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A double-edged sword: the role of pornography in learning about BDSM

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ABSTRACT

Increasing depictions of kink in mainstream society are leading to a rise in people seeking to learn about and participate in bondage/discipline, domination/submission, and sadism/masochism (BDSM). For many, this initial education process is likely to focus on the Internet and pornography specifically. Existing research into the impact of pornography on sex education has been mixed, though predominantly negative. However, pornography's role in BDSM education has yet to be explored. To address this gap, 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted with BDSM community leaders in Canada and the USA to examine from where and what practitioners learn about BDSM. Participants drew upon their personal experiences and those they interacted with in their capacity as a community leader. Interviewees identified the benefits and risks associated with using pornography as a learning tool for BDSM participation. They stressed how pornography's value as a learning tool has evolved over time, how it can normalise BDSM and increase self-acceptance, teach skills, and reinforce negotiation and consent practices. However, if consumers cannot separate fantasy from reality, pornography can have negative effects. The impact of BDSM-themed pornography for education, especially in adolescents and young people, is discussed, as are directions for more in-depth investigations of this topic.

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Introduction

Changes in social mores and increasing depictions of BDSM (bondage/discipline, domination/submission, and sadism/masochism) in popular media have contributed to rising participation in BDSM in mainstream society (Turley 2022; van der Beek and Thomas 2023). This rise likely means that more people are seeking out educational information on BDSM. Given that BDSM, sex and sexual pleasure overlap for many people (e.g. Faccio, Sarigu, and Iudici 2020; Sprott et al. 2021), it is likely that knowledge acquisition, or at the very least exposure to different BDSM activities, occurs via pornography. This hypothesis is supported within the literature. Herbenick et al. (2020) found that 45% of men and 33% of women surveyed will view BDSM-themed pornography¹ within their lifetime, while Walker and Kuperberg (2022) found that pornography was the most common precursor to BDSM participation and the point of

entry for 33% of interviewees. While this research established that people likely use pornography to learn about BDSM, there has been no research on how pornography shapes a person's perceptions and expectations when initially engaging in BDSM practices.

The current study aimed to begin developing a foundation for future exploration on the role of pornography specifically in the BDSM learning process, which can then be used to identify lines of questioning and themes to be examined in future, large-scale, research. To accomplish this, we implemented a narrative approach to inquiry by conducting semi-structured interviews with BDSM community leaders in Canada and the USA. Participants drew upon their personal experiences as well as those they interacted with in their capacity as community leaders, to identify the benefits and risks associated with initially learning about BDSM through pornography.

Learning about BDSM

While some research on how people learn about BDSM has been undertaken, none of it explicitly examines the impact of this learning on expectations, normalisation of activities, and safe practices. More specifically, research has yet to explore what knowledge practitioners take from various learning avenues and how this informs their subsequent BDSM activities. Graham et al. (2016) stressed how community building provides opportunities for sharing of educational knowledge but did not go in-depth on how that knowledge is translated. Webster and Klaserner (2019) found that 'munches', or non-play social events typically held in restaurants or bars, were one way in which newcomers can be introduced to, and learn about, activities related to BDSM. However, they did not detail how learning at these events occurs and is then put into practice. Sprott, Meeker, and O'Brien (2019) examined the importance of various sources of learning (e.g. pornography, websites, workshops) and the motivations of practitioners for using these sources for learning about BDSM. While participants stated some educational sources were more important, they stopped short of explaining how useful, practical, and effective these were for learning. While research has surmised that real-world domains are the most beneficial for BDSM learning, it is important to recognise that these sources may not be viable options for some people initially exploring BDSM.

