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An International Survey of BDSM Practitioner Demographics: The Evolution of Purpose for, Participation in, and Engagement with, Kink Activities

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ABSTRACT



While general proclivities for BDSM participation have been investigated in various countries, few large-scale studies have been conducted specifically with BDSM practitioners, which would allow for more in-depth analyses of participation. Through an online survey of 810 BDSM practitioners, the predictability of demographics and BDSM-related traits on the who, what, when, where, why, and how of BDSM participation were examined. Descriptive and regression analyses led to six findings. First, BDSM is practiced globally by a heterogeneous group. Second, learning about to participating in BDSM is a stepwise progression occurring over years. Third, pathways into BDSM vary with self-introduction, often as a form of sexual exploration, more common for adolescents, and friends/partners, and as a form of self-growth, more common for those introduced later in life. Fourth, historically viewed as sex-driven, few demographics predicted purpose for BDSM participation, while enjoyment/fun was the most common motivation. Fifth, practitioners participate in BDSM with multiple others beyond intimate partners, suggesting a communal element. Sixth, as a person gains more BDSM experience, their purpose/motivation evolves and the frequency and “risk” (i.e. edge-play) of activities participated in increases. Implications for further research into BDSM sub-culture are discussed, relating to the role of BDSM in sexual practice, sexual orientation, and leisure (hobby) activity identity formation, the impact of geographic, racial, and generational differences on participation, differing experiences of sexual and gender minorities (e.g. transgender, pansexual), and the importance of BDSM-specific measures, such as years of experience and occupying multiple BDSM-related roles, in analyses.

Introduction

The practice of bondage/discipline,¹ Domination²/submission, Sadism/masochism³ (BDSM), sometimes referred to as kink, includes, but is not limited to, fantasy, fetishes, consensual violence, sensation, role play, and exchange (taking or giving up) of power (Damm et al., 2018; Ortmann & Sprott, 2012; Pitagora, 2013). Increased awareness of BDSM as a non-pathological social and cultural activity has contributed to a quickly expanding body of literature, addressing a broad array of topics (see Brown et al., 2020 for a systematic review). This has led to extensive research over the past decade into the prevalence of BDSM participation amongst college students (Boyd-Rogers et al., 2022) and online samples (Walker & Kuperberg, 2022; Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013), as well as representative samples of Americans (Herbenick et al., 2017, 2020), Australians (Richters et al., 2008, 2014), Belgians (Coppens et al., 2020; Holvoet et al., 2017), Dutch (Schuerwegen et al., 2021), Finnish (Paarnio et al., 2022), Italians (Botta et al., 2019), and Norwegians (Træen et al., 2022). Combined, these studies have provided important insights into the relationship between BDSM and pornography consumption, coping styles, sexual behaviors,

sexual coercion, and personality characteristics (e.g., extroversion, openness, and honesty).

Surveying of the general population rather than large-scale surveying of BDSM practitioners can be attributed, at least in part, to this being a hard-to-reach population that experiences stigmatization (Freeburg & McNaughton, 2017; Lindemann, 2013; Stein, 2021; Wright, 2018). However, reliance on the general population for investigation of BDSM practices necessitates that studies need to be more general and freer of BDSM-specific language (Boyd-Rogers et al., 2022). This means that important concepts as well as linkages between these concepts are difficult to explore in depth, especially across various demographics, BDSM roles and dynamics, and edge play⁴ activities. The current study sought to address these limitations in three ways. First, by introducing the methodology for a large-scale, mixed-method, online survey of self-described BDSM practitioners on the motivations, benefits, and experiences of participating in BDSM. Second, by analyzing the five W's of participation – when (i.e., age of exposure/onset), what are the sources of introduction (e.g., media), where (e.g., only privately), why (i.e., purpose), with who (e.g., romantic, friend, stranger), and how frequently. Third, to identify the predictive

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¹A type of BDSM practice that incorporates bondage (tying, binding, or restraining someone) and discipline (punishing a submissive partner when they break a rule).

²We have taken the intentional step to capitalize Master, Dominant, Owner, and Top throughout, when discussed in comparison to slave, submission, property, and bottom to acknowledge the inherent power differences between the opposing roles within BDSM.

³This subset of BDSM involves inflicting pain or humiliation for the purpose of pleasure or sexual gratification.

⁴Edge play are activities viewed as more intense or dangerous such as breath, blood, and cutting.

relationship, or linkages, between these topics, specific demographics (e.g., sexual orientation, race, relationship status), and subsets of the BDSM community (e.g., years of experience, different BDSM roles).

Age of BDSM Onset

There have been a handful of descriptive analyses conducted on the age of onset for BDSM interest and practice. As this area of research has progressed, the nuance of what is meant by “participation” has increased. Within the last decade, Pascoal et al. (2015) were one of the first to explore the age at which people become interested in and start participating in BDSM. They found that interest occurred, on average, at 22 years of age and that it took six years (i.e., 28 years old) before the 68 participants surveyed began engaging in BDSM activities. Holvoet et al. (2017) were one of the first to explicitly study age of onset in a large-scale survey, finding that 61% became interested before 25 and 8% prior to 15, while Botta et al. (2019) found that first BDSM experience in men was at age 28.3 and 29.9 for women.

Building upon earlier research, adding nuance, Coppens et al. (2020) divided participants into those who had only fantasized about participating in BDSM, those who had participated privately, and those who had participated in a community setting (e.g., public dungeon). They found that 40% of fantasize-only participants became aware of their interests below 20 years of age, while 32% of private-only and 61% of community participants were aware when they were under 20 years old. When it came to first experiencing BDSM, 18% of private-only and 25% of community participants did so prior to 20. However, to this point, there had been no comparison of practitioners across different BDSM roles and/or demographics nor a delineation between first participating privately and first participating publicly.

Walker and Kuperberg (2022) were the first to begin addressing the limitations of prior research, by quantitatively exploring age of onset across various BDSM roles and demographics as well as qualitatively identifying several sources of initial exposure/introduction (popular culture, sexual partner, self). They found that the average age of first fantasy was 15.3, with 76.4% fantasizing prior to age 18. For first practicing in BDSM, the average age was 21.5, with 25.2% participating prior to 18 and only 11.6% after 30. Providing further details about BDSM/demographic predictors, those who identified with Dominant BDSM roles were older when first fantasizing while queer, submissive, and masochist participants were younger at fantasy onset. When it came to first practicing, switches⁵ were younger while women were older. Finally, they did not find a relationship between race or education with fantasy and practice onset.

Purpose for Participation

The origins for participating in BDSM have been focused on determining whether BDSM is the result of factors that are intrinsic, rooted in it being part of personal identity, or extrinsic,

rooted in environmental processes such as during childhood development. This research has largely explored this origin in the framework of sexual identity (Yost & Hunter, 2012) and sexual orientation (Gemberling et al., 2015). However, a growing amount of research has argued that while BDSM and sex are strongly linked (e.g., Sprott et al., 2019), for many this is not necessarily their driving purpose (Sagarin et al., 2015). This has led to discussions surrounding BDSM as a form of serious leisure (Sprott & Williams, 2019) and the non-erotic /sexual purposes for participation (Turley, 2022), including therapeutic benefits (Lindemann, 2011; Schuerwegen et al., 2021; Sheppard, 2019) such as navigating trauma (Thomas, 2020). As a result, the purpose for initial and continued participation in BDSM may not be directly linked to just sexual identity/orientation, but rather to the development of identity formation more generally.

