview of edgework mostly derived from Lyng’s theorization of the concept as his work provides valuable insights into the motivations and experiences of individuals who actively seek out intense, high-risk activities (Lyng, 1990, 2014). Hence, this perspective helps us understand the psychological and emotional rewards that individuals derive from engaging in edgework, and why they willingly expose themselves to potential harm.

Lyng’s (1990) original approach to edgework explores Marx’s analysis on alienation and Mead’s standpoint on the spontaneous, impulsive, and unpredictable “I.” Lyng (1990) argues that individuals who are excessively impacted by oversocialization suppress their individuality and autonomy. Oversocialization has been previously conceptualized as a “process in which the social world has become so reified that it becomes completely opaque to individual understanding and action” (Batuik & Sacks in Lyng, 1990:870). This means, many individuals are influenced by the modern world societal values, norms, and expectations to a point where their individuality and autonomy are restrained. As Lyng (1990:852) contends, this is especially pronounced in Western societies. This process can lead to conformity as individuals may prioritize fitting in over expressing their unique perspectives. Consequently, those affected by oversocialization can experience feelings of disconnection from themselves, others,

and society at large (Lyng, 1990:876). This is what Marx calls ‘alienation.’ Lyng (1990:870-871) argues that many individuals do not conform to oversocialization and alienation, and therefore seek to escape the structural conditions that support them. Lyng (1990:870) claims that to cope with impacts of alienation and reification, individuals employ multiple strategies. For instance, play (Huizinga, 2014; Caillois, 2001) serves as a resistance to those feelings of disconnect due to its spontaneous, creative, impulsive, and rewarding attributes. Lyng (1990, 2005), however, focuses on engagement in voluntary risk taking, which he calls doing edgework, as an escape from the structural conditions supporting oversocialization. Furthermore, Lyng (1990:871) indicates that individuals are seeking experiences that are both self-determining and self-actualizing. In this sense, both edgework (Lyng, 1990) and play (Huizinga, 2014; Caillois, 2001; Sicart, 2014) conform.

Lyng (1990:852) defines edgework as an engagement in voluntary risk-taking activities. The concept of edgework seeks to clarify and understand why people are interested in risky pursuits and what draws them to these types of hazardous behaviors even though there seems to be no clear reward (Lyng, 2014:444). The fundamental aspect of edgework, as well as its special significance, is with an ‘edge,’ which is used to describe a boundary between life or death, sanity or insanity, consciousness and unconsciousness, order and disorder, form and formlessness, or full functionality and permanent disability (Lyng, 2014:448-449). Crossing the edge implies the latter. While Lyng (1990) only considers edgework in relation to high-risk physical activities, more recent research has adjusted the interpretation and included emotional experiences alongside physically risky behaviors (Naegler & Salman, 2016:360). Edgeworkers involved in such activities try to get as close as possible to a boundary line without transgressing it (Lyng, 1990:857; Lyng, 2014:454).

Edgeworkers find pleasure along with other intense emotions in negotiating this edge or a boundary (Lyng, 1990). Engaged participants insist edgework activities produce unique sensations, specifically depicted as “self-realization,” “self-actualization,” and “self-determination” (Lyng, 1990:860). Typically, these sensations are followed by a multitude of other emotions, such as fear, exhilaration, and omnipotence depending on the stage of engagement in edgework (Lyng, 1990:860). This sensation is also accompanied by altered perception, consciousness, and reality (Lyng, 1990:860-861). Edgeworkers describe these experiences as more authentic compared to their daily

lives, these notions are especially heightened when approaching above mentioned edge (Lyng, 1990:861).

The ability to control the seemingly uncontrollable, to govern situations that verge on complete chaos, or that other people who are not edgeworkers would find unmanageable is an ability edgeworkers are particularly fond of (Lyng, 1990:858-860). To be able to possess this special skill, edgeworkers seek to constantly develop and master the abilities (Lyng, 1990:859). For instance, planning and preparation are considered integral parts of edgework, as it helps edgeworkers to develop their “survival instinct” (Lyng, 1990:874).

From all of the above, we can see that the approach and negotiation of boundaries, development of special skills and intense emotional sensations can be seen as the edgework experience. While the need to escape the feeling of alienation can be seen as a motivation in edgework activities, the experience can be understood as the reason for continuous engagement. Lyng further explores Goffman’s concept of action and conforms with the importance that individuals play in shaping their own experiences and identities and how these experiences contribute to social cultural significance (Lyng, 2014).

With this in mind, Lyng’s interpretation of edgework is predominantly focused on men as he claims men are “more likely than females to have an illusory sense of control over faithful endeavors because of the socialization pressures on males to develop a skill orientation towards their environment” (1990:872-873). Women, however, not only take risks and develop the skills required for such activities, but they are also often forced to undertake risky situations as a consequence of living in patriarchal and misogynistic societies (Naegler & Salman, 2016:361). Ferrel et al. (2015:75), however, argue that women are not only as interested as men in high-risk pursuits, but they might be involved in these activities for the same reasons as men. Albeit, this participation is more complex as it involves many involuntary circumstances, such as consequences of victimization or caused stigmatization that is greater than of men (Naegler & Salman, 2020:361-366). Additionally, many female edgeworkers tend to rather seek more of “emotional self-expression, control, and fulfillment of erotic desires” (Naegler & Salman, 2020:367) which can be related to historical suppression of their sexual freedom and sexual expressiveness. Recognizing

and addressing gender differences is thus important as they can influence participants' experiences and motivations in pursuing high-risk activities.

### 3.2.1 Edgework and Play

Edgework can be seen as a type of play on the darker side of the spectrum, as it involves several similar characteristics (Lyng, 1990; Caillois, 2001; Sicart, 2014; O'Grady, 2012, 2013; Huizinga, 2014). Both edgework and play embrace the significance of voluntary participation, emotional reward, and challenging individual limits through their experiences (Lyng, 2014; Sicart, 2014). Furthermore, edgework often takes the form of dark play, as it involves potential risks of physical or mental harm (Lyng, 2014; Sicart, 2014:3). In the context of unconventional or deviant performances, such as freak shows, edgework could be understood as a central play element as performers may engage in exploration of their body limits or cultural perceptions of social norms. Edgework and play can also be described as a way of testing the limits of one's mind and body in a free and creative way (Lyng, 2014; Sicart, 2014). Through such experiences, individuals are able to escape the ordinary and explore new ways of being in the world (Lyng, 2014; Sicart, 2014).

Both play and edgework stress the value that community plays in its experiences (Lyng, 1990; Sicart, 2014; Huizinga, 2014). Even though the felt experiences carry personal value (Lyng, 1990; Huizinga, 2014:2; Sicart, 2014:18), their worth of being shared with others holds special significance (Huizinga, 2014). According to Lyng (1990:869), edgeworkers create social connections with one another through a mutual appreciation for their edgework skills, forming a type of exclusive social group. Just as edgework creates social connections, play (Sicart, 2014:85) is a social activity that connects individuals with each other. Likewise, Huizinga (2014:12) states "...the feeling of being 'apart together' in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual play." Similarly, Lyng (1990:869-867) suggests, the community is particularly important to those who feel alienated from the mainstream culture. As such, forming close bonds with individuals who share similar experiences can lead to a sense of social support and belonging. This further indicates that feelings of personal growth and discovery can be enhanced by such a sense of acceptance and supportive community (Lyng, 1990).

## 4. Methodology

Building upon the theoretical framework laid out in the previous chapter, I next delve into the methodological choices employed. As previously mentioned, the purpose of this thesis is to explore motivations and experiences of freak show performers with the use of play theory and edgework. For this reason, I conduct thematic analysis on data obtained from ten semi-structured interviews with freak show performers from the Czech scene. This chapter outlines the specific steps taken in this thesis, from the selection of interview participants and collection to the coding strategies. Moreover, I will reflect on my own positionality and reflexivity, the ethical considerations that have arisen throughout this research, and lastly, the limitations that occurred in the process of writing this thesis.

### 4.1 Entering the Field

To ensure validity and reliability of this research, my own positionality and reflexivity must be discussed. This section thus describes my own assumptions, biases, and background; and how they may shape my analysis. My interest in this research was first ignited through the observation of a freak performance. During this past summer, 2022, my brother, a business owner, convinced me to come to a festival, *Obscene Extreme*, with his vegan food stand. The festival has been annually hosted in Trutnov, Czechia since 1999. It focuses on extreme metal subgenres, such as grind core, death metal, and also hardcore punk. I had previously heard many wild stories about the festival, as my brother has been involved both as a fan and a vendor for many years. I must admit that I had my reservations about coming along to help him sell vegan burgers to those ‘extreme freaks.’ Little did I know the atmosphere during the whole festival would excite me, as well as inspire me for this thesis’s work. Already on the first evening, after a full day of extreme music, freak shows were scheduled to perform at around midnight. As I was tired from working all day, I was quite reluctant to go and see these so-called freaks perform on stage. My brother, however, pushed me, gave me a beer, and sent me out with words, “just go enjoy it!” As I had no previous knowledge or an idea of what a freak show could be, I also had no expectations. What I witnessed happening on that stage certainly shocked me, confused me, and left me thinking “What on earth did I just see!” The feeling did not leave me for a few days, but as time passed, I was more and more intrigued. Little did



I know back then, these exact feelings are what freak shows thrive to provoke in their audience. As I started researching freak shows and their history, trying to understand the appeal and controversy surrounding them, I was fascinated by their perplexity. How can something so disturbing and repulsive be so appealing? With this question in my mind, I delved deeper into the playfulness of these shows. My initial shock and subsequent intrigue indicate the power of the performers' ability to push societal boundaries, leading to the creation of a unique and thought-provoking experience for the viewer. However, I developed strong sympathy with these performers, wanting to represent them fairly, and make justice to them. As such, I recognize that there is a fine line between doing that and staying academic and true to the research question. I have consciously made every effort to balance my personal sympathies with maintaining academic rigor and objectivity throughout this research.