Participation in BDSM can still garner significant stigma from health professionals, judicial systems, family, and friends (Ling et al. 2022). Therefore, those interested in BDSM may be reluctant to seek out in-person learning opportunities. Potential reasons may include a) not knowing these options exist; b) not having access to events in their community; c) not wanting to engage in BDSM publicly; and d) not wanting to divulge an interest in BDSM to an intimate partner(s). For minors (i.e. typically under the age of 18 in the USA), inaccessibility to BDSM education is likely even more pronounced (Randall and McKee 2017). Given nudity and 'sexual activities with a minor' laws throughout much of the world, minors are almost universally precluded from attending real-world BDSM-related events. Moreover, even notable online BDSM communities such as *FetLife* are unavailable to minors. While understandable, the exclusion of minors from more credible education offline and online is problematic, as many individuals first participate in BDSM prior to 18 (e.g. Bezreh, Weinberg, and Edgar 2012). Given that adolescents perceive pornography as the most helpful source for learning about sex (Rothman et al. 2021), minors are likely to turn to online sources, and pornography specifically, for their initial BDSM education.

Using pornography to learn about sex

Research into pornography's influences on sex education has been largely negative. These include greater acceptance of stereotypical gender roles, such as women being subservient to men (Doornwaard et al. 2017); engagement in sexualised violence/harassment (e.g. Brown and L'Engle 2009); and lowered self-/body-esteem; creating sexual performance insecurities (e.g. Goldsmith et al. 2017; Skoda and Pedersen 2019). Importantly, Bridges et al. (2016) suggest that the consumers of pornography may develop mild aggression (engaging in or being the target of) and degradation sexual scripts to navigate real-world sexual experiences. This may be especially true of adolescents, who are more likely to integrate things learned/viewed from pornography into sexual activities (Banca et al. 2016; Sun et al. 2016). These sexual scripts can lead to unrealistic and misleading attitudes towards sex and relationships (Tsitsika et al. 2009) and less enjoyment (Wright et al. 2021).

However, a growing literature argues that pornography can have a positive impact on learning. In a mixed method systematic review of what is learned from pornography, Litsou et al. (2021) found that the mechanics of sex and sexual identities and sexualities were the most common issues learned about. Other research has demonstrated increased knowledge of the human body and sexual practices, increased sexual competence, and decreased shame (e.g. Goldstein 2021; McCormack and Wignall 2017). Pornography can also promote sexual openness that embraces nonjudgement towards, and even approval of, non-traditional sexual behaviour (Linz & Malamuth, 1993). Specific to BDSM, research has found that pornography can be a useful tool for exposure to sadomasochism (Kubicek et al. 2010) and potentially liberating to closeted BDSM practitioners (Soble, 2011). The exploration of power exchange in BDSM-themed pornography has also been suggested to be empowering rather than oppressing (Scott 2010; Smith and Luykx 2017). This is partly attributed to it effectively balancing pain with pleasure, and presenting performers in non-traditional roles, such as women in dominant roles and men in subservient ones (Cruz 2016; Nash 2014). Although research suggests pornography is used as a learning tool for those interested in BDSM, it is less clear whether it is a *useful* tool in terms of realistic representations of BDSM behaviour.

Materials and methods

Purpose and development

The aim of this exploratory study was to interview community leaders about themes within health and safety that needed to be examined in more detail through large-scale surveying and in-depth interviewing of BDSM practitioners. 'Community leader' was here defined as someone who held a board position, organised meetups, hosted events, and/or educated others through community workshops and classes (Holt 2016).

Community leaders were chosen as the most suitable population for this exploration for three reasons. First, they have many years of experience to reflect and draw upon. Second, they often serve as initial points of contact for people new to the community. Third, as community leaders they may have legal and ethical responsibilities to counter misconceptions that people may have resulting from societal, online and pornographic depictions of BDSM. Therefore, while participants were largely

informed by their own experiences, they drew on their interactions with others, especially those new to BDSM, to provide a broad overview of the role of pornography on expectations and learning.

To accomplish the study aim, we used a semi-structured narrative interview approach, which allowed us to prepare broad questions ahead of time, while providing the flexibility to revise questions, and ask additional probes, based on participants' responses. The interview protocol was developed in collaboration with community members and approved by the San Jose State University institutional review board. Participants were asked how they started participating in BDSM, their perceptions on how others first engaged in BDSM, and what role, if any, popular media had in learning. From here, participants identified the role of pornography in learning about BDSM, which led to follow-up discussions of the impact pornography has on people's initial expectations and understandings of BDSM.