Erikson (1968) and Marcia (1966) characterized identity formation as developmental steps occurring over the life course, with the former consisting of eight progressive stages and the latter consisting of four non-sequential statuses. Both argued that identity is rooted in both a sense of the self (individuality and uniqueness) and society (belonging and relatedness), and that navigation of stages/statuses can positively or negatively impact subsequent stages/statuses. Building upon these, Adams and Marshall (1996) provided a set of propositions related to the understanding of selfhood through socialization that can be used to explore purposes for BDSM participation. These included the role of social influences on identifying what is important (e.g., romantic partner(s) and/or friends on sources of BDSM introduction), the social structure for understanding oneself (e.g., relationships with BDSM co-participants), developing identity through a self-regulation system (e.g., mental well-being), consistency and harmony within values and beliefs (e.g., enjoyment/fulfillment), providing a sense of personal control and free will (e.g., addressing personal needs/urges), recognition of potential (e.g., self-exploration/growth), and finding communion with society (e.g., connection with others).

In addition to identity development theory, small-scale studies of BDSM provide a foundation from which to examine purpose at a larger scale. For example, Labrecque et al. (2021) described five broad purposes for participating in BDSM among sexual masochists and submissives. First is power plays, which refers to the erotic power of giving up, taking, or exchanging control. Second is altered states of consciousness, which refers to the use of pain to achieve a higher, altered, state of spiritual connection through prolonged stimulation. Third is meditation/relaxation, which refers to escapism from mundane matters, using the stimulation of BDSM activities to be present in the moment, and to relax from life stressors. Fourth is pleasure/leisure, which refers to the positive emotions associated with the enjoyment of learning through self-exploration and adventure. Fifth is sexual arousal, which refers to more traditional views of BDSM as an enhancement of sexual practice between intimate partners.

Frequency of Participation in BDSM Activities

The frequency of participation in BDSM activities has been explored in previous research but has often suffered from one

⁵A person who will assume either role of a Top and or a bottom in a BDSM scene.

or more of the following limitations: a) been conducted with representative samples in specific countries (i.e., not wide-spread), b) examined in relation to sexual practices/pleasure/behavior, c) omitted comparisons (descriptive and predictive) between various BDSM roles and demographics, and/or d) lacked depth regarding the frequency and engagement in edge play activities such as consensual non-consent⁶ (CNC), cutting, watersports,⁷ scat,⁸ guns, and breath.⁹

Most commonly, BDSM activities have been studied in relation to sexual intercourse, using a single survey question, within a single country. For example, Richters et al. (2008, 2014) conducted telephone interviews with Australians, asking whether they had participated (yes/no) in BDSM with a sexual partner within the past year. In 2008, they found 2.2% of men and 1.3% of women reported doing so, while in 2014, rates increased slightly to 2.5% of men and 1.6% of women. Exploring pornography use over a lifetime, Herbenick et al. (2020) conducted a probabilistic survey of Americans and found that 19.7% of men and 20.3% of women had engaged in BDSM at least once. Similarly, Træen et al. (2022) conducted a probabilistic survey of Norwegians and found that 10.4% had tried BDSM (10.6% for men and 10.3% for women) and 9.7% wanted to try BDSM (10.1% of men and 9.4% of women). Surveying Finnish twins and siblings, Paarino et al. (2022) found that 35.6% of men and 38.4% of women had an interest in BDSM, as did 34.4% of heterosexual and 50.0% of homosexual participants. They also examined giving and receiving domination, humiliation, or bondage (tied up) during sexual activity. Men were likelier than women to be the giver of BDSM activities at least once (31.7% vs 24.7%), while women were likelier than men to be the receiver (37.2% vs 22.6%). Finally, homosexuals were likelier than heterosexuals to be both the giver (33.6% vs 25.5%) and receiver (39.9% vs 29.9%) of BDSM activities at least once during sexual activity.

There have also been a small set of studies that delved deeper, exploring participation in specific BDSM activities, but still often linked with sex. For example, Herbenick et al. (2017) explored how appealing (very, somewhat, not, not at all) are sexual behaviors, including bondage, whipping, spanking, biting, blindfolding, and experiencing pain, in a nationally representative online survey of American men and women. They found that biting appealed (somewhat or very) to 43.9%, blindfolding to 38.9%, bondage to 29.3%, spanking to 28.4%, whipping to 20.3%, and experiencing pain as part of sex to 11.4%. Finally, 7.0% also found going to a BDSM club, party, or dungeon somewhat or very appealing. Surveying 289 lesbian and 58 bisexual New York City women, Tomassilli et al. (2009) asked whether they participated (yes/no) in kinky sexual behaviors, bondage/domination, exhibitionism, sadomasochism, and asphyxiation/breath play. At least one kink activity was engaged in by 43.8% of participants, with bondage being more prevalent among White (37.9%) participants than Women of Color (27.9%). Using snowball sampling, Botta et al. (2019) explored differences across 25 BDSM activities

(e.g., needles,¹⁰ bondage, chastity,¹¹ sensory deprivation,¹² humiliation,¹³ human furniture,¹⁴ pet play¹⁵) between sexes (male/female) and BDSM roles (Dominant/submissive/switch) of 266 Italians. However, there was no gradation to the analysis as participants were asked whether they had “done” or “received” the activity. Likewise, Rehor (2015) conducted descriptive analyses (percentage of participants) across a broad range of BDSM activities (e.g., flogging, humiliation, punishment, caning,¹⁶ electro¹⁷), but only gauging participation among women as “done to others”, “done to you”, and “observing”. They found that women enjoyed tactile sensations such as touching, ice, candle wax,¹⁸ and fur, more than activities associated with pain. However, pain-related activities such as hair pulling, biting, bondage, and paddling were also common. Finally, two representative sample studies of Belgians have explored BDSM activity frequency outside of the context of sex, with a sample of just over 1,000 (Coppens et al., 2020; Holvoet et al., 2017). These studies used a scale which included options never do this, like to try, fantasize sometimes/regularly, tried, like, do regularly/indispensable. Activities were clustered into four categories – Dominant, submissive, visual, and attributes – and compared across sex (male/female), four age groups, and sexual orientation (heterosexual vs non-heterosexual). They found that movement restrictive activities (i.e., bondage), blindfolds, and ice garnered the most interest.

Current Study

We built upon the existing literature on age of BDSM onset, the purpose for participating in BDSM, and the frequency of BDSM activities participated in by practitioners in four ways. First, we separated age of onset into a wider scope of categories than previously studied (e.g., Walker & Kuperberg, 2022): learn about, interest in (i.e., fantasize), participate privately, and participate publicly. In doing so, we explored whether the stages of progression from learning about, to participating in, BDSM occur over an extended period or in quick succession. We also investigated whether demographics (e.g., gender, race, sexual orientation), sources of introduction (e.g., partner, media), and/or purposes for engaging in BDSM (e.g., sex, intrinsic urges) predict younger ages at which practitioners enter each of the four stages (learn, fantasize, private, public) of BDSM participation.