During the course of this thesis, I made a conscious effort to approach the research with an open mind, so I could gain a deeper understanding of how participants felt about their experiences. In doing so, I drew inspiration from Durkheim's sympathetic approach, which involves studying things with sympathy and without judgmentalism while also being mindful of all sensory inputs (Durkheim, 1995; Tutenges, 2023:20). This approach allowed me to remain objective throughout the research process. By keeping an open mind, I was able to uncover insights that would have been otherwise overlooked if I approached the research with preconceived biases.

## 4.2 Selection of Participants

Interview participants were selected based on a few criteria to allow for a comprehensive understanding of the motivations, experiences, and perspectives of freak show performers. First and foremost, the participation in freak performances in the Czech freak scene was essential in identifying the understanding and behaviors among this particular subculture. I have made one exception with a participant from the UK, nevertheless, this individual also performed in the Czech freak scene. The reason behind this inclusion is to gain a new perspective and allow for a broader range of experiences and insights to be captured within the research. This can, furthermore, provide a more nuanced and diverse understanding of the subculture and its practices (Hannerz & Tutenges, 2022:6-8). Moreover, including a diverse set of interviewees may enhance generalizability (De Villiers et al., 2022:12). Nonetheless, interviewees

were from various regions of the country, but the majority of them performed in Prague as it is home to the largest freak subcultural population.

The selected participants are involved in different types of ‘freak activities’ to ensure inclusivity and to collect a wider range of data from different freak experiences. Specifically, participants engage in BDSM, Shibari, body modifications, body suspension, freak and side shows, scare acting, fire shows, fetish burlesque, and other shows depicting extreme or deviant elements. Most participants perform in a variety of these shows as the freak scene is interconnected and these individuals often look for new and exciting experiences.

The gender, sexuality, and age of the participants varied which provided a diverse range of perspectives. However, it should be noted that all participants were white, which is reflective of the general population in the Czech Republic. The age of the participants was not a determinant factor for the analysis, and therefore, it was not specifically inquired about. Nonetheless, it is important to mention that all interviewees were over the age of 18. By selecting participants in this manner, the study aimed to provide a diverse range of perspectives and experiences within the Czech freak subculture.

### 4.3 Data Collection

The material for this thesis consisted of ten semi-structured interviews as the understanding of performers’ experiences is best understood by people who are immersed within the sub-culture and who themselves take part in these unconventional shows. The use of interviews allows for an in-depth exploration of participants’ perspectives and experiences, as well as the opportunity to gather rich and detailed data (Lamont & Swidler, 2014:158-159). For this reason, I have decided to conduct semi-structured interviews to gain a deeper understanding of individuals’ involvement in freak shows and their perspectives on navigation of risks. Furthermore, my knowledge was enhanced by the previously discussed observation of a freak performance.

To gather the initial batch of interviews, internal connections were utilized. Furthermore, interview participants were recommended by other interview participants, applying what is known as the snowball sampling in qualitative research

(Naderifar et al., 2017:1). Additionally, other interview participants were contacted through various forms of social media and websites. The response from potential interviewees was largely positive, as many expressed a desire to share their experiences, with one individual stating, “Hello, of course it will be possible to schedule an interview, we are exhibitionists, we love to talk about ourselves!”

All interviews were conducted online using a variety of video communication tools, such as Zoom or Google Meet. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and translated into English. Moreover, the atmosphere of the interview setting was very honest and relaxed, providing a comfortable space for participants to share their experiences and perspectives without feeling judged or intimidated. This allowed for a more authentic and diverse range of responses, ultimately enriching the study’s findings.

The interview process was constantly changing with new ideas, concepts, and gathered information coming into light. Interview questions were designed to be open-ended, sensitive, and understandable to allow for generation of rich data (Gill et al., 2008:292). However, the interview guide was flexible and if during the interview a topic that was not included in the interview guide was of interest, it was further discussed and developed. Prior to each interview, participants were informed about the purpose and the aim of the study, and ethical principles such as anonymity and confidentiality. Participants were also asked for their consent and informed that they had the right to end the interview at any time. At the end of the interviews, participants were thanked for their time and asked if they had anything else to add. This allowed interviewees to express any thoughts or ideas that they felt were important but may not have been addressed by the interviewer. Additionally, this approach can lead to the discovery of new, unforeseen ideas (Gill et al., 2008:293).

Lastly, it should be noted that the interview participants were very passionate about their contribution to this study. They were thrilled about presenting their perspectives and sharing their experiences, which are often hidden from the dominant culture. Their enthusiasm and eagerness to participate in the study highlight the importance of amplifying marginalized voices and recognizing the value of diverse perspectives in research.

## 4.4 Coding and Analyzing the Data

The approach taken in this study draws inspiration from phenomenology and employs thematic analysis as its primary method. Thematic analysis, as described by Hammersley and Atkinson (1983), is a qualitative analytic method for identifying and analyzing themes within empirical data. The gathered data is analyzed in relation to theoretical perspectives and previous research in the field.

The analysis began during the interview process itself as all Czech interviews were transcribed and translated from Czech to English. By conducting and transcribing the interviews myself, I had a good idea of the common themes that could be used for the analysis. Once all the data was translated, I re-read it and identified common words and phrases, color-coded each pattern, and made notes on significant points. I then grouped the data into smaller themes and later into bigger ones.

Further on, I began to evaluate the information I had gathered in light of the selected theoretical viewpoints, play and edgework, and previous research. Based on my research questions, I decided to divide the data into sub-codes which led me to identify the three major themes, each of which was then subdivided into smaller groups to give the analysis section a unified feel. Moreover, I focused on searching for similarities and differences in my dataset which were later presented in my analysis. The three themes that emerged from the data were: motivations to engage in the freak scene, experiences of freak show performers, and control of associated risks in the freak performances. By grouping the data into these themes, I was able to explore the ways in which play and edgework manifest in the participants' understanding of their own shows.

The coding process involved continued re-reading of the material in both the original language and the translated version in order to identify and correct any discrepancies or errors. This diligent approach increased the accuracy and consistency of the final codes. The process of reviewing and refining the analysis continued until the codes and themes accurately captured the relevant content of collected data.

## 4.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were a significant aspect of this thesis. In qualitative studies, such as this, they are particularly noteworthy due to the in-depth nature of the process

(Arifin, 2018:30). In-depth interviews regarding the topic of unconventional performances including extreme elements with members of freak subcultural scene inherently raise ethical issues.

In order to avoid negative emotional impact, I gave the interviewees some level of control over the interviews and refrained from pushing them too much in any particular direction. My primary concern was protecting their emotional well-being and avoiding any distress. Therefore, I made every effort to create a safe and comfortable environment that encouraged them to openly share their experiences with me. The cautious approach I took during the interviews not only helped to protect the emotional integrity of the interviewees but also strengthened their engagement and openness in sharing their experiences. This, in turn, allowed me to accurately represent their perspectives, which was essential to the success of the study.

Furthermore, photographs of participants are presented in the analysis to give the reader a more visual presentation of the freak experience. It is, however, important to note, photographs were obtained from interview participants with consent as well as from the photographers. As such, photo credits are displayed beneath each photograph.

#### 4.5.1 Confidentiality & Anonymity

All potential interview participants were informed about the purpose and aim of this study along with a brief explanation about data collection. In addition, selected interview participants were all ensured about the anonymity and confidentiality of collected data. These two aspects were thereby maintained throughout the data collection and analysis process by refraining from disclosing their names and identities. Moreover, consent was gathered before each interview took place and participants were informed that they could withdraw from the interview at any time. Additionally, the gathered data was safely stored in an encrypted folder.

Since the freak community in the Czech Republic is relatively small, there is a risk that people could identify the respondents. Interview participants perform, however, in different locations within the Czech Republic, which limits the recognition factor. To reduce the chance that someone would recognize a quote used in the analysis, I changed their names to pseudonyms. This technique is commonly used in research

studies to protect the privacy of participants and maintain confidentiality (Arifin, 2018:31). Furthermore, this technique allows for more honest and accurate responses without fear of identification or retribution.

#### 4.6 Limitations

Throughout this research process, I have encountered several limitations including, conducting interviews from outside of the Czech Republic, not being a member of the subcultural community, and the scope of this research. However, these limitations have also provided opportunities for further exploration and future research.