Participants and procedure

A combination of convenience and snowball sampling techniques was used to obtain the final sample size of 18. This was determined through a series of pragmatic judgement decisions shaped by the goals of the analysis, the depth of new information generated from each subsequent interview (informational power), and accessibility to diverse community leaders (Braun and Clarke 2021). The initial nine interviews were acquaintances of the research team members, met through various public and private dungeon parties, workshops, and international conferences. These participants were contacted through a combination of in-person and virtual (FetLife, Facebook, and email) means and advised about the purpose of the study and the questions being asked. If they were interested in participating, a virtual interview was scheduled.

Interviews began with general non-BDSM and BDSM-related conversation to help build rapport and demonstrate the research team's knowledge of BDSM. At the conclusion of each interview, participants were asked to pass along contact information to other community leaders they felt would be interested in participating in the study, especially those that were outside of their own community (to diversify the sample). This snowball sampling led to an additional nine interviews, leading to the final total of 18.

Six interviews were conducted by one of the three primary researchers, seven included two of the researchers, and five with all three. Interviews lasted on average one hour and 45 minutes and ranged from 49 minutes to two hours and 39 minutes. Follow-up email or virtual interviews were conducted with some participants to clarify and/or expand upon responses during the initial interview, or to obtain responses to new questions that arose from subsequent interviews. Participants were not compensated for their time.

Participants came from Western and Central Canada and throughout the USA, with an unintended focus on metropolitan areas including San Francisco, Seattle, Chicago, Washington, and Atlanta (see Table 1 for individual participant demographics). Thirteen self-identified as White, and five as Persons of Colour (POC), with ages ranging from 27 to 67. Some participants identified occupying more than one BDSM role, with nine on the 'left side of the slash' (e.g. Dominant), four on the 'right side of the slash' (e.g. Submissive), and five on 'both sides of the slash' (i.e. Switch).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of BDSM community leaders interviewed.

Name	Race	Country	Yrs. of Exp.	BDSM Role(s)
Atlantis	White	USA	15	Sadist
Alex	White	Canada	10+	Top
Andi	White	Canada	21	Slave
Charlie	POC	USA	23	Switch
Gem	White	USA	21	Switch
Jay	POC	USA	10	Dominant, Top
Lady D	POC	USA	30+	Master, Mistress
Mia	White	Canada	13	Bottom
Michael	White	USA	26	Sadist
Naomi	White	Canada	14	Property
Nelson	White	Canada	30	Dominant, Master
Robin	White	Canada	10	Switch (Top leaning)
Sara	White	Canada	10	Dominant
Steven	White	Canada	No Answer	Dominant, Top
Taylor	White	Canada	14	Bottom
Trudy	POC	USA	16	Switch
Victor	POC	Canada	13	Switch (Top leaning)
Walter	White	USA	13	Dominant, Top

Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed, verified for accuracy, and uploaded to NVivo for thematic analysis. Data analysis was conducted by each of the three researchers, comprising one man and two women. One self-identified as being involved in BDSM for 15+ years, one was knowledgeable about BDSM prior but not actively participating, and a third who was new to BDSM. This diversity led to varying viewpoints about BDSM and facilitated a robust yet nuanced interpretation of the data, contributing to reflexivity. It also allowed each researcher to reflect on their potential bias as it related to each theme and explore implications that their personal perspective may bring to the analysis (see Braun and Clarke 2019). This process allowed the researcher team to determine whether the codes and latent themes fitted with what the participants were saying, and not just the perspective of the individual researcher.