⁶One participant is “consenting” to act out a scene of “non-consent”

⁷Play that involves urination, also referred to as golden shower.

⁸Play involving defecation, crap, poop, shit.

⁹A form of play when one participant controls the breath of the other. This may include choking or asphyxiation.

¹⁰This involves using needles on a partner, involves sticking a needle (temporarily) through a body part or erogenous zone.

¹¹A form of erotic sexual denial or orgasm denial where a person is prevented access to or stimulation of their genitals sometimes using a chastity belt.

¹²Using various objects such as blindfolds, ear plugs, etc. to deprive the subject of one or more senses, may be used to enhance other senses such as touch or create insecurity and often used in pushing limits or fostering increased trust.

¹³This involves a sub agreeing to demeaning situations, verbal insults, servitude, cross dressing, and other activities meant to demean and embarrass the sub by their Dom/Domme.

¹⁴Play where the submissive is directed to assume the role of furniture such as a footstool or table.

¹⁵A submissive is treated like a loved pet (e.g., puppy or pony).

¹⁶A thin rod used for striking commonly made of hardwood bamboo or acrylic.

¹⁷Involvement of electrically charged objects such as violet wands, stun guns, cattle prods.

¹⁸When the top drips hot wax onto the bottom.

Second, we explored the purpose for participating in BDSM by expanding a) beyond sexual-based purposes to self-growth, connection, and other purposes, b) beyond subsets of practitioners, such as sexual masochists and submissive (e.g., Labrecque et al., 2021), and c) to a larger sample than previous interview-based studies (e.g., Graham et al., 2016; Vivid et al., 2020; Yost & Hunter, 2012). We sought to determine whether certain demographics (e.g., gender, relationship status), sources of introduction to BDSM (e.g., self), and BDSM-related attributes (e.g., years of experience, submissive) predicted purpose for participating in BDSM.

Third, because of the strong association between sexual practice and BDSM, most research has assumed that BDSM is participated in by romantic/sexual partners. However, it is possible that for those whose purpose is not sexual arousal, or not just sexual arousal, they may engage in BDSM with non-sexual participants, such as friends, strangers, and even alone. Therefore, to examine this possibility, we determined whether a) practitioners participate with a myriad of partners, including alone and with non-romantic partners (e.g., friends and strangers) and b) whether demographics (e.g., geographical location, sexual orientation), BDSM-related attributes, and/or the source of introduction to BDSM (self or partner) predicted who practitioners co-participated with in BDSM.

Fourth, we explored engagement in BDSM activities beyond what has previously been studied (e.g., Coppens et al., 2020; Rehor, 2015) by a) increasing the time frequencies measured (i.e., never, rarely, sometimes, often, and regularly) and b) examining it outside of the context of sexual intercourse. In doing so, we determined whether sex (male/female), years of BDSM experience, and whether a practitioner participates only privately or also publicly predicted more frequent engagement in edge play activities (e.g., CNC, cutting, fire¹⁹).

Method

Measures

The survey developed for this research was informed from a review of the literature and interviews with 18 community leaders on a variety of topics related to health and safety in BDSM practices (see Westlake et al., 2023). Interviews averaged one hour and 45 minutes and ranged from 49 minutes to two hours and 39 minutes. After conducting a thematic analysis of the interviews, themes and key concepts identified were translated into open-ended and close-ended survey questions. The survey developed consisted of 102 questions, with many having multiple sub-questions, across nine broad themes: demographics (21 questions), participation in BDSM (22), community structure, safety, and engagement (14), participation in sex work (8), pornography (9), upbringing (10), parenting (4), mental health and chronic pain (5), and intimate partner violence (9). Participants were informed at the beginning of the survey that all questions were optional (i.e., any question could be left blank or skipped). Each of the final two sections on mental health and chronic pain and intimate

partner violence were preceded by a description of the purpose of asking these questions, the types of questions that would be asked, and an option to skip the section(s) without seeing the questions (to avoid potential trauma to participants). Participants were also told that if they skipped these sections, they would still be eligible to receive financial compensation for their participation. Open-ended questions were preferred throughout the survey, especially regarding demographics and personal experiences, to minimize restricting responses.

Both authors identify as cisgender, predominantly heterosexual, and White. The lead author has practical and theoretical knowledge of BDSM and BDSM-practices, while the coauthor's prior research has focused on the experiences of trauma survivors and domestic violence. Given that these positionalities can impact the development and interpretation of findings from the survey, prior to dissemination, the survey went through extensive external review. First, two experts (one who participated in BDSM and one who did not) in cultural, racial, gender, and sexual sensitivity were financially compensated \$100 each to review the survey to ensure that the language used was appropriate and inclusive. This was an iterative process, which included providing feedback for individual questions on multiple versions of the survey and the final draft. This led to changes such as race terminology (e.g., West Asian for Middle East participants; LatinX being separate from Hispanic) and inclusions of additional relationship styles (e.g., "relationship anarchy"). Second, the survey was piloted back to the 18 community leaders initially interviewed prior to the survey's construction, who were asked to provide feedback on the types and wording of questions. This led to additions in various sections, including issues within BDSM communities (e.g., ableism and racism), different dynamic terminology (e.g., owner/property instead of master/slave), identification of common mental health diagnoses in BDSM communities (e.g., fibromyalgia), and rephrasing of questions to improve clarity. Third, the survey was reviewed by our institutional review board. Fourth, the survey was internally reviewed (e.g., organizational review board) by several of the organizations we solicited to assist in disseminating the survey.

Procedure

The survey was conducted through Qualtrics and advertised primarily through FetLife, a free BDSM/kink social networking website akin to Facebook, whose operators conducted an ethics and legal review prior to allowing us to solicit individual discussion groups for dissemination of the survey. We also solicited 10 university-based kink/sexuality research organizations (e.g., The Science of BDSM), BDSM/kink specific organizations (e.g., The Eulenspiegel Society), and sex-related organizations (e.g., Kinsey Institute), who distributed the survey through mailing lists and social media accounts (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram). Finally, we recruited from four Reddit and six Facebook discussion groups.

Prior to posting in any discussion group (FetLife, Reddit, or Facebook), the group administrators/moderators were contacted, provided university contact information for the research team, informed about the purpose of the survey, provided a copy of the survey, and asked if they would permit

¹⁹Play involving the use of flammable liquids to create quick, fleeting contacts of flame on the skin.

it to be advertised in their group. On FetLife specifically, 83 groups were contacted, with 45 approving, 28 declining for various reasons, and 10 providing no response. Groups solicited varied, including those targeting younger and older members, various activities (e.g., rope, bondage, latex, spanking, humiliation), topics (e.g., toy crafting, intelligence kink, psychology and BDSM), and sex-focuses (e.g., gangbangs and group fun, threesomes, rough sex).

Within advertisements on discussion groups and through mailing list outreach, prospective participants were informed of the purpose of the survey and the nine topics that would be covered. They were told that the survey would take approximately 45 minutes to complete but could be done in multiple sittings, provided they used the same device to return to the survey. To ensure privacy and confidentiality all tracking settings in Qualtrics (e.g., IP address and location) were turned off. At the conclusion of the survey participants could click a separate link to disconnect from survey responses and enter a draw for one of six \$100 USD prizes. They also had the option to leave contact information for a follow-up interview to discuss topics covered in the survey more in-depth.