As I was conducting the research from Sweden, yet all my interviewees were based abroad, I decided to utilize Zoom as the main tool to conduct interviews. This, however, introduced a limitation to my work. Poor internet connection or technical glitches have been present in a couple of my interviews, leading to disruptions and, at times, an uneasy flow of the interview. Non-verbal cues may have been more difficult to pick up, which can impact the quality of the collected data. While conducting interviews via Zoom have certain limitations, I was still able to listen to their tone of voice, watch their facial expressions, and other signs that are visible through the senses of sound and sight. Furthermore, being outside of the Czech Republic did not allow me to attend the shows in order to conduct a more ethnographic approach, which could have been beneficial in both gathering interview data and having notes from observations. However, the online format allowed for more flexibility in scheduling interviews.

As a researcher who is not actively immersed in the freak community, there may be certain nuances and intricacies of the community that I may not fully understand or appreciate. This can lead to a potential limitation in the study, as it may be difficult to accurately capture the complexities of the culture and its practices. Without firsthand experience, there may also be certain questions that I may not think to ask or areas of the community that I may overlook entirely. Additionally, there may be certain biases or assumptions that I bring into the research due to my position outside of the community, which may affect the way in which I interpreted and analyzed the data. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge these limitations and take steps to mitigate their impact on the research findings.

As interviews focus on individual experiences, the analysis of such data is very individual and not as generalizable (Lamont & Swidler, 2014:162). This means that the findings from interview-based research may not be applicable to larger populations or groups. However, they can provide valuable insights into the experiences and perspectives of individuals. Additionally, interviews can explore topics that are difficult to measure, such as emotions, beliefs, and motivations, which were crucial for the analysis of my thesis.

## 5. Results

My analysis consists of three sections where I explore the perspectives of freak show performers. In the first section, I analyze the motivations of freak performers to engage in the freak scene. Through the lens of play and edgework, I demonstrate their justifications of the exposure in potentially harmful activities. I will then explore how they make sense of their experiences and their desire for continuous engagement. Lastly, I present how freak performers navigate the risks inherent to performing in the freak shows. More specifically, I show how the participants find pleasure in testing their boundaries between safe and dangerous as a form of play (Huizinga, 2014; Sicart, 2014; Caillois, 2001) or edgework (Lyng, 1990, 2014).

### 5.1 Motivations of Freak Show Performers

In the first results' chapter, I will explore how and why individuals have started partaking in the freak scene. In this chapter, I argue that most performers chose to engage in freak shows to escape the mundane everyday reality for the purpose of entertainment, enjoyment, meaning, and socialization with likeminded people as a form of play (Caillois, 2001; Huizinga, 2014; Sicart, 2014). While this can be the case for some, other performers are drawn to the risks associated with performing in the freak scene as a type of dark play or edgework (Lyng, 1990, 2014; O'Grady, 2012, 2013; Sicart, 2014). As such, they challenge themselves and test their physical and mental capabilities.

#### 5.1.1 Escaping the Mundane

Freak show performers recall their engagement in the freak scene as a very personal decision. The attraction to risky pursuits was often stimulated by their desire to escape the ordinary reality of everyday life and experience something new and exciting. As Huizinga (2014:4) and Caillois (2001:6) propose, play has the ability to transcend the ordinary and breakout from routine and responsibility.

Fascination of the extreme, the different, the abnormal, the hard-core, or the aesthetic and beautiful was seen by performing individuals as commonly shared values. Huizinga (2014:10) suggests that play has a captivating quality because it creates an alternative reality where individuals step out of the ordinary world and rules. In this



sense, freak shows are a form of play because they provide a space for individuals to step outside of the norms and the rules of mainstream society and enter into a different reality. The excerpt below is an example of aesthetic fascination. The beautiful element here is that the individual became fully immersed in the act as she was captivated by the chaotic, unpredictable yet beautiful nature of the performance (Huizinga, 2014:10).

As for Shibari, the visual and the aesthetic really appealed to me. With the way it was connected to BDSM it didn't really make sense to me, how can there be such chaos, yet so gorgeous. Such a beautiful aesthetic.

Caroline, Shibari and BDSM performer



*Through the Lens of Ropes: Revealing the Aesthetic Beauty of Shibari, © Iva Žūr*

The aesthetic visuals seem to appeal to all participants involved with Shibari shows. Interviewees have described them as “visually captivating” and “unconventionally beautiful.” In this sense, Shibari performers may be drawn to these shows as a form of play that allows them to explore their artistic senses while also engaging in playful exploration of boundaries and risk-taking behaviors (Lyng, 1990, 2014). Elements of beauty can be seen in other freak performances and have been described as such by a few of my interviewees. But Shibari shows seem to have the most obvious

aesthetically pleasing visuals. However, freak performers can see beauty beyond its conventional manifestation. As for example, body suspension performers often depict more extreme and brutal elements in their shows which they similarly described as beautiful by both the performers and audience members. In this regard, play's captivating quality (Huizinga, 2014:10) can inspire performers to creatively engage in the creation of something unconventionally attractive or beautiful.

Visual appeal is not the only motive that brought participants to the freak scene. In this regard, participants shared how self-discovery and the search for something meaningful also played a crucial role in their decision to try freak shows for the first time. A few interviewees mentioned how, at the time they stumbled upon the freak scene, they were going through a rough patch. They described this period as a time in which they were not in a good state of mind; as they were going through something bad, draining, or purposeless. This implies, individuals could have been experiencing the effects of oversocialization (Lyng, 1990), facing disconnection from themselves or others, while searching for their purpose, and belonging. These emotions are common for alienated individuals (Lyng, 1990).

Freak shows can also provide comfort to the participants who feel this way. For instance, in the excerpt below, one can see how Carla found solace and purpose through body suspension. As Lyng (1990) implies, individuals facing these constraints find an outlet in the form of play or edgework. Involvement in body suspension or other freak show performances can thus serve as a resistance to those feelings. Furthermore, edgework activities produce unique sensations, such as self-actualization (Lyng, 1990:860), which can help performers in reaching their full potential through self-discovery and the pursuit of fulfilling one's unique talents. In addition, the disruptive and carnivalesque feature of play allows individuals to explore their agency and creative tools (Sicart, 2014).

I was going through such a bad time. I had a feeling that my boyfriend at the time was cheating on me, and I was terribly jealous. On top of that, I was finishing up my degree, which I no longer enjoyed, but I would have felt bad if I didn't finish it. [...] I saw a picture in a tattoo magazine from a tattoo convention in Scotland where there was a balding dude in a kilt, rugged to look at, pulling a car by the hooks in his back and then hanging there by those

hooks too. He also had some weights hanging from his knees. I thought that was so cool, but I guessed that's only for some cool, rugged dudes in kilts. But then I saw a girl at a tattoo convention. There she was, all cute and little, hanging from those same hooks. I could identify with her. It was such a bolt from the sky. At that moment, I thought, "If I'm going to experience this, it's bound to help me somehow." It gave me everything I needed.

Carla, Body suspension performer

### 5.1.2 Tempted by Danger

While seeking a break from the mundane was an aspect prevalent among most interview participants, a smaller portion of interviewees were drawn to the thrills that the risky performances can offer. However, freak shows differ greatly in the content and message portrayed. As such, the reasons to engage as well as the reasons to continue performing might differ greatly. Ultimately, motivations for engaging in the freak scene are complex and multifaceted and may vary across different cultural contexts.

Edgeworkers are drawn to the edge, seeking experiences that challenge their limits and push them beyond their comfort zones (Lyng, 1990, 2005, 2014). They are motivated by the allure of the unknown, the thrill of testing their skills and courage, which allows them to look for opportunities for personal growth and self-discovery (Lyng, 1990). In this way, some freak show performers pursue danger, pain, and edgy experiences. After all, the fun is often in the danger (O'Grady, 2012:90). Naturally, freak performers engaging in edgework seek the danger, and the risks as a creative way to play with the boundaries and test their limits while exploring the emotional outcomes.

The attraction to the painful experiences seemed to be a shared characteristic among a few of the interview participants. As previous research on BDSM pointed out (Sihvonen & Harviainen, 2020:12; Forsyth & Simpson, 2008:371), pain can be seen as pleasurable when perceived sexually. Individuals who have been going through a bad period, dealing with stress or negativity, or questioning their purpose in life are especially drawn to the painful and more intense experiences.

I was tempted by the aesthetics, the eroticism, and the pain. I was in a period where I was always getting tattoos, piercings, and various other modifications, and I didn't know what else I could do, some kind of sado-masochism. That was the next thing I wanted to do, explore my body and my boundaries.

Caroline, Shibari and BDSM performer

For Caroline, sado-masochistic practices seemed like the next logical step creating a path for the exploration of her body and her boundaries. The inflicted pain can be seen as a way of testing both the body and the mind as a form of edgework (Lyng, 1990, 2014). Freak show performers who seek to know more about their emotional or physical limits can practice this as a form of self-discovery. By pushing themselves to their limits and testing their boundaries, edgeworkers can gain a deeper understanding of themselves and their capabilities. In this way, performers can learn to overcome their fears and prove their resilience and strength.