Analysis consisted of the six-phase process described by Braun and Clarke (2006), for conducting reflexive thematic analysis. First, each researcher became familiar with the data through independently reviewing the transcripts and used an open coding process to identify initial patterns of meaning. This was supplemented by memoing and debriefing after each interview and at the conclusion of all interviews. Second, the overall concept of the role of pornography in BDSM learning was identified and initial codes were generated through a combination of deductive and inductive approaches. Third, transcripts were re-analysed for codes and initial themes were collated from these codes. Here, a turn, or multiple sentences spoken by the participant, was the unit of analysis. Fourth, an iterative and reflexive process was undertaken to ensure alignment between themes and codes within and across interviews. This included similarities and differences between coded extracts and whether follow-up interviews were needed. Fifth, themes were collaboratively defined and named by researchers. This step involved an ongoing and reflexive discussion between researchers to allow for a more nuanced analysis of the data. Sixth, appropriate interview excerpts were selected to provide a rich and vivid narrative for the report, that connected back to the original research question – the role of pornography in BDSM learning. This phase also included situating the themes within the current literature.

Results

Four themes were identified pertaining to the role of pornography in learning about BDSM, 1) transitioning to more realistic depictions of BDSM in pornography; 2) identifying and normalising interests and formulating self-acceptance; 3) balancing entertainment with training techniques; and 4) negotiating and ensuring consent.

Transitioning to more realistic depictions of BDSM in pornography

In discussing BDSM's role in learning, participants were quick to distinguish the past from the present. Mia noted that historically 'S&M was portrayed to be very non-consensual ... models and actors were told that the longer you put up with it, or the longer you didn't call it, the more money you were paid'. Likewise, Andi mentioned 'there wasn't any porn that was available, easily accessible, and being done by folks who actually were BDSM practitioners and 100% knew what they were doing ... It was very stereotype fantasy, really scripted'. Participants identified when kink.com, a kink/BDSM pornography website, began operating as a turning point.

I would say the first time ... where you could tell they were actually BDSM folks was really when kink.com got big ... that was really the first time you had practitioners on both sides. Not just an experience[d] dominant, because that I would say came before, but you actually had lifestyle bottoms of all genders. (Andi)

Kink.com, and other websites that followed, have led to a divergence which participants spoke about in which there is now an 'accurate' kind of pornography and an 'inaccurate' (fantastical) kind pornography for learning about BDSM.

Community leaders recognised that the inherent fantastical nature of pornography can often align contrary to the accurate representation of BDSM activities. As Taylor explained,

Real-life kink play can involve a lot of awkwardness, giggling, mid-scene conversations, water breaks, lube breaks, rope adjustments, minor accidents ... when these realistic aspects of BDSM are caught on camera ... they often end up on the cutting room floor because they detract from the fantasy.

As a result, key elements that make for healthy BDSM practices – training, negotiation, maintaining ongoing consent, using safe words, and practising aftercare – may be absent, giving an incomplete lesson to consumers. Walter noted 'I have really significant concerns about porn leading people to believe something about [BDSM and] sex that is not accurate'. Mia agreed, stating 'there's so many misrepresentations ... what you see on the screen or what you read in the books is not going to be what happens when you go to your local dungeon'. This leads to community leaders regularly conversing with newcomers about misconceptions they have formed as a result of pornography. As Trudy explained,

I have to be very explicit because there's so much fantasy, people will go for a fantasy they see online but like a mentor is a real human, that you can talk to. One of the consequences of the BDSM fantasy portrayed in pornography is that the context of the scene is often missing or inaccurately portrayed.

If consumers are unable to delineate the fantasy within pornography from the realistic BDSM elements, this can lead to problematic and dangerous expectations and demands that may carry over to their real-world experiences.

Identifying and normalising interests and formulating self-acceptance

Community leaders believed that pornography could serve as a useful learning mechanism for enabling initial exposure/interest, normalising pre-existing fantasies, and facilitating self-acceptance through seeing others with similar BDSM interests. Community leaders identified that many newcomers they speak with noted pornography is where they were initially exposed to BDSM activities. As Jay explained ‘... with the people I’ve met, I would say in general [learning] probably starts with the Internet to some degree. People are exposed to ideas or pornography’. Likewise, Naomi stated,

I know lots of people who have entered the kink scene because they’ve seen depictions of kink or BDSM practice [in pornography] and them being like ‘that might be for me’. So I think it’s a way that people become exposed to the concept.