Participants

A total of 979 people attempted the survey, which was deemed as having completed at least 5%. The entire survey was completed by 595 (61%) while 629 (64%) completed at least 50% of the survey. Five (0.5%) participants declined the consent form but were still eligible to enter the draw. The final sample size was 810 (82.7%), which comprised all participants who completed the sections covered in the current research. 376 participants provided their contact information for entrance into the cash prize draws. Of these, 309 (82%) also opted-in to a follow-up interview, demonstrating that this was an engaged sample. All 376 participants were placed into a spreadsheet and a random number generator was used to select the six winners. Winners were then contacted via e-mail and asked how they would like to receive their \$100 USD. Four selected Amazon gift cards, one chose a Visa gift card, and one chose an electronic funds transfer to their bank account.

Nearly all demographic questions were open-ended, to ensure that people could provide the response that was most applicable to them. Responses were then recoded into groups based on their frequency, and to ensure that the groups met requirements for meaningful statistical analyses. A summary of the study demographics, by sex at birth (male, female, intersex), are presented in Table 1. Overall, participants came from 43 different countries, although they were predominantly from USA, Canada, and United Kingdom. Ages ranged from 18 to 80, with an average of 39.6, which were then recoded into generations – Baby Boomer, Generation X, Millennial, Generation Z. This decision was made to simplify age for analysis purposes (fewer categories) and to acknowledge the changes over time in a) BDSM culture, b) laws and policies, c) media representations, and d) the role of the Internet in knowledge acquisition (see Sisson, 2007 for detailed history of BDSM sub-culture). As a result of these changes, analyses focused on comparisons between Generation Z and older generations.

In addition to sex at birth, participants were asked, through two open-ended questions, whether they identified as transgender and what was their gender identification.²⁰ Responses to gender were collapsed into nine categories based on frequency counts – agender ($n = 13$), androgyne ($n = 3$), gender-queer ($n = 12$), genderfluid ($n = 28$), non-binary ($n = 33$), questioning/unsure ($n = 12$), another gender identity ($n = 11$), man ($n = 294$), and woman ($n = 402$). Of those born male, 86.4% identified as a man (i.e., cisgender man) while 80.8% of those born female identified as a woman (i.e., cisgender woman). Gender was subsequently analyzed as cisgender and non-cisgender for two reasons. First, because sex was also included in analyses (i.e., high correlation between sex and gender) and second, to increase the sample size for other gender identities, so statistical comparisons could be meaningful. Responses to sexual orientation were collapsed into 11 categories based on frequency of counts – heterosexual ($n = 329$), bisexual ($n = 242$), pansexual ($n = 113$), asexual ($n = 21$), hetero/homo-flexible ($n = 21$), queer ($n = 20$), gay ($n = 15$), lesbian ($n = 13$), demisexual ($n = 7$), bicurious ($n = 3$), and “another” ($n = 22$). Sexual orientation was subsequently analyzed with the three largest groups (heterosexual, bisexual, and pansexual), with the rest collapsed into an “other” category. Despite efforts to racially diversify the sample,²¹ it was predominantly White, followed by Hispanic ($n = 33$)/LatinX ($n = 19$), Black, and South ($n = 9$)/East ($n = 21$) Asian. As a result, subsequent analyses compared White practitioners to Persons of Color (POC) practitioners.

Participants were distributed across a variety of relationship statuses, with married, dating, and single the most common. However, 59 stated committed relationship, 30 partnered, 22 engaged, 18 common law, 13 divorced, 8 widowed, and 6 separated. In addition to relationship status, current and preferred relationship style were asked. For preferred relationship style, participants could select more than one, with monogamous, mostly monogamous, nonhierarchical ($n = 165$) and hierarchical ($n = 115$) polyamory, and open being the most common. Additionally, “other,” responses included relationship anarchy ($n = 78$), polygamous ($n = 68$), swinging ($n = 54$), swapping ($n = 29$), and cheating ($n = 1$).

More than 50% of the sample had a bachelors or graduate degree. Self-perceived personal and household income were asked in relation to those within their community or country, with bands of 10% increments provided (e.g., 1–10%, 11–20%). Personal income appeared evenly distributed (e.g., 40% of participants identified being in the bottom 40%), while participants perceived a higher household income (e.g., 28% identified being in the middle 20%). Therefore, personal income was used in subsequent analyses. Participants were largely employed, with students making up the second largest group, followed by the unemployed and retired. Finally, 313 owned their own home, while 391 rented and 82 lived with family (rent free). Some also couch surfed ($n = 5$), or reported co-op

²⁰Throughout, when referencing “sex at birth,” we use the terms female and male. When referencing “gender,” we use the terms women and men.

²¹Participants could select more than one racial background, therefore numbers presented here do not match combined categories (i.e., Hispanic/LatinX and South/East Asian) found in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographics of BDSM practitioners.