*The Practice of BDSM, © Petr Jedinák*

This attraction to the inherent risks and danger is enhanced by the adrenaline rush (Lyng, 2005). Felt risky experience can evoke strong emotions, including this adrenaline rush which some performers describe as “addictive.” “The adrenaline rush, the sensation of being close to the edge, of giving in to the chaos of the moment, is a hedonistic escape from the mundane routine of ‘straight’ society” (Reith, 2005:242). Hence, engaging with danger offers an escape from the routine and constraints of daily existence (Caillois, 2001:6).

At first, I panicked. I didn't know what to do and I wanted to get dressed. Then, the adrenaline kicked in again and I found out that it was actually quite good and that I enjoyed getting the attention, watching people look at me. It was something new again, something I had never tried before, a very liberating feeling.

Caroline, Shibari and BDSM performer

Here, Caroline provides an example of how adrenaline rush can enhance the experience and how experimenting with something new and exciting creates these feelings of freedom and liberation. This serves to illustrate the edgeworkers' (Lyng, 1990, 2014) motivation to engage in risky activities as well as in dark play (O'Grady, 2012, 2013; Sicart, 2014) through the exploration of temporarily subverted social norms allowing self-expression and autonomy. The uncertainty of something new provides freak show performers the opportunity to explore their limits that can offer a rewarding experience. Furthermore, the desire to test oneself and feel alive through the experience of danger and risks is what drives individuals towards dark play (O'Grady, 2012:90). In this sense, the feeling of reward and satisfaction that comes with successfully navigating these challenges can be seen as one of the key motivators for the engagement in freak shows.

## 5.2 Experiences of Freak Show Performers

To summarize the discussion so far, performers' motivation in the continuous engagement in freak shows derives from the captivating play feature (Huizinga, 2014:10) freak shows entail. The unpredictability, uniqueness, and effervescence of the shows typically involves initial exploration of boundaries and personal limits, potentially producing powerful emotional rush. Within this initial discovery performers allow creative contribution to ensue as it fosters innovation and self-expression (Sicart, 2014:17). This can help participants to develop mastery in the face of chaos. For many performers, this sensation can contribute to a more meaningful and purposeful existence as it enables them to address their repressed feelings of alienation. In this section, I will explore performers' early experiences, their spiritual and extreme interpretations, along with their collective experiences.

### 5.2.1 Early Experiences

As freak show participants explained, the early experiences are significantly different than those experienced after years of participating and performing on stage. The first experiences with freak acts, whether in private or public, have been discussed as the most powerful ones. Early stage is the time when creativity and personalization take over which contributes to continued involvement in the freak scene. Furthermore, boundary testing seems to occur more in the early stages of performing rather than later with years of experience. Furthermore, performing individuals encounter the community for the first time which can contribute to a sense of belonging and mutual understanding.

While the motivations to engage in the freak scene seem to vary quite a bit, the early experiences of freak performers tend to be very similar. Performers often try to find how they can connect their skills and their abilities learned beforehand with the freak performances. As Huizinga advocates, "...play-factor is powerfully operative and a really creative force" (2014:180). As such, freak performers pursue to develop their personal skills that bring them joy and explore them in connection with freak shows. Lyng (1990:859) further endorses the significance of the use and development of special skills. Therefore, performers seek to master their personal skills allowing them to create personal and meaningful content while fulfilling their desires. Furthermore, when these performances become more personal, individuals tend to seek to improve and develop other skills related to the scene and their interests.

I started to connect my skills with my hobbies and then I slowly incorporated them in my performances. I think because of that, it doesn't bore you, it entertains you, it keeps you having fun and you have a reason to keep improving. Because the BDSM and fetish scene, where there are a lot of side shows and freak shows, is very close to me, I got into it, and I started exploring it. I then found out I really enjoy it, and that it fulfills me.

Joe, Freak and Side show performer

As Sicart (2014:18) indicates, play is personal because it shows character and the values we stand for, especially when we push ourselves to the limits. Indeed, freak show performers make their shows personal through engaging with different skills and addressing different issues or contents. Even though freak shows are perceived as

shows for the public, they are also very personal to those on stage. Lilly, body suspension and fire performer, suggests that the freak experience is a very personal, intimate one. “We are revealing our intimacy to these people as part of the ‘circus.’” As such, the freak experience can be seen as a form of play as it acknowledges the personal, intimate, and unmediated values, granting individuals an experience unlike any other (O’Grady, 2013:33).

Individuals engaged in the freak scene sometimes tend to be a bit scared or afraid of the risks involved but then find the early experience as one of the most powerful, or most emotional experiences. Few interviewees have described it as life changing, others as if they found purpose of life in it, and some as transgressive. Adrenalin seems to take over the pain involved, meaning performers then either do not feel the pain or they find it enjoyable when connected to sexual pleasure. This can change over time for some performers, for others it can remain. A fundamental aspect of play, as suggested by Huizinga (2014) and Caillois (2001) is this meaningful, purposeful quality through which performers can express their desires (Sicart, 2014). In the meaning of freak shows, performers on stage can express their true desires which in connection with them being exhibitionists is emphasized through such. This is in addition to having found their purpose or meaning in life. Moreover, play’s inherent value inspires individuals’ self-expression, creativity, and personal growth (Sicart, 2014; Huizinga, 2014).

Exploration of boundaries is an aspect most freak performers play with. It is how they gain control and how they explore the unknown. The desire to explore those boundaries seems to occur more often in the early contributions in the freak scene. Performers have said, the exploration of body and boundaries is pronounced in initial experiences as the felt sensations are notably more intense. While for most performers, boundary testing is an aspect they play with throughout their performances, others play it safer and while they engage in risky behaviors, they do not have the desire to push their limits.

As freak shows are performed in public and for the public, individuals who participate in the freak scene have strong first experiences due to both factors; engaging in freaky practices, and in performing in front of an audience.

I was immediately taken by the crowd, swallowed up by it, the nervousness, the adrenaline, and the opportunity to exhibit in front of so many people, people in the rows throwing up, not understanding, calling us all sorts of things. I must have that forever.

Bob, Body suspension and Freak performer

Although many freak show performers enjoy and love exhibiting their bodies and talents, a few of my interviewees have admitted it sometimes brings them a lot of stress, nervousity, and fear. They especially remember their first shows being very stressful. Some view it as a boundary that they try to push to their limits, others might get very down on themselves examining every little detail of their performance, causing them distress. Having said that, these emotions are similar to the sensations Lyng (1990:860) describes as defining edgework emotions: self-realization, self-actualization, and self-determination. Edgework experiences involve individuals seeking out challenges that are both physically and mentally demanding, with the goal of achieving a sense of accomplishment and personal growth. While some people may find these experiences exhilarating, others may find them overwhelming and anxiety-inducing. This is in line with previous research on body modifications practices suggesting that practice of modifying one's body serves as a means of self-actualization (DeMello in Horton, 2013:117).

### 5.2.2 The Spiritual Experience

For freak performers, engagement in freak shows has been described as “something they must always have in their life.” As discussed above, their participation holds a significant value as it allows them to escape the mundane everyday reality to a world with heightened experiences. Through pain, risks, and danger, these acts give them meaning, purpose, novel perspective, and intense emotional release. These emotions and personal values are consistent with previous research on BDSM and body suspension acts (Greenberg, 2019; Turley, 2016; Simula, 2019; Lindemann, 2011; Williams, 2009). Participants of this study describe their freak related experiences as “more real than their everyday life,” or even as “transformative.” Both play theory (Huizinga, 2014; Sicart, 2014) and edgework (Lyng, 1990, 2014) suggest that experiences that involve risk, uncertainty, and novelty have the potential to be transformative because they allow individuals to explore and experiment with new



possibilities, challenge their assumptions and limitations, and gain new insights about themselves and the world around them.

For me, it's just a great way to clear my mind and my body really needs it from time to time. After being suspended on those hooks I'm so relaxed, nothing seems to bother me. It's as if I've gained such a new perspective. It's like I've discovered the meaning of life after being suspended. The feeling lasts long. It's so funny, sometimes, let's say a week after the suspension, I'm just sitting in the kitchen, having a coffee and all of a sudden, I just start laughing and then I remember "Oh yeah, I was actually on those hooks!"

Victor, body suspension performer

The excerpt above describes a typical strong suspension experience. As Victor explains, through body suspension he was able to connect deeper with himself. Furthermore, this intense feeling brought him a new perspective on life, giving him joy and laughter to the mundane moments of life while reminding him of the transformative power body suspension entails. This playful engagement with new emotions, sensations, and thoughts can allow for personal growth and development (Huizinga, 2014:82). Because play is a challenge to oneself (Sicart, 2014:3), the act of body suspension can provide this transformative experience leading to a sense of accomplishment and empowerment. Moreover, what Victor experienced was a cathartic release. Body suspension allowed him to feel this intense emotional relief consequently leading to psychological healing. Catharsis is often associated with the idea of releasing repressed or suppressed feelings and finding a sense of emotional resolution (Golden, 1973:473). Ultimately, body suspension experience can result in a deeper understanding of oneself and a new appreciation for life. Furthermore, previous research on body suspension aligns with the cathartic release for certain individuals (Rada, 2014:95).