For these individuals, pornography can serve as an important gateway into BDSM activities.

For those that already have an interest in BDSM (e.g. fantasise about it), pornography can normalise the interest. This was the case for Mia who said, ‘[it] helped me understand what appealed to me and what didn’t appeal to me and helped me kind of figure out my desires’. It can also open new avenues and directions for further exploration as Charlie explained, ‘... if you like feet, you’ll eventually know where to go and get just like everything feet ... you can find these really cool hyper specialised stuff that can be a gateway into BDSM’. From this, consumers can acquire greater self-acceptance, by seeing others that have similar interests.

When I first got started, I knew this one person that I was playing with. When she and I went our separate ways, it was like ‘now what?’. And so, when I found there were other people [like me], I was like ‘oh, I’m not as weird as I thought I was’. (Nelson)

While pornography can help normalise activities that someone already participates in and/or may initially perceive as abnormal, community leaders noted that the lack of diversity in those depicted within BDSM-themed pornography could lead to increased feelings of shame, isolation, and less self-acceptance.

Participants expressed concerns that BDSM-themed pornography does an insufficient job at including people of different races, body types, gender identities and expressions, and BDSM roles. For Persons of Colour, there was a feeling that BDSM-themed pornography rarely depicted them, and when it did, it was often through a fetishised lens.

... I would start collecting any sexual stuff I found that had brown people in it. Because for a long time, I didn’t find a lot. And then eventually I started a Tumblr called Perverts of Colour, where I just collected all of the porn that had brown people in it related to kink and sexuality and everything ... I met people through my blog who told me the same thing, like they really appreciated having a place to go to see just brown people in a way that wasn’t fetishised or disrespectful or creepy. (Trudy)

Andi felt that the lack of representation also extended to the spectrum of body types and gender identities,

... I would still say it's probably about 70% cis [gender]. But they do have a catalogue that goes outside that. So, their body type inclusion is not awesome but... it's not all size twos, fours, and sixes because they do have lifestyle girls, so there's a few on there who I really like, who are, I would say, like 10/12/14.

For those that do not seek conventional heterosexual dynamics, with the man taking the dominant role and the woman taking the submissive role, participants felt that they were often excluded from representation. For example, Charlie stated,

It's always some chick, it's never a guy in kink.com, strapped up to this - what we call fuck machines - and just like getting beat and forceful blow jobs and all that stuff.

Finally, if the consumer is unaware that people can, and do, consent to BDSM activities, it can lead to feelings of shame.

... when I was young, watching these videos, I would hide. It's your shame time. You'd watch it. You'd finish. Then you're like, 'oh god what did I just get off to? This is awful. I'm a monster'. Especially when I didn't know what kink was. I didn't know you could consent to these things. (Alex)

Overall, BDSM-themed pornography can function to identify and normalise interests, leading to greater self-acceptance of sexual proclivities. As Gem stated, 'I feel like kink is becoming such a norm that you can literally just go on the Internet and research bondage, and then come up with instructions on bondage'. However, BDSM-themed pornography has a long way to go before being truly inclusive and representative. The lack of diversity in practitioners depicted can teach consumers that while BDSM is normal for some, if they belong to an underrepresented group, it is abnormal for them, which can lead to beliefs of being undesirable.

Balancing entertainment with training techniques

Community leaders recognised that BDSM-themed pornography can be beneficial for those seeking to explore new, and expanding existing, techniques for various activities, however, they also felt that consumers are presented with a limited range of possible activities, which can lead to feelings of shame and further isolation.

For those new to BDSM, pornography serves a valuable function by providing ideas on activities they can participate in.

... it can be a good avenue for people to go, 'oh, that's really interesting. Maybe we should try something like that'. Like some type of role play. Or 'oh, I never thought to use this type of thing for restraint'. Or 'oh wow that looks really fun'. 'What is this thing with electricity? Well, maybe we should look into it more'. (Atlantis)

For more experienced practitioners, BDSM-themed pornography can also provide creative ideas on how to vary an existing activity or combine it with other activities. Charlie described this process.