	Sex at Birth*			Sample* (%)
	Male (%)	Female (%)	Intersex (%)	
Geographic Region				
USA	203 (63.6)	285 (60.4)	3 (100.0)	492 (61.7)
Canada	38 (11.9)	71 (15.0)	0 (0.0)	109 (13.7)
UK	20 (6.3)	39 (8.3)	0 (0.0)	60 (7.5)
Other Country	58 (18.2)	77 (16.3)	0 (0.0)	137 (17.2)
Generation				
Baby Boomer (1946 to 1964)	72 (22.6)	29 (6.1)	1 (33.3)	102 (12.7)
Generation X (1965 to 1980)	100 (31.4)	112 (23.4)	0 (0.0)	214 (26.7)
Millennial (1981 to 1996)	116 (36.5)	234 (49.0)	0 (0.0)	351 (43.7)
Generation Z (1997 to 2010)	30 (9.4)	103 (21.5)	2 (66.6)	136 (16.9)
Gender				
Man	279 (86.4)	14 (2.9)	1 (33.3)	294 (36.4)
Woman	13 (4.0)	387 (80.8)	1 (33.3)	402 (49.8)
Genderqueer+	15 (4.6)	58 (12.2)	0 (0.0)	73 (9.0)
Other	16 (5.0)	20 (4.2)	1 (33.3)	39 (4.8)
Transgender				
Yes	24 (7.5)	50 (10.4)	0 (0.0)	76 (9.4)
No	297 (92.5)	429 (89.6)	3 (100.0)	730 (90.6)
Sexual Orientation				
Heterosexual	176 (54.7)	153 (32.0)	0 (0.0)	329 (40.8)
Bisexual	72 (22.4)	168 (35.1)	2 (66.6)	242 (30.0)
Pansexual	34 (10.6)	79 (16.5)	0 (0.0)	113 (14.0)
Other	40 (12.3)	78 (16.3)	1 (33.3)	119 (14.8)
Race^a				
White	279 (87.5)	391 (81.8)	3 (100.0)	675 (84.1)
Black	6 (1.9)	15 (3.1)	0 (0.0)	21 (2.6)
Hispanic/LatinX	9 (2.8)	17 (3.6)	0 (0.0)	26 (3.2)
South/East Asian	6 (1.9)	13 (2.7)	0 (0.0)	19 (2.4)
Other	19 (6.0)	42 (8.8)	0 (0.0)	62 (7.7)
Current Relationship Status				
Married	111 (34.8)	103 (22.1)	0 (0.0)	215 (26.5)
Single	91 (28.5)	121 (25.9)	0 (0.0)	213 (25.8)
Dating	61 (19.1)	145 (31.0)	2 (66.6)	209 (26.3)
Other	56 (17.6)	98 (21.0)	1 (33.3)	156 (19.3)
Current Relationship "Style"				
Single	56 (17.6)	70 (14.7)	0 (0.0)	126 (15.7)
Monogamous	95 (29.8)	133 (27.9)	1 (33.3)	230 (28.7)
"Mostly" Monogamous	55 (17.2)	70 (14.7)	0 (0.0)	125 (15.6)
Polyamorous	53 (16.7)	93 (19.6)	1 (33.3)	147 (18.4)
Open	30 (9.4)	49 (10.3)	0 (0.0)	79 (9.9)
Relationship Anarchy	5 (1.6)	29 (6.1)	1 (33.3)	36 (4.5)
Other	25 (7.7)	32 (6.7)	0 (0.0)	57 (7.1)
Preferred Relationship "Style"^{ab}				
Single	13 (4.0)	31 (6.5)	0 (0.0)	44 (5.4)
Monogamous	89 (27.5)	169 (35.3)	0 (0.0)	260 (32.1)
"Mostly" Monogamous	93 (28.7)	133 (27.8)	1 (33.3)	227 (28.0)
Polyamorous	87 (26.9)	152 (31.7)	1 (33.3)	241 (29.8)
Open	78 (24.1)	101 (21.1)	1 (33.3)	180 (22.2)
Relationship Anarchy	13 (4.0)	62 (12.9)	2 (66.6)	78 (9.6)
Other	69 (21.3)	79 (16.5)	2 (66.6)	150 (18.5)
Education				
High School or Less	24 (7.4)	44 (9.2)	0 (0.0)	70 (8.7)
Some College	113 (35.0)	146 (30.5)	0 (0.0)	260 (32.2)
Bachelor's Degree	101 (31.3)	166 (34.7)	3 (100.0)	271 (33.5)
Post-Graduate	85 (26.3)	122 (35.5)	0 (0.0)	207 (25.6)
Rank of Personal Income				
Lowest 40%	82 (27.8)	216 (49.3)	2 (66.6)	301 (40.7)
Middle 20%	73 (24.7)	121 (27.6)	0 (0.0)	195 (26.4)
Highest 40%	140 (47.5)	101 (23.1)	1 (33.3)	243 (32.9)
Rank of Household Income				
Lowest 40%	64 (21.8)	154 (35.3)	1 (33.3)	220 (29.9)
Middle 20%	75 (25.5)	131 (30.0)	0 (0.0)	207 (28.1)
Highest 40%	155 (52.7)	151 (34.6)	2 (66.6)	309 (42.0)
Employment Status				
Employed	246 (79.4)	364 (79.8)	1 (33.3)	613 (79.4)
Unemployed	19 (6.1)	27 (5.9)	0 (0.0)	47 (6.1)
Retired	29 (9.4)	14 (3.1)	1 (33.3)	44 (5.7)
Student	16 (5.2)	51 (11.2)	1 (33.3)	68 (8.8)
Housing Status				
Own	158 (49.2)	154 (32.2)	1 (33.3)	313 (38.8)
Rent	129 (40.2)	258 (54.0)	1 (33.3)	391 (48.5)
Living with Family	29 (9.0)	51 (10.7)	1 (33.3)	82 (10.2)
Other	5 (1.6)	15 (3.1)	0 (0.0)	20 (2.5)

*some participants did not respond to every demographic question, so totals do not add up to 810.

^aparticipants were able to select more than one category.

+ 'genderqueer' includes responses of genderqueer, genderfluid, and non-binary.

Table 2. BDSM role(s) of participants.

Side of Slash	Specific Role	Sex at Birth*			Sample (%)
		Male (%)	Female (%)	Intersex (%)	
Left-Only	Master	123 (40.7)	41 (8.9)	1 (33.3)	166 (21.6)
	Dominant	11 (3.4)	2 (0.4)	0 (0.0)	13 (1.6)
	Top	139 (43.6)	58 (12.2)	1 (33.3)	200 (25.0)
	Sadist	16 (5.0)	23 (4.9)	1 (33.3)	40 (5.0)
Right-Only	Sadist	52 (16.3)	50 (10.5)	0 (0.0)	103 (12.9)
	property/owned/slave	95 (31.5)	284 (61.9)	1 (33.3)	382 (49.7)
	submissive	7 (2.2)	32 (6.8)	0 (0.0)	40 (5.0)
	bottom	109 (34.2)	302 (63.7)	2 (66.6)	416 (52.0)
Both	bottom	8 (2.5)	39 (8.3)	0 (0.0)	47 (5.9)
	masochist	14 (4.4)	100 (21.1)	1 (33.3)	117 (14.6)
	Sadomasochist	84 (27.8)	134 (29.2)	1 (33.3)	220 (28.6)
	Switch-Identifying	6 (1.9)	33 (7.0)	0 (0.0)	40 (22.2)
		82 (25.7)	117 (24.7)	0 (0.0)	200 (25.0)

*some participants did not provide their sex at birth.

($n = 5$), transitional/social housing ($n = 3$), student housing ($n = 2$), lived in car ($n = 1$), and other statuses not listed ($n = 4$).

Using an open-ended question, participants were asked to identify their BDSM role, or roles (Table 2). Most chose more than one role, with 28.6% identifying roles on both the left-side (i.e., “Dominant” roles) and the right-side (i.e., “submissive” roles) of the M/s or D/s slash. Of those identifying on both sides of the slash, 25.0% specifically mentioned switch while 22.2% said Sadomasochist. On the left-side, 21.6% identified with only these roles. The four most common were Master, Dominant, Top, and Sadist; however, other responses included Rigger ($n = 23$), Daddy/Mommy ($n = 19$), Caregiver ($n = 7$), Owner ($n = 7$), and Trainer ($n = 3$). Nearly half (49.7%) identified with roles only on the right-side of the slash. The four most common were property/owned/slave, submissive, bottom, and masochist; however, other responses included brat ($n = 40$), rope bottom/bunny ($n = 29$), pet ($n = 18$), little ($n = 16$), and prince/princess ($n = 10$). There were also some that were unsure/exploring ($n = 19$), primal ($n = 10$), none ($n = 2$), and other (e.g., slut, fetishist, kinkster; $n = 32$).

Results

The process from being introduced to BDSM to regularly participating in BDSM can be broken down into five concepts. First, the age pathways into BDSM, including when a person learns about, becomes interested in, and then begins participating, either publicly or privately, in BDSM. Second, the source, or sources, of introduction into BDSM. Third, the purpose/reason for continuing to participate in BDSM after first exposure. Once a person has been introduced to BDSM and found their purpose, fourth is with whom they co-participate and fifth is the types and frequency of activities engaged in. Each of these are discussed in order.