A lot of things started to make sense to me (after getting involved in the BDSM scene). I think it's one of the most meaningful experiences. You give yourself to the other person, you open yourself completely to them and at that moment you are just there for each other and there is nothing else, no one else. You get into this state called subspace, where you don't really care about anything else, it's a kind of meditation, you relax. Everything hurts you, but at

the same time it relaxes you. You fall into this special state, which, I think, should be the main reason why it's done. And after the show you release a lot of emotions, you can laugh and become very brave and happy or you start crying, all the traumas come out, you get all the emotions out. It's a big bundle of feelings, emotions, and all sorts of things. It's a kind of meditation state. When you're tied up, your body starts to release a lot of adrenaline. You find yourself in a very euphoric state. It's such a beautiful experience.

Laura, BDSM performer



*The Act of Body Suspension, © Tomáš Mičák*

Similar to Victor, Laura explains her BDSM experiences as transformative and transcendent. BDSM involvement has brought her meaning and clarity in life. Laura describes a state called subpace<sup>3</sup> that evokes meditative and relaxing moments where she is able to let go of all concerns and focus solely on the experience. “The play-mood is one of rapture and enthusiasm, and is sacred or festive in accordance with the occasion. A feeling of exaltation and tension accompanies the action, mirth, and relaxation follows” (Huizinga, 2014:132). In this sense, subpace can be seen as the play mood as it describes a special mental state characterized by a sense of joy and

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<sup>3</sup> Subpace refers to a state of mind occurring in BDSM practices. It is often described as trance-like state where individuals may feel a sense of detachment from their surroundings and experience high degree of focus, euphoria, and altered perception of time. It is generally perceived as a positive sensation, often pursued in BDSM acts (Greenberg, 2019:4, Pitagora, 2017:46, Thomas, 2020:927).

excitement. In this context the sacred mood can refer to the divine or spiritual connection, which has been emphasized by interview participants. Furthermore, Huizinga (2014:132) suggests, this mood creates a strong desire and interest in the play while facing both mentally and physically challenging moments. This implies, performers challenge themselves to achieve this state of relaxation and contentment. The transformative power of play (Huizinga, 2014) can create positive emotional experiences for freak show performers.

Furthermore, Bob stresses that the term modern primitivism<sup>4</sup> is very close to him as he explains, through body suspension he is able to connect to nature and to the roots of humanity. While modernism rejects the values of traditional societies, modern primitives embrace them. They seek to reconnect with a more authentic, primal way of life through the spiritual value freak shows can offer (Klesse, 1999:15). As such, extreme elements with intense pain can enable individuals to access a deeper sense of authenticity, personal growth, and spiritual development. The connection with authenticity is perhaps the most evident aspect of edgework (Lyng, 1990:861) in relation to freak shows.

Through the pain, through the self-knowledge, to fly out there naked on stage is good, that kind of "clowning around on stage" and showing people what I don't think belongs there. The beginning of that primitivism and those rituals is not to exhibit on stage, as a lot of people think. It's more a recognition of the inner self. That kind of connection with nature as well, hence the term modern primitivism.

Bob, Body suspension performer

While other performers have not directly mentioned the term modern primitivism, many align with its interpretation. These performers thus keep intentionally seeking out risky or intense experiences to feel more alive and transform their sense of self. By challenging mainstream norms and exploring taboo subjects, freak show performers can embrace their alternative lifestyles that convey meaning and purpose.

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<sup>4</sup> Modern primitivism is a subcultural movement that emerged in the late 20th century. It emphasizes a return to more natural, primal, and tribal ways of living and being. It often incorporates elements such as body modification, ritualistic practices, and a rejection of modern technology and consumerism. It is also characterized by an appreciation for the wild and chaotic aspects of life, and a rejection of the restraints and conventions of modern society (Klesse, 1999, Conley, 2003).

Through such experiences, individuals are able to escape the ordinary and explore new ways of being in the world (Lyng, 2014; Sicart, 2014).

This spiritual quality seems to resonate with most freak performers. Interview participants generally described their experiences as meditative, therapeutic, euphoric, meaningful, purposeful, intimate, or transformative. Lyng (1990, 2014) suggests that edgeworkers find pleasure along with intense emotions, which he describes as “self-actualization, self-realization, and self-determination.” These emotions are particularly pronounced when approaching an edge (Lyng, 1990, 2014). In this context, freak show participants engaged in edgework embrace the risks and challenges associated with their performances because they strive to reach a state of self-fulfillment and personal growth. Furthermore, the appropriative and disruptive elements of play can promote a space where all this is possible to achieve (Sicart, 2014:14-15).

### 5.2.3 The Extreme Experience

Through the spiritual quality, performers are able to endure or enjoy pain, violence, and other elements of danger. While for some, the more extreme elements connected with performing are the driving force for the involvement in the freak scene. The pain, the risks, the intense emotions all contribute to heightened experience, keeping performers on edge, excited, and alive. Moreover, the exploration of taboo subjects and controversial ideas in the form of dark play (O’Grady, 2012, 2013) is a journey that some participants play with in relation to societal boundaries.

Alice O’Grady introduced play as both “light, theatrical, spectacular, fun, and socially engaging” while at the same time “dark, subversive, disturbing, disorienting and potentially fatal” (2012:90), as if on a spectrum between light and dark (Tutenges, 2023:92). This darker, subversive side of play is explored by some freak show participants through their acts on stage.

While positive emotions were expressed in all interviews as one of the driving factors in engaging in the freak shows, a multitude of hurtful feelings were felt, albeit explained in a positive matter. As Trammel suggests, play can hold torture, pain, and violence yet still be pleasurable (2020:33-36). Hence, an experience with torturous pain can remain a positive one.

There was a point where the pain was so extreme that the physical experience shut down and it was purely a deep psychological experience. It was so intense. I have never experienced something like that, and I wanted it back.

Claudia, body suspension performer

The pain or danger felt during the performance of body suspension here indicates how something so painful can remain so pleasurable. This is consistent with Sicart's (2014:3) understanding of dark play, where he describes these attributes that range from physical pain to emotional damage, as at the same time delightful. Furthermore, previous research demonstrates that other freak performers, particularly those engaged with BDSM acts, perceive pain as enjoyable (Sihvonen & Harviainen, 2020:12; Forsyth & Simpson, 2008:371). This implies that if the pain is perceived sexually, it almost always provides pleasure and joy.



*The act of Body Suspension, © Tomáš Mičák*

Some participants act on the desire to push societal norms to their limits, challenge the conventional, while enjoying the shock and disgust it provokes. “...people in the front rows throwing up, not understanding, calling us all sorts of things. I must have that forever.” Bob, the body suspension performer, enjoys testing and challenging the limits of his audience. Pedro Rebelo and Franziska Schroeder (2006:6) suggest that “...certain performance technologies reclaim the ‘messiness’ rejected by modernism; that they deliberately set out to subvert order and celebrate deviance.” As such, Bob finds gratification in the chaos the freak show produces. Engaging in behaviors that are often considered taboo can be an exhilarating and rewarding experience for some individuals. The experience of dark play can be deeply personal and meaningful,

allowing individuals to explore and express aspects of themselves that they may not be able to in other contexts (O'Grady, 2012, 2013).

While mainstream society can find many shows offensive, gruesome, and taboo, the subcultural community often finds them unique, and interesting. Some audiences can, however, react more negatively than others, as Bob described in one of his freak performances.

First, I pulled 3 needles from my forehead. Then, I started taking blood and drinking it, there were already fewer people there. When I hammered the scrotum to a log, picked up the log and cut it with an axe, there were only 3 people left.

Bob, Freak and Body suspension performer

Bob's performance undoubtedly pushed many social boundaries and could have even been seen as transgressive as many people left the show because they were not ready for it. Lyng (1990:857) explains, how crossing a boundary represents "an observable threat to one's physical or mental well-being or one's sense of an ordered existence." This reaction from the audience shows how Bob's performance not only challenged their preconceived notions, but it also disrupted their sense of order, leaving them with more negative feelings of discomfort.

#### 5.2.4 The Collective Experience

Apart from the spiritual and the extreme elements involved in performing within the freak scene, community values are deemed highly important. Thus, to fully understand the individual's experience and their drive to perform, the focus cannot be solely on the isolated perspective. As such, this section focuses on exploring how the collective impacts the individual considering the social reality has a direct impact on the experiences of freak show performers. Both play theory (Huizinga, 2014; Sicart, 2014; Caillois, 2001) and edgework (Lyng, 1990, 2014) hold a special significance to the collective value because of its impactful and strengthening assets, creating a community which is respectful, and understanding.

The freak community in the Czech Republic is not very big as acknowledged by many interviewees. Despite the size of the community, or maybe because of it, these people have developed a sense of support and respect. As Caillois (2001:4) implies, through

play, social groups are tied together as they share their differences from the outside world. Despite facing stigmatization and discrimination from mainstream society (Fordham, 2007:243), the freak community has created a space where they feel in control and safe to explore their deviant desires which allows them to express themselves.



*Joyous Body Suspension Performance at a Tattoo convention, © Josef Moučka*

The freak subculture is based upon uniqueness, deviance, spiritual connection, and danger, but also mutual respect, tolerance, and non-judgmental attitudes. Victor, a body suspension performer, opened up about the community. “I think the people who hang on the hooks respect each other and give each other space. If I see someone else's show, I’ll support them as much as I can because I know what they're going through.” Victor emphasizes how tolerance and support is important to him. As Huizinga (2014) suggests, through shared experiences individuals feel social connection and belonging. Similar to Victor’s quote, Laura sees the crew as her family. “The group is like a family to me. They’re very honest, trusting, and open-minded people. They are so tolerant, and nobody judges you for anything.”