... there is so much deliciously perverted stuff out there. So many different niches ... you can find it and then click on the people and you dive down rabbit holes. You're like 'oh, okay. So I can maybe flog while that's happening. That's pretty cool'.

To facilitate participation in BDSM activities, Sara Blaze and Andi discussed how websites such as kink.com have developed educational branches, which depict performers and kink educators teaching viewers proper techniques.

On the other hand, participants posited that pornography lacked the diversity of BDSM activities possible, which can give consumers a skewed view of what BDSM looks like in practice. Nelson mentioned,

I think the role of BDSM in most pornography, not all but most, is very limited in scope. It doesn't really address the depth of what is possible. And I think the topics are generally a lot less than what is really out there. ... you're really only skimming the surface. . .

For those seeking to engage in edgier activities, such as intense pain, breath, needles, extreme bondage, the lack of representation can lead to feelings of discomfort and further isolation.

I tend to be fairly edgy in my BDSM. . . . and I didn't see things that appealed to me that I had been fantasising about since I started being sexual. I didn't see any of that being portrayed. So, it made me question myself even more. Made me feel more like, 'oh god there's something broken, like, wow, what's wrong with me' ... [it] definitely made me feel like I would be uncomfortable at an event. (Andi)

BDSM-themed pornography can provide exposure to, and education about, common activities, however, the lack of diversity and omission of edgier activities, can provide an incomplete picture of BDSM.

Community leaders also felt that consumers may take activities they see in pornography at face value, failing to recognise the training that actors frequently undergo to perform in these scenes. Atlantis explained that 'there's lots of stuff in [pornography] that you're not seeing. They're taking multiple takes, there's cuts'. As a former performer herself, Taylor likened actors to professional athletes, explaining how these individuals train extensively prior to filming and that they are not walking in off-the-street able to do the activities depicted.

... there's a lot of practice and preparation that goes on behind the scenes. When we see a porno featuring a submissive hanging from one ankle with a fist up their butt, for example, it's key to recognise that they're basically a sexual stunt person doing acts that shouldn't be viewed as one's typical foray into BDSM.

Lady D highlighted how this perception can be a problem when describing an encounter with another practitioner seeking to re-enact what they had seen without considering the training and safety precautions required.

I remember a couple that came in and he walked up to me and ... I actually had my equipment in the dungeon for people that didn't have equipment. . . he said, 'Lady D, do you have suspension cuffs?'. And I said, 'yeah baby', and he said, 'can I borrow them?'. And I was like 'yeah. So, what do you want to do?'. And he said, 'oh, I want to suspend my girl'. And I said 'oh, you do? That'd be cool ... have you ever done suspension before?' He said, 'oh no, but I know she'd love it'.

When this occurs in public settings, community leaders can converse with newcomers about how to engage in BDSM practices in a healthy and safe way.

It's not always the case but we talk a lot, with new people especially, about learning the risks and being well versed in what they're doing and doing a lot of research, getting a lot of references from people, not just taking the first thing they read and going with it. (Sara Blaze)

However, if these actions occur in private, Lady D questioned 'what happens now when you don't have the person that says, time out, time out'. Thus, community leaders expressed concern for consumers' safety if they attempted to replicate what they see in BDSM-themed pornography without proper education about the risks.

Negotiating and ensuring consent

In addition to the types of activities a person can participate in, community leaders explained how BDSM-themed pornography has come to emphasise the importance of detailing the negotiation process. For example, Mia explained, 'I feel like kink.com was pretty instrumental in helping people understand consensual kink ... [they] did a really good job of showing negotiation and showing aftercare and explaining how people were consenting'. In addition to setting the tone that consensual BDSM can be hot and sexy, Alex said that pornography further normalises the negotiation process.

... sitting down talking about why they like this, why this is fun for them. 'This is great. I would come back again', or 'I've done a bunch of these videos ... this is what I look forward to'. This is my favourite part. I think that helps people normalise these actions and sort of humanise the people who were doing it.