When and Where – The Journey from Awareness to Curiosity to Participation

The journey from first becoming aware of BDSM to participating in BDSM appeared to occur over an extended period. On average, respondents recalled first learning about BDSM at 18.4 years old ($SD = 8.5$) but their interest in BDSM (e.g., fantasizing about participation) did not occur for another couple of years ($M = 20.7$ years old; $SD = 9.8$). Translating interest into participation took another couple of years, with respondents reporting that they first participated privately in BDSM at 24.4 years old ($SD = 10.4$) and participated publicly much later at 30.0 years old ($SD = 10.8$). Given the journey length, it is unsurprisingly that 41.4% of respondents had never participated in BDSM publicly and 2.1% had never participated privately or publicly (i.e., only fantasized). Grouping respondents into age categories revealed that many recalled their BDSM journey starting at a young age; however, for some it did not occur until later in life (Table 3). More than 60% learned about BDSM prior to 18 (i.e., as a minor) and nearly one-quarter (24.4%) participated privately as a minor. Comparatively, nearly 8% did not learn about BDSM until after 30, while 21.5% did not participate privately and 39.6% did not participate publicly until after 30.

Multiple regression analyses were conducted to determine if demographics and BDSM-related attributes predicted the age at which participants learned about, became interested in, participated privately in, and participated publicly in BDSM. Nine demographic and two BDSM-related variables were included in each regression model with coefficient estimates, effect sizes (Cohen’s f^2), and levels of significance reported in Table 4. Compared to heterosexuals, those from “other” sexual orientations (e.g., gay/lesbian, asexual) first learned about BDSM at a younger age, as did Canadians

Table 3. Number of participants that first learn about, become interested in, participate privately and publicly in BDSM within different age groups.

Age	Learn about BDSM n = 791	Interested in BDSM n = 794	Participate Privately n = 785	Participate Publicly n = 454
< 10	40 (5.1)	35 (4.4)	10 (1.3)	0 (0.0)
10 to 17	448 (56.6)	349 (44.0)	181 (23.1)	13 (2.9)
18 to 21	150 (19.0)	165 (20.8)	227 (28.9)	100 (22.0)
22 to 30	90 (11.4)	136 (17.1)	198 (25.2)	161 (35.5)
31 to 40	32 (4.0)	58 (7.3)	93 (11.8)	100 (22.0)
40+	31 (3.9)	51 (6.4)	76 (9.7)	80 (17.6)

Table 4. Demographic differences in age of participation in BDSM.

Demographic	Age Learn	Age Interested	Age Play (Private)	Age Play (Public)
Sex (Female)	0.39	-0.82	-1.86*	-1.59
Transgender	-1.70	-2.33	-3.21*	-1.72
Non-Cisgender	-2.18	-3.17*	-3.67**	-5.26**
Bisexual	1.88	1.66	1.42	0.28
Pansexual	-1.35	-1.95	-2.40*	-1.81
Other Sex Orien.	-2.26*	-1.98	-2.20*	-1.29
Heterosexual	REF	REF	REF	REF
Canada	-2.04**	-2.13*	-2.22*	-2.22
United Kingdom	-1.33	-1.74	-1.50	-1.76
Rest of World	-1.15	-1.37	-2.60*	-0.98
USA	REF	REF	REF	REF
Dating	-0.36	-1.08	-1.41	-0.83
Single	-0.41	-0.18	-1.06	-0.24
Other	0.07	-1.12	-0.59	-1.77
Married	REF	REF	REF	REF
Persons of Color	-1.49	-1.97*	-3.57**	-3.78**
Personal Income	0.61*	0.65*	0.49	0.39
Generation Z	-5.75**	-7.55**	-10.20**	-9.85**
Left-Side of Slash	3.17**	4.00**	3.25**	1.04
Right-Side of Slash	-0.18	0.25	1.10	1.46
Both-Sides of Slash	REF	REF	REF	REF
Yrs. of BDSM Exp.	-0.21**	-0.30**	-0.45**	-0.05
n	655	655	660	387
r ²	0.18	0.23	0.35	0.19
Cohen's f ²	0.22	0.30	0.54	0.23

*Significant at $p < .05$.

**Significant at $p < .01$.

(compared to Americans), Generation Z (compared to older generations), and the more years of BDSM experience a person had (current age minus age first start participating privately). Meanwhile, those on the left-side of the M/s or D/s slash (compared to those on both-sides) and the higher personal income a participant reported predicted an older age when

first learning about BDSM. The average age for becoming interested in BDSM was lower for non-cisgender (e.g., queer), Canadians, POC, Generation Z, and the more years of BDSM experience a person had. Like age of learning, the higher personal income a person reported and for those on the left-side of the slash, the older they became interested in BDSM. When it came to first participating privately in BDSM, females (compared to males), transgender (compared to non-transgender), non-cisgender, pansexuals (compared to heterosexuals), other sexual orientations, Canadians, “Rest of the World” (i.e., not Canadian, British, or American), POC, Generation Z, and more years of BDSM experience were younger, while those on the left-side of the slash were older. Finally, non-cisgender, POC, Generation Z were all younger when they first began participating in BDSM publicly. Effect sizes ranged from medium (learn, interest, and public) to high (private).

Three logistic regression analyses were conducted to determine whether demographics, age or years of BDSM experience, and BDSM-related attributes predicted whether a person had participated in BDSM in private only, or also publicly. Odds ratios, 95% confidence intervals, and statistical significance for each variable are reported in Table 5. Examining demographics, excluding age, pansexuals were less likely than heterosexuals to have only played privately, as were Canadians, compared to Americans, and those who stated their relationship status was dating, compared to married practitioners. Conversely, those who were from Generation Z were more likely than older generations to have only participated privately. Examining BDSM-related attributes, those on the right-side of the M/s or D/s slash, compared to those on both-sides, were more likely to have only participated privately. Finally, years of BDSM experience ($OR = 0.965$, $95\%CI [0.949, 0.981]$)

Table 5. Demographic and BDSM-related attributes predicting private-only participation.

	Demographics Model (n = 684)		BDSM Attributes Model (n = 752)		Age vs Experience Model (n = 781)	
	Odds Ratio	95% CI OR	Odds Ratio	95% CI OR	Odds Ratio	95% CI OR
Sex (Female)	1.09	0.77, 1.54	-	-	-	-
Transgender	0.57	0.29, 1.09	-	-	-	-
Non-Cisgender	0.93	0.50, 1.73	-	-	-	-
Bisexual	1.40	0.83, 2.35	-	-	-	-
Pansexual	0.45**	0.26, 0.78	-	-	-	-
Other Sexual Orien.	0.69	0.29, 1.12	-	-	-	-
Heterosexual	REF					
Canada	0.50**	0.30, 0.84	-	-	-	-
United Kingdom	1.22	0.66, 2.24	-	-	-	-
Rest of World	1.45	0.94, 2.24	-	-	-	-
USA	REF					
Dating	0.52**	0.33, 0.81	-	-	-	-
Single	0.83	0.54, 1.28	-	-	-	-
Other	0.58*	0.36, 0.93	-	-	-	-
Married	REF					
Persons of Color	0.79	0.50, 1.24	-	-	-	-
Personal Income	0.89	0.78, 1.03	-	-	-	-
Generation Z	2.34**	0.78, 1.03	-	-	-	-
Age	-	-	-	-	1.00	0.98, 1.01
Years of Experience	-	-	-	-	0.97**	0.95, 0.98
Left-Side-of-Slash	-	-	1.01	0.66, 1.52	-	-
Right-Side-of-Slash	-	-	1.53*	1.08, 2.15	-	-
Both-Sides-of-Slash	-	-	REF			

*Significant at $p < .05$.