Victor and Laura both express a sense of acceptance and tolerance in their respective groups. Both quotes suggest that this subculture provides an accepting and open space for individuals to engage in activities that may be considered ‘freaky,’ strange, or extreme by mainstream culture. Other interviewees similarly refer to the people with whom they perform with as “family.” Laura, a BDSM performer, indicated the

positive core values of the people involved in the freak scene. “They are the type of people who will not pass judgment on anyone, and no one needs to pretend to be someone else.” This behavior resonates with Lyng’s (2005:4) observation considering the development of respect within edgeworker communities who share understanding of their unique experiences and the mutual admiration for their courage and skills required to live it out. Furthermore, these values contribute to the creation of special social bonds (Lyng, 2005:4).



*Collaborative Efforts in Shibari, © Iva Žúr*

Consequently, trust is acknowledged by performers who work in pairs or groups as crucial, especially since mutual trust is needed for controlled outcome of the shows. This can include trust in each other’s skills and abilities, as well as in each other’s commitment to respect personal boundaries during the performance. Without trust, performers may lose control over their show which could negatively impact their performance and potentially put themselves or others at risk. As such, trust is a critical component in freak shows ensuring participants that everyone involved can handle uncertainty and ensue rewarding and exciting experience (Lyng, 1990). This is consistent with previous research (Dunkley & Brotto, 2020:662; Cutler et al., 2020:96; Parchev, 2023:10).

The subculture can help you in revealing things that you've been keeping hidden inside. Those people don't think it's strange; they think it's normal. You can then express and release these feelings. You can then understand these things and work with them. Only then will you be able to accept and understand yourself.



Importantly, freak show performers feel understood in their inner bubbles which allows them to express their needs and desires. This sense of social support and belonging is immensely valuable for those who are disconnected or alienated from the dominant culture (Lyng, 1990). Additionally, this acceptance freak performers have within their respective community is reflected in the way they perceive and experience their shows. Huizinga's (2014:10) concept of "magic circle" refers to the idea that play is a separate space and time with its own rules and norms where the actions and interactions are separate from the outside world. In this sense, the freak community can be seen as a type of magic circle where performers come together to create a unique and alternative world with its own norms, and values. In this respect, freak show performers create their own context, the magic circle, that allows them to engage in play. Within this magic circle, performers can experiment with their identities, push their individual boundaries, and explore different forms of self-expression and creativity through their shows. This reflects the idea that play is not just a form of entertainment but also a way of exploring and transforming the world around us (Huizinga, 2014:10). Due to this contextual characteristic (Sicart, 2014:6), play can be a powerful tool for individuals to break away from their daily routines and explore new possibilities. This is especially true in the case of edgework (Lyng, 1990, 2014) and dark play (O'Grady, 2012, 2013), where individuals seek to push the boundaries of what is considered safe or acceptable. By creating a space for exploration and experimentation, the magic circle of the freak community offers a supportive environment for individuals to engage in these activities without fear of judgment or ostracism. In this way, the contextual nature of play allows individuals to engage in transformative experiences that can lead to personal growth and development (Sicart, 2014; O'Grady, 2012).

However, negative feelings of frustration, disrespect, dishonesty, and lack of understanding also play a central role in this subculture. For instance, consent has been speculated among BDSM performers as a number of incidents happened where boundaries were transcended leading to emotional or physical distress of involved parties. Moreover, previous research (Dunkley & Brotto, 2020; Newmark, 2010; Holt, 2016; Fanghanel, 2020) supports the importance of consent as violations occur within

communities. Thus, the use of safe words and symbols is encouraged to prevent these violations.

With this in mind, rules have been described as essential to the maintenance of the play and the enjoyment of all involved. This is because rules provide structure and meaning to play experiences (Huizinga, 2014). Hence, freak show performers follow a set of rules to ensure control can be maintained within their performances. By following these rules, the performers can engage in play and experimentation while still maintaining a sense of order and control.

Some freak communities have clearly defined rules and guidelines that are communicated and endorsed by members. This is particularly evident in BDSM communities, where the importance of consent and personal boundaries is clearly specified. One of the rules on their website states the following: “Respect the boundaries of others and take responsibility for your actions” (Pisklata, n.d.). Such rules are particularly important in the creation of a safe and consensual environment, where all parties involved can enjoy the experience. Other subcultural groups within the freak scene may place a greater emphasis on responsibility for common sense things, trust, sterility and hygiene, and the use of symbols, signs, or code words. While these groups may not have as many explicit rules, there is still an expectation of responsibility and respect towards others within the community. Ultimately, whether through explicit rules or shared understandings, the maintenance of boundaries is crucial in creating a sense of safety and order.

Transgression of binding rules in play leads to the collapse of the game, as it disrupts the shared understanding and agreement among players (Huizinga, 2014:11). In the context of freak shows, where certain boundaries are pushed and tested, the performers’ adherence to the agreed-upon rules and limits is crucial for the safety and well-being of all involved. As such, the transgression of these rules can result in serious consequences, both for the performers themselves and for the audience. Thus, when asked about how the transgression is handled, interviewees responded: “They wouldn’t play with us. They can practice it somewhere in the woods, but they wouldn’t have anything to do with us.” This implies transgression comes with social consequences. The maintenance of boundaries contributes to a sense of order within the otherwise chaotic and unpredictable nature of freak shows. As Bob mentioned,

“When there’s no rules, chaos ensues.” Players engage in the activity by both obliging with the rules while playfully engaging with them (Sicart, 2014:17).

Lastly, Brad summarizes the different values of the freak subculture and how diverse it can be.

There are different circles and bubbles everywhere. [...] With social media, people are getting more interconnected. [...] One thing I’ve learned is that all these different communities have the same problems just in different forms. I have found that the less mainstream something is, the more friendly it gets. That’s one thing that is very similar to all these different communities. Fetish and kink people are, for example, more aware of consent. The more niche the performance is the friendlier it is. Some of the friendliest places are the ones that are most stigmatized. Those that people think might be more risky, or scary are usually the opposite way around.

Brad, Freak, Side show performer, Scare actor

Brad’s opinion about the subculture is in line with other interviewee participants who found the community as a place where they met the most amazing, creative, caring, and fun people but also people who value money, power, or fame over friendship, trust, and support. While inner circles tend to be very supportive, trustworthy, and open-minded groups, the overall freak subculture has its drawbacks. This can create tension and conflict within the subculture and can prevent performers from fully expressing themselves and their identities.

### 5.3 Controlling the Uncontrollable

By examining what inspires and drives performers in the continuous engagement in freak acts, we gain a better understanding of their perspectives. Play theory and edgework so far helped in understanding the meaning freak shows provide to both individuals and society at large. What is yet to be discussed is how performers are able to push their personal limits and the boundaries of what mainstream society deems appropriate. Freak shows entail a variety of risks as many performers challenge and test their bodies to the very limits. Control can give performers a sense of order to

the chaos that freak shows impose. Edgework, as Lyng (1990, 2014) implies, draws individuals to the thrill and excitement high-risk activities entail and the adrenaline rush that comes with them. For freak performers, it's all about experiencing these exciting shows and finding creative ways to engage in the freak scene while controlling the disputably harmful outcomes. As such, I will first describe the risks associated with performing. Consequently, I explore the ways performers take in mitigating those risks while carefully balancing between pushing the limits and ensuring safety.

### 5.3.1 Occupational Risks

The central characteristic of edgework is an engagement in high-risk activities (Lyng, 1990, 2014). This implies there is a chance of a negative outcome. Freak show performers thus need to be aware of those risks to be able to maintain composure and make effective decisions (Lyng, 2014). Most of the interview participants recognized the presence of risks in their shows. However, they also pointed out that some individuals in the industry tend to downplay or overlook the risks, which can have serious consequences for everyone involved. There are two specific risk areas that have been repeatedly mentioned in the participants' experiences as something they always had to be vigilant about. They include the risk of physical injury including the danger of infection, and emotional distress.

First and foremost, many physical injuries come with the practice of a specific performance. For example, BDSM and Shibari performers reported harm caused by the practice of bondage. As they pointed out, there are many nerves within the body and damaging them could result in serious injuries or loss of sensation in certain body parts. Body suspension performers, on the other hand, can endure skin trauma caused by hook penetration. Additionally, some performers practice varied forms of body modifications on stage, such as scarification, skin cutting, or branding as a part of their performance. The ability to be able to manage these risks is thus crucial in sustaining controlled practices.

Freak show performers who work with blood, or other bodily fluids may encounter intensified risks of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and other infections. Open wounds can serve as entry points for bacteria, viruses, and other pathogens, increasing the risk of infection. Furthermore, if the tools, needles, or other equipment are not

fully sterilized, it can carry infectious agents. It is thus a significant concern that participants do not take lightly. In particular, this is an edge that performers are not willing to play with, let alone cross it (Lyng, 1990, 2014). Phillip recognizes the gravity of the risks of infection in his line of work. He also advocates the importance of hygiene and sterility as it allows him to be in control of the freak experience.