Yet, even when discussing the positive presentation of active consent, participants said this could lead to misplaced expectations concerning the use of safe words. Some interviewees who identified as bottoms (the person receiving the action/pain/etc) indicated that even in situations where they want to use their safe word, they may not. Reasons included, but were not limited to, wanting to push themselves beyond what they are capable of, fear of displeasing or letting down their partner, not having enough self-awareness to realise they need to use their safe word, and how stopping may impact the relationship dynamic going forward. If a top (the person giving the action/pain/etc) watches BDSM-themed pornography, they may come to assume that a bottom will automatically use their safe word if there is a problem. For Andi, this is concerning because it may 'abdicate [tops] from some of the responsibility of learning and pay[ing] attention and developing those communication skills'. This can lead to an inability to recognise when limits are reached, for all parties, and increase risks of serious injury, consent violations, and loss of trust.

Discussion

Through conversations with community leaders, we have begun to develop a foundation for examining the role of pornography in BDSM learning. Participants recognised that depictions of BDSM have improved over time, that online pornography is where many first learn about BDSM, and that it can teach people how to participate in some activities and engage in effective negotiation. However, they also recognised that BDSM-themed pornography has the potential to do harm. Central to this was the challenging balance

between pornography's role as a fantasy representation of sexual activity and the need to educate about the potential safety risks of some BDSM activities. This begs the question, how does a consumer new to BDSM determine whether what they are watching is accurate or inaccurate?

Existing concerns about the negative impacts of pornography on sex education were mirrored by study participants in discussing its role in BDSM education. Although not expressed explicitly, an analysis of the data suggests scripts may be developed for navigating real-world BDSM activities, which aligns with concerns about pornography facilitating sex scripts (Banca et al. 2016; Bridges et al. 2016; Sun et al. 2016; Tsitsika et al. 2009). These scripts could lead to misplaced expectations and a lack of discussion prior, during and after an activity, leading to dissatisfaction and consent violations. Like sex-based scripts (Goldsmith et al. 2017; Skoda and Pedersen 2019), if a person's BDSM interests are not readily found online, it could lead to similar increased shame for one's sexual interests in BDSM and low self-esteem. Combined, the development of inaccurate BDSM scripts and omission of their interests online could prevent new practitioners from seeking out real-world mentorship that might assist with education, especially with edge-play such as autoerotic asphyxiation, and normalising interests less frequently represented online. Therefore, future research needs to examine how scripts developed from pornography may lead to challenges/adjustments when first engaging in BDSM.

Although community leaders critiqued the fantastical representation of BDSM in pornography as being problematic, it is important to acknowledge that pornography is not necessarily 'wrong' for oversimplifying, or giving incomplete or inaccurate, depictions. While sexual curiosity (i.e. learning new things) and self-exploration (i.e. identifying and recognising one's sexual needs/preferences) are common motivations for consuming pornography, more than half of users cite sexual pleasure (45%) and fantasy (10%) as their driving motivations (Bóthe et al. 2021). For those focused on sexual gratification, incorporating an accurate BDSM lesson into pornography is not ideal. However, it would also be naive to assume that even when sexual pleasure is the driving motivation, that passive learning does not occur. For example, if a depiction is sexually arousing it may create a desire to replicate it in the real-world.

Despite concerns, participants were not willing to paint all BDSM-themed pornography as bad. Like the growing body of literature arguing the benefits of mainstream pornography (e.g. Goldstein 2021; McCormack and Wignall 2017; Wright and Tokunaga 2018), participants recognised pornography's merits for BDSM learning. Like sex, community leaders believed that pornography could increase BDSM competence (e.g. teach techniques), decrease shame (e.g. normalise interests), and improve negotiation and consent behaviours (Newman and Haire 2019). As not all pornography showing BDSM is problematic, as with pornography in general, this complicates the learning process for consumers who are newer to, or less experienced in, BDSM. For those initially learning about BDSM from pornography, the challenge becomes one of seeking out accurate depictions while simultaneously being in the right frame of mind to separate fantasy from reality. Interestingly, consumers seem to believe that *they* can recognise the wrong lessons learned from pornography, but that *others* may be swayed by pornography as being representative (Koletic et al. 2021; Scarcelli 2015; Goldstein 2020). Specifically referencing BDSM pornography, Shrage (2005) believes that consumers *can* distinguish fact from fiction found in pornography. Therefore, is it up to consumers to understand these delineations, or do sex educators and pornography companies shoulder some of the responsibility?