**Significant at $p < .01$.

Table 6. Where participants were initially exposed to BDSM, their purpose for participation, and whom they participate with.

Initial Introduction	Participants (%)	Purpose for Participation	Participants (%)	Dynamic with Co-Participant	Participants (%)
Self	303 (62.1)	Enjoyment	349 (45.3)	Sex/romantic	676 (84.4)
Partner	179 (22.4)	Sex	185 (24.0)	BDSM-only	340 (42.3)
Friend	114 (14.2)	BDSM	184 (23.9)	Sex-only	223 (27.8)
Family	16 (2.0)	Mental	145 (18.8)	Non-sexual romantic	142 (17.7)
Internet	44 (5.5)	Personal Growth	130 (16.9)	Friends	237 (29.6)
Literature	20 (2.5)	Connection with Others	115 (14.9)	Strangers	191 (23.8)
Media	14 (1.8)			Alone	188 (23.5)

was a better predictor of whether a person had only participated privately or if they had also participated publicly than age ($OR = 0.996$, 95% $CI [0.982, 1.010]$). This suggests that participation in BDSM publicly is a step that follows participating in private only, as they obtain a certain level of experience and/or comfort participating privately.

What – Source of Initial Introduction to BDSM

Participants were asked what their first source(s) of introduction was/were to BDSM. Table 6 (Initial Introduction) shows that people are introduced to BDSM from a myriad of sources. Self-introduction was the most common pathway (62.1%), followed by a partner (22.4%), a friend (14.2%), and the Internet (5.5%). Literature (2.5%), family (2.0%), and television and/or movies (1.8%) were also identified as sources of introduction.

Multiple regression analyses were conducted to determine if any of the four most common sources of introduction (self, friend, partner, Internet) predicted the age at which participants learned about, became interested in, participated privately in, and participated publicly in BDSM. Coefficient estimates, effect sizes (Cohen's f^2), and levels of significance are reported in Table 7. Those who were self-introduced to BDSM were younger when they learned, became interested in, participated publicly, and participated privately. Those introduced by a partner were older when they first learned about and became interested in BDSM. Finally, those who were introduced by the Internet were younger when they first became interested in BDSM. However, it is worth noting that effect sizes were small, ranging from 0.02 (private, public) to 0.09 (learn)

Why – The Purpose for Participating in BDSM

Participants were asked via an open-ended question to explain their purpose for participating in BDSM, with most citing more than one purpose. An initial content analysis was

conducted, based on the presence of specific words, resulting in 22 groups. These groups were then thematically coded into six themes, and the percentage of participants who fit each theme are presented in Table 6 ("Purpose for Participation"). The most cited purpose was for Enjoyment (45.3%). This theme consisted of those using specific enjoyment related words such as "like", "pleasure", "fun", "happy", "good", and "enjoyment". The second most commonly cited purpose was Sex (24.0%), which consisted of specific reference to sex such as arousal, satisfaction, gratification, variety, and orgasm (e.g., "get off"). Third was BDSM Need (23.9%), which consisted of those who stated that BDSM was part of their identity (e.g., "who I am"), they had a need to engage in BDSM (e.g., "fetish" and "urge"), there was fulfillment in participation (e.g., "made whole" and "feel complete"), and they were drawn to specific activities (e.g., "rope" and "flogging"). Fourth was Mental Health (18.8%), which consisted of benefits to mental health (e.g., "therapeutic" and "catharsis"), stress relief, stimulation (e.g., "adrenaline", and "thrill"), and altered state of mind (e.g., "sub-space" and "meditative"). Fifth was Personal Growth (16.9%), which consisted of keywords related to exploration (e.g., "curiosity" and "adventure"), learning (e.g., "skill building"), self-actualization (e.g., "better myself" and "challenge myself"), and self-esteem (e.g., "confidence" and "less shame"). Sixth was Connection with Others (14.9%), which consisted predominantly of those who stated that it helped them get closer to their intimate/romantic partner (e.g., "feeling close" and "connect on a deeper level") but also those seeking connection from community (e.g., "socializing" and "make friends").

Multiple regression analyses were conducted to determine if any of the six identified purposes for engaging in BDSM predicted the age at which participants learned about, became interested in, participated privately in, and participated publicly in BDSM. Coefficient estimates, effect sizes (Cohen's f^2),

Table 7. How source of introduction to BDSM predicts age of participation in BDSM.

Source of Introduction	Age Learn	Age Interested	Age Private Play	Age Public Play
Self	-3.03**	-3.37**	-2.80**	-2.40*
Friend	1.64	0.95	0.40	-1.16
Partner	2.72**	2.53**	1.11	0.67
Internet	-0.73	-3.95**	-0.98	-2.61
n	790	793	783	452
r^2	0.08	0.06	0.02	0.02
Cohen's f^2	0.09	0.06	0.02	0.02

*Significant at $p < .05$.

**Significant at $p < .01$.

Table 8. How purpose predicts age of participation in BDSM.

Purpose	Age Learn	Age Interested	Age Private Play	Age Public Play
Enjoyment	-0.30	-1.37	-0.54	-0.66
Sex	-2.33**	-3.22**	-2.75*	-3.21**
BDSM Need	-0.91	-2.61**	-2.22*	-1.99
Mental Health	-1.16	-0.98	-2.02*	-2.39
Personal Growth	0.04	0.79	0.30	-0.80
Connection with Others	-1.19	-0.54	-1.09	-1.00
n	760	765	761	444
r^2	0.02	0.03	0.03	0.03
Cohen's f^2	0.02	0.03	0.03	0.03

*Significant at $p < .05$.

**Significant at $p < .01$.

and levels of significance are reported in Table 8. Those who cited sex were younger when they learned about, became interested in, participated privately in, and participated publicly in BDSM. Those who cited BDSM need were younger when they became interested in BDSM. Finally, those who cited mental health were younger when they started participating privately. Effect sizes were small, ranging from 0.02 (age learn) to 0.03 (age interested, age private play, age public play).

Logistic regression analyses were conducted to determine if demographic or BDSM-related attributes predicted one's purpose for participating in BDSM. Odds ratios, 95% confidence intervals, and statistical significance for each variable are reported in Tables 9 and 10. Overall, demographics did not predict purpose (Table 9), with all but mental health failing the omnibus test (i.e., the variables did not improve model prediction). Within models, there were some modestly significant variables. Those in the United Kingdom were more likely than Americans to state enjoyment as their purpose. Those who identified their relationship status as dating were more likely than married participants to cite sex as their purpose. Females and Canadians were more likely than males and Americans to state that mental health was their purpose. Canadians were also more likely than Americans to identify personal growth as their purpose, as were pansexuals compared to heterosexuals. Conversely, bisexuals were less likely than heterosexuals to state personal growth as a purpose for BDSM participation. Finally, those who identified as transgender or non-cisgender were more likely than non-transgender and cisgender participants to cite connection as their purpose.