The risks are enormous, of course. We're working with blood. From red blood cells to nymphs to very thick black arterial blood. Everyone has to approach it with responsibility. Personally, I take it very seriously, in terms of hygiene, sterility, all items are sterile, dried. We use sterile gloves. We protect ourselves and others, so just putting on regular rubber gloves is not an option. We use stainless steel, surgical steel, and an awful lot of disinfectant.

Phillip, Body suspension and Freak performer

To move away from the physical risks, freak show performers additionally face a range of emotional risks. During my interview with Benjamin, he opened up to me about being a part of LGBTQ+ community within the freak scene and how it can be especially challenging on one's mental health. Benjamin emphasized how individuals who come from marginalized communities or subcultures may face more mental health challenges due to factors such as discrimination, stigma, and microaggressions. He emphasized that these individuals tend to be more vulnerable and take things more personally. As such, these challenges can be especially pronounced in high-stress activities thus taking care of performers' mental health holds highly important value.

Another form of emotional distress is explained by Jessica as she describes how her ex-boyfriend overstepped her limits which caused her psychological distress and disengagement in the scene for about 3 years.

My ex-boyfriend used to train with me every day, even weekends. He came home from work and wanted to train. I lived with him for about half a year and he totally drained me. It was very hard, especially mentally. It bothered me that I didn't have my privacy, I was dealing with problems at work, loads of stress. I was sick and tired of it. I didn't want to do it anymore. It wasn't for fun, for us, just for him. It was so selfish of him, just so he could perform elsewhere. So, I left. I was out of the community for 3 years, I only went to a

couple of workshops, I wasn't looking for new people or new riggers. I only hung out with my current boyfriend because he was happy, and we did it together for fun. The joy was more important to me.

Jessica, Shibari and BDSM performer

Edgework can come in many forms, and while exploration of the boundaries is something edgeworkers flourish in, crossing the boundary can lead to serious damage, whether it is physical injury (Lyng, 1990, 2014) or emotional distress (Naegler & Salman, 2020). Additionally, the fundamental aspect of play is that it produces joy and pleasure (Caillois, 2001; Huizinga, 2014; Sicart, 2014). Jessica's engagement with the freak scene became more of an obligation than a source of joy and pleasure, leading her to depart from the freak community. This implies that Jessica's participation ceased to be a form of play, as it was no longer something she enjoyed. Thus, she found an outlet and temporarily left the freak community. She then only returned when she again found joy in it with her rigger and current boyfriend. As she mentioned, joy is more important for her than the performance. Jessica was then able to regain her control back and perform once again for fun. As Sicart (2014:114-115) suggests, the power and freedom of play is an essential part of one's well-being.

With this in mind, performances that include BDSM elements are especially conscious of consent. Consent has been previously densely researched and analyzed (Holt, 2016; Zambelli, 2017) depicting the importance of setting personal boundaries as well as respecting them. Interview participants, especially those who use BDSM elements in their performances, have acknowledged its need and further emphasized the awareness of their boundaries during subspace, which interviewees described as a state where "...you don't really care about anything else, it's a kind of meditation, you relax. Everything hurts you, but at the same time it relaxes you" or as "...a brutally submissive mode, where the model could choose something she later regrets."

Furthermore, interview participants have acknowledged emotional risks related to the hectic, "circus like" lifestyle that can take a toll on their mental health. The lifestyle often involves limited sleep, constant preparation, and a lot of responsibility. During the busy season, performers often push their physical and psychological limits. The risks here are not necessarily connected to the performances themselves but rather to the overall demands of the challenging environment. The need for control in this

context is evident as the performers must navigate the potential emotional risks associated with their lifestyle. Here, developing “mental toughness” could help individuals cope with challenging situations while keeping high standards at their performances (Lyng, 1990:859). By exercising control over their mental and physical states, performers can mitigate the risks of burnout, exhaustion, and other negative consequences associated with this demanding lifestyle.

We can't do one show over and over again because we have to rotate those people, so we prepare each show individually, each show is different. There's always something to rehearse, always something to prepare, and of course it's very demanding and exhausting.

Ralph, Body suspension and Freak performer

Ralph here points out how the demanding and unconventional nature of their shows can have psychological effects. In this regard, performers may experience high levels of stress, anxiety, and emotional challenges due to the intense and often physically demanding nature of their shows. Additionally, audience members may also be exposed to psychological distress or discomfort, especially those unprepared for such a spectacle.

Having said that, by carefully balancing the risks and rewards of their shows, freak performers are able to create a compelling and thrilling experience for themselves and their audiences, while also ensuring that their safety and well-being are not compromised. Awareness of risks, as Lyng (2014:7-9) suggests, is thus important for maintaining control as it allows performers to choose their actions and responses. Overall, the need for control in this context highlights the importance of developing skills and strategies to navigate the complex and demanding nature of the freak show industry.

### 5.3.2 Planning and Preparation

Being able to navigate aforementioned risks, freak show performers participate rigorously in training, careful planning, and rehearsing, and employ variety of safety protocols. As Lyng (1990:874) suggests, for edgeworkers planning and preparing for the experience is particularly important. He then continues and describes these abilities as “...integral parts of the total experience (Lyng, 1990:874). In view of this,

freak show performers engage in this preparation to be able to safely control the risks involved in their shows.

Interview participants highlighted the essential value of planning and preparation. As such, they mentioned they devote many hours of rehearsing into each show; trying to perfect all details, including costumes, music, lighting, or sound effects. Backstage helpers need to be briefed, and the stage needs to be ready for the show. Along with preparing the performers, individuals need to create a sense of awareness of their surroundings. It is a skill, they mentioned, they work on and try to improve to prevent a long-lasting injury. Just as Lyng (1990:876) states “...planning may be an additional ‘skill’ factor that helps support edgeworkers’ belief in the existence of a survival instinct as well as their pronounced sense of personal competence.” In other words, planning helps edgeworkers feel more in control of their actions and increases their confidence in their ability to handle risky situations. This, in turn, allows them to push themselves closer to the boundaries and experience the thrills of edgework.

If you’re doing anything on stage, you gotta know where your equipment is, you’ve got to know the stage needs to be clean. If you’re doing anything with props you’ve gotta understand how they work, certain things require object safety, like if you do needles or stapling, it’s gotta be sanitized. One, if it goes wrong, you can cause lasting injury but also, it’s unprofessional. If you mess up something because you’re being careless, you’re not gonna get booked again. It’s also a bad example to set to people.

Benjamin, Scare Actor, Freak and Side performer

Benjamin draws attention to how the high level of preparation also extends to hygiene and sterilization. All necessary objects such as needles, hooks, and other equipment need to be carefully cleaned and sanitized. Performers only use sterile equipment, gloves, and some even travel with a trained nurse. Furthermore, performers undergo regular STD tests as they do not take this risk lightly.

### 5.3.3 Inherently Dominant Skills

Many interviewees who have taken upon dominant roles have acknowledged the importance of technical skills. Having the knowledge of basic anatomy, specific materials and techniques required for the practice, and effective communication



efforts with their submissive partners are essential for successful outcomes of their shows. Training and developing these aspects can impact performers' abilities to fully engage in the dominant role since these roles often require a high level of expertise to be able to control the outcomes of the shows as well as their partners' safety.

It's obviously an extreme activity in terms of pain or physical trauma, but it's also quite an expert activity that you can't learn easily. Unlike a whole lot of other things that can be extreme, this also requires perfect knowledge of working with sterile material, wound care, sink technique, and this is actually very specific to sink, so rope work, high rope work, there's a whole range of expertise that we've picked up, that we're trained for, and we're training other people for.

Jess, Body suspension performer

Here, Jess highlights that while body suspension is a risky activity in terms of physical trauma and pain, it also demands a high level of expertise, which is not easily learned. For example, dominant BDSM or Shibari performers acknowledge the gravity of rope bondage techniques. They need to understand the principles of rope safety, tension, and placement but also the use of knots, ties, and harnesses. Body suspension performers, on the other hand, learn to work with weight distribution and harnessing techniques. Overall, freak performances require certain technical abilities that work as a tool of control and elimination of potential risks.

Apart from technical expertise, dominant roles often create the flow of the freak show. As such, communication with their submissive partners holds a special significance. Interviewees mentioned how they confirm and discuss boundaries before the acts bearing in mind that they have to be able to hurt their submissive partners without actually harming them. As Holt (2016:923) pointed out, hurt is perceived as pleasure and enjoyment, but harm can negatively impact the submissive partners in terms of physical or emotional harm. Ralph here shares his input: "When you're in the role of hurting, you have to know perfectly well not to hurt the person. It's something you learn for a long time; we train these people to do it." This statement suggests that causing pain intentionally, in a controlled manner, is a skill that requires training, practice, and effective communication skills. It also implies that those who are in a position to hurt others have a responsibility to use their power wisely and avoid

causing harm. In sum, dominant individuals need to recognize when they can push someone's boundaries and when it is needed to pull back. As Lyng (1990:859) suggests, the development of skills is highly valued by edgeworkers.