Assumptions learned from BDSM-themed pornography can be mitigated, to some degree, when a person engages with real-world communities (e.g. Graham et al. 2016). Those that utilise real-world sources appear to recognise that mentorship and educational workshops are better sources of education than pornography (Spratt, Meeker, and O'Brien 2019). This is because community leaders can ask questions about their learning process, debunk inaccurate representations, and point them in the direction of educational BDSM materials. However, minors, who cannot engage with in-person communities, view Internet pornography as an easily accessible source for BDSM information (Randall and McKee 2017), and are more likely than adults to integrate what they view into sexual activity (Banca et al. 2016; Sun et al. 2016), ensuring accurate BDSM-themed pornography is accessible and viewed through the most appropriate lens is paramount. Integral to this is who plays a role in that educational process.

There appears no ready solution for ensuring minors exploring BDSM through pornography obtain accurate knowledge. A potential avenue might be the incorporation of BDSM into sexual education classes. But there are several issues with this approach, especially given youth do not view sex education classes as the place for the most useful information (Rothman et al. 2021). However, Goldstein (2020) demonstrated that if discussions around pornography move away from a top-down approach, focused on harms and effects, towards a holistic and interactive conversational approach, minors can engage with larger issues of sexuality including labour, consent, power, and deviance. While this research focused on pornography more generally, it provides guidance on how similar BDSM-related conversations could be approached, to translate healthy and safe practices more effectively to this demographic.

In addition to traditional educators, pornography producers likely share some of the responsibility for communicating safety, consent, negotiation, safe words, etc (Philpott, Singh, and Gamlin 2017). Yet this could be challenging for mainstream producers, who may not be well-versed in the potential risks, given BDSM may not be a core component of their work, and aim to facilitate sexual pleasure rather than education. Nevertheless, participants' identification that accurate depictions of BDSM in pornography have improved over time, suggests that producers have taken a positive step in acknowledging their role in education. This demonstrates that pornography can be produced to effectively balance arousal with encouraging safe practices. Nevertheless, there is a need for further conversation and research about how to ensure accurate portrayals of BDSM in pornography are the norm and the most readily accessible.

Conclusion

The Internet can serve as an important medium for education on sensitive or personal topics. However, the benefits of confidentiality and anonymity afforded can also decrease the reliability and accuracy of the knowledge being obtained. Although pornography is a common starting point for those interested in BDSM, the impact of using pornography to initially learn about BDSM is unknown. This study sought to begin exploring this concept through interviews with BDSM community leaders on pornography's impact on shaping perceptions and expectations. Overall, participants viewed portrayals of BDSM in pornography as a double-edged sword. While its benefits have increased in the past two decades, there are still several negatives associated with it. These positives

and negatives appear to align to some degree with research on the effects of learning about sex from pornography. Although the current research began to explore pornography in the context of BDSM, it should be looked at as an initial step, with more large-scale studies of BDSM participants needed, and evaluations of online education and learning tools. This is especially true for minors, who cannot access real-world resources and are more likely to rely on Internet sources for education. As BDSM interest and participation increases, it is imperative that people are properly educated about risks, challenges and safe practices, including consent and negotiation.

Note

1. There is no single definition of what constitutes BDSM pornography as BDSM occurs on a continuum and differs for each person. Therefore, we define BDSM pornography broadly to include depictions of fantasy, fetishes, consensual violence, role play, power exchange, and other activities (see Bezreh, Weinberg, and Edgar 2012).

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