#### 5.3.4 Inherently Submissive Skills

As a submissive performer, obedience and compliance has been described an essential skill. Being compliant with the demands of the dominant partners' needs and requests is seen as not only a submissive mode, but also as finding pleasure in its surrender of control and embracing the vulnerability. Yet, as previous research pointed out, submissive roles have described their experiences as the most controlled and powerful ones referring to their acts as "empowered choices" (O'Doherty & Cherrington, 2022:1286).

You have to be submissive enough as a model, someone will not only tie you up, but also push you into other things. For example, at one of the shows, a model was pissed on. It's also associated with various humiliations, so you have to be prepared for what's possible.

Julia, BDSM and Shibari performer

Julia further explains that while submissiveness is crucial in freak performances, it is also important for these performers to set up personal boundaries to prevent engagement in something that they would later regret. Thus, expressing clearly desires, boundaries, and limits is a skill that allows them to ensure their well-being within power exchange. Edgework skills, such as emotional self-control, presence of mind, and composure in high-pressure situations, are particularly important to maintain BDSM or Shibari as controlled experiences rather than transgressive harmful acts (Lyng, 1990, 2014).

Above all, trust holds a very special value. While mutual trust has been described as very important by everyone engaged, submissive models find trust more challenging and pivotal for their well-being. The vigorous emphasis on trust aligns with previous research (Giddens, 1990; Fanghanel, 2020:274). Engagement in freak shows can involve enormous amount of risks if the controlling, dominant performer is reckless or disrespectful thus submissive roles seek to find a compatible match in their partners to have a sense of control over the outcomes and to prevent unnecessary damage. This

trust can be seen as edgeworkers' ability in oneself and others (Lyng, 2005:9) helping performers with the navigation of a controlled outcome.

That trust is very important there, you should go to someone who is not an asshole, ideally someone close to you, who will help you, who is confident and who knows how to function and move on and not panic when things go wrong.

Bonnie, Shibari performer

Afore-stated trust in oneself and one's partner allows for a smoother and more enjoyable experience, both for the performers and the audience. Additionally, communicating effectively with the partner allows for a deeper connection between each other. To deepen this connection and trust in each other, freak show participants engage in discussion of boundaries, taboo matters, and the use of safe words or symbols. Such use has been heavily analyzed in particular with BDSM acts (Weiss, 2015:4; Ernulf & Innala, 1995:650; Forsyth & Simpson, 2008:378), however, other freak performers have also emphasized the importance of it, especially in the context of performing in front of an audience because they are often unable to communicate it verbally as to not disturb the performance.

### 5.3.5 The Pursuit of Mastery

While planning and preparation of freak shows and the use of fundamentally dominant and submissive skills is greatly significant in the navigation of the occupational risks, many individuals thrive to master their personal skills and abilities. By doing so, they seek to achieve what Lyng (1990:872) calls "complete mastery." This "ability to 'beat the odds'" is what many edgeworkers value the most (Lyng, 1990:872).

You have an ability in a lot but you're not a master in any of them. Some things take time to learn properly. That can be difficult, just learning one thing okay and then learning another thing okay while the other thing is being maintained.

Carlos, Freak performer

Carlos's intake on mastering particular abilities is not very indifferent to other interviewees. The process of mastering a certain skill may be challenging, Carlos thus highlights that it can take a lot of time to learn these skills. This requires focus and discipline to be able to achieve such mastery. In the context of control, Carlos's perspective highlights the central values like self-awareness and self-improvement, that are prevalent in edgework experiences (Lyng, 1990, 2014). By mastering personal skills, performers can become more confident in their abilities and have greater control over their performances. Additionally, mastering personal skills can allow performers to push their own boundaries and explore the edges of their abilities. Overall, having well-developed skills can increase one's sense of control over their performances and help better manage associated risks (Lyng, 1990, 2014).

Bob has been involved with body suspension for over 10 years. For him, controlling risks comes as second nature. Through experience and acquired knowledge, Bob has gained an understanding and awareness of the multitude of risks involved in the freak scene. Bob's attitude is not atypical for an experienced freak show performer thriving to master his skills. "Personally, I'm trying to study a bit of medicine. I want to know how the body works, how it behaves, convalescence and so on. I can puncture through my abdominal cavity and not hit a single organ." Ralph, furthermore, adds that before performers hurt others, they need to first master it themselves. They are only then allowed to try on their mentors, more experienced performers like Bob and Ralph, and only when the test is successful, they are allowed to start practicing on others.

Along with self-learning, many performers who want to educate themselves more and improve their skills also attend a variety of workshops. Many performers involved in shows depicting more BDSM elements have discussed going to specific workshops about subspace or nerves. Similarly, performers mostly engaged with body suspension have also acknowledged the substantial value of these workshops. This is consistent with previous research (Boyd-Rogers et al., 2022:3171; Bennet, 2020:172; Ernulf & Innala, 1995:650; Horton, 2013:118; Spratt et al., 2019:57). Self-learning and the development of skills and abilities are essential in the pursuit of achieving mastery in controlling chaos (Lyng, 1990:872). Furthermore, this achievement implies strong character (Lyng, 2014:447).

The range of physical or emotional injuries that performers may experience is extensive, and these injuries may affect each performer differently. As such, performers have developed to take control of their well-being to ensure their experiences remain edgy rather than transgressive. As Lyng (2014) explains, effective edgeworkers possess special skills that allow them to control such high-risk situations. “This unique skill, which applies to all types of edgework, is the ability to maintain control over a situation that verges on complete chaos, a situation most people would regard as entirely uncontrollable” (Lyng, 1990:859). Freak show performers are able to navigate high-risk situations because they have learned to anticipate and manage potential risks. The mastery of freak skills allows them to maintain a sense of control even in situations that may seem chaotic or unpredictable to others. This implies that without control, performers could be more prone to serious injuries, potentially life-threatening ones, forcing them to leave the freak scene.

## 6. Conclusion

Through this work, freak show performers give us a glimpse into the complex freak subculture, challenging our preconceived notions of what is normal, noble, or entertaining. Despite the controversial history of exploitation and dehumanization (Bogdan, 1988; Fordham, 2007), freak shows evolved into a subculture that serves to challenge societal values and perceptions of difference (Fordham, 2007:214). Their personal stories and perspectives reveal the possible limits of the human body and mind.

Challenging themselves, their partners, and their audiences, freak shows are showing us an alternative perspective of human experience. Intrinsically, this thesis served to bring back the attention to the word freak in a more positive way and consequently to the term freak shows, allowing performers to reclaim its substance. It is, however, important to keep in mind that freak shows can stigmatize performers with physical or behavioral differences causing the spread of deeper stigmatization to all people with visible differences, consequently leading to discrimination and negative public perception (Fordham, 2007:243).

Nevertheless, the examination of this subculture has helped in clarifying the importance of freak shows on a societal level as well as in the personal participation within them. By incorporating Lyng's concept of edgework (1990), it is clear that many freak show participants may be affected by oversocialization in today's reality, leaving them with feelings of disconnection, and the lack of purpose and meaning in their lives. Therefore, these individuals seek to escape the constraints of modern society and look for heightened, meaningful experiences. Edgework is "...an innate response arising from sources deep within the individual, untouched by socializing influences" (Lyng, 1990:879). As such, freak shows, as a form of edgework, allow individuals to find solace and reclaim their own agency.

Furthermore, the creative, personal, and autotelic characteristics of play (Sicart, 2014; Huizinga, 2014; Caillois, 2001) enrich self-expression and authenticity of freak show performers. Although, the disruptive and carnivalesque play elements allow performers to explore their controversial ideas, taboo subject, and intense emotions in the form of dark play (Sicart, 2014; O'Grady, 2012, 2013). This individual and

collective experience can explore and reveal performers' repressed emotions, desires, and fears. By means of testing and challenging their personal limits and societal boundaries, freak show performers can find solace along with edgework-dense sensations: self-actualization, self-realization, and self-determination (Lyng, 1990).

Importantly, freak shows are collective functions thus enabling the collective experience. The sense of social support and belonging creates a safe space for individuals to share their differences and feelings of disconnection together from the outside world (Lyng, 1990; Huizinga, 2014, Caillois, 2001, Sicart, 2014). As such, the freak community enhances the individual experience making it possible for the performers to fully express themselves. As Presdee (2000:74) posits, "the more real the experience, the more real the thrill..."

To conclude, freak shows have started as displays of people exhibiting physical differences whereas now freak performances continue to exist to teach people about behavioral differences. Accepting difference and deviance can be seen as core values of many subcultures and as long as subcultures exist, difference, deviance and abnormality will coexist with mainstream societal values. Understanding such could thus facilitate the promotion of a more inclusive and tolerant society that recognizes and values diversity. Nonetheless, freak shows will always be around as society keeps searching for the unusual, deviant, and different.

## 6.1 Suggestions for Future Research

Despite the limitations encountered during the research process, there are several opportunities for further exploration and future research. Firstly, as the interviews were conducted online due to geographical limitations, it may be worthwhile to conduct future research in person to gather more in-depth data and observations. Additionally, a more ethnographic approach could be implemented to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the subcultural community. Furthermore, as the interview-based research focuses on individual experiences, future research could also explore the similarities and differences in experiences across a larger population. While the findings from interview-based research may not be as generalizable, they nevertheless provide valuable insights into the perspectives and experiences of individuals.

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