Purpose was also examined across BDSM-related attributes – side of M/s or D/s slash, play privately, years of BDSM experience – and the two most common sources of introduction, self and partner (Table 10). Those on the right-side of the slash were less likely, and those who were self-introduced were more likely, to state sex was their purpose. Those who only participated privately were less likely than those who also participated publicly to state BDSM need was their purpose. Those on the left- and right-sides of the slash were less likely than those who occupy roles on both sides of the slash to state that personal growth was their purpose, as were those with more experience participating in BDSM. Finally, those who were introduced by a partner were more likely to cite personal growth and less likely to cite connection as their purpose.

Who – Co-Participants in BDSM Activities

BDSM is an activity that could be characterized as most likely being participated in with an intimate partner. However, even those who engaged in BDSM with an intimate partner were likely to participate with friends, strangers, and even alone (Table 6 “Dynamic with Co-Participant”). When asked whom they engaged in BDSM with, 63.4% identified more than one “type,” with an average of 2.5 types. The most common type was sex/romantic partners (84.4%); however, 42.3% identified BDSM-only partners (i.e., non-romantic and non-sexual), 27.8% with sex-only partners, and 17.7% with non-sexual romantic partners. Respondents were also likely to participate with friends (29.6%), 23.8% engaged with strangers, also known as pick-up play (i.e., meeting someone at a public event and

participating with them), and 23.5% participated alone. Importantly, only 3.1% expressed *only* participating alone. That is, almost all who participated alone also reported participating with others. Finally, 0.9% identified participating with someone online while 1.2% participated with a professional.

Logistic regression analyses were conducted to determine if demographic or BDSM-related attributes predicted who practitioners co-participated with. Odds ratios, 95% confidence intervals, and significance for each variable are reported in Tables 11 and 12. For demographic attributes (Table 11), females were more likely than males to participate with romantic/sex partners and less likely with non-sexual romantic partners. Transgender practitioners were more likely to participate with sex-only partners than non-transgender practitioners. Non-cisgender practitioners were more likely to participate with friends, strangers, alone, and non-sexual romantic partners. Pansexuals were more likely to participate with BDSM-only, friends, and strangers than heterosexuals. When compared to married practitioners, those who identified as dating were more likely to participate with sex-only, friends, and non-sexual romantic partners, while single practitioners were more likely than married practitioners to participate with sex-only partners and alone, while less likely to participate with romantic/sex partners. Finally, those from Generation Z were less likely than other generations to participate with friends and non-sexual romantic partners.

Examining BDSM-related attributes and self/partner source introduction, few attributes predicted co-participants (Table 12). Where there was the most difference was between those who only participated privately and those who participated privately and publicly. Private participants were less likely to participate with BDSM-only, sex-only, friends, strangers, and non-sexual romantic partners. Across other attributes, compared to those who identified on both sides of the M/s or D/s slash, those on the left-side were less likely to participate with strangers and alone, while those on the right-side were less likely to participate with friends and non-sexual romantic partners. Those who self-introduced were less likely to participate with friends and more likely to participate alone, while those who were introduced by a partner were also less likely to participate with friends.

How – The Frequency of Engaging in BDSM Activities

Figure 1 presents responses to the frequency (never, rarely, sometimes, often, regularly) at which participants engaged in 15 different BDSM-related activities. Impact²² was the most regularly participated in activity (41.5%), followed by rope (14.2%), breath (12.6%), and CNC (11.6%). These patterns were consistent at lower levels of frequency, as 87.6% at least sometimes engaged in impact, followed by rope (84.2%), breath (57.9%), and CNC (52.9%). Participation in specific activities was highly correlated with one another. Among the most notable, knives,²³ needles, cutting, and blood were all statistically significant with one another between 0.45 and 0.78,

²²A type of BDSM play that involves striking the body. This can be done with whips, canes, paddles, a hand, flogger, riding crop, or other instruments.

²³This involves using a knife blade to either psychologically induce an adrenaline rush by gliding a knife across the body, or with actual cutting.

Table 9. Logistic regression analysis of demographic attributes on purpose for participation in BDSM (n = 673).

	Enjoyment+			Sex+			BDSM Need+			Mental Health			Personal Growth+			Connection+		
	Odds Ratio	95% CI OR		Odds Ratio	95% CI OR		Odds Ratio	95% CI OR		Odds Ratio	95% CI OR		Odds Ratio	95% CI OR		Odds Ratio	95% CI OR	
Sex (Female)	0.98	0.70, 1.37		1.18	0.79, 1.75		1.04	0.70, 1.53		3.10**	1.88, 5.11		1.01	0.64, 1.59		1.08	0.67, 1.74	
Transgender	0.62	0.33, 1.16		1.42	0.73, 2.78		0.71	0.33, 1.53		1.46	0.71, 2.99		1.00	0.46, 2.15		2.24*	1.06, 4.74	
Non-Cisgender	1.05	0.58, 1.88		1.82	0.91, 3.24		0.87	0.43, 1.74		0.68	0.31, 1.50		1.18	0.57, 2.45		2.45*	1.23, 4.91	
Bisexual	1.43	0.86, 2.36		0.84	0.47, 1.50		1.06	0.59, 1.88		0.68	0.37, 1.27		0.49*	0.26, 0.92		1.01	0.51, 2.03	
Pansexual	0.86	0.52, 1.44		0.98	0.54, 1.77		1.17	0.65, 2.11		1.85	0.96, 3.57		1.96*	1.04, 3.69		0.93	0.45, 1.92	
Other Sexual Orientations	1.01	0.62, 1.67		1.11	0.63, 1.96		1.07	0.60, 1.92		1.42	0.74, 2.71		1.18	0.61, 2.30		1.13	0.57, 2.24	
Heterosexual	REF			REF			REF			REF			REF			REF		
Canada	0.85	0.54, 1.35		1.22	0.72, 2.05		0.82	0.41, 1.25		1.86*	1.10, 3.15		1.81*	1.04, 3.14		1.26	0.69, 2.27	
United Kingdom	1.86*	1.02, 3.36		1.61	0.85, 3.05		0.89	0.44, 1.78		0.42	0.17, 1.06		0.81	0.34, 1.90		0.50	0.19, 1.35	
Rest of World	1.08	0.70, 1.67		1.46	0.89, 2.39		0.95	0.57, 1.58		0.61	0.32, 1.16		0.94	0.52, 1.71		0.79	0.41, 1.49	
USA	REF			REF			REF			REF			REF			REF		
Dating	1.02	0.67, 1.57		1.94*	1.16, 3.23		1.05	0.64, 1.73		0.71	0.39, 1.29		1.13	0.62, 2.09		0.95	0.49, 1.83	
Single	0.92	0.60, 1.41		1.36	0.80, 2.30		0.99	0.60, 1.64		1.08	0.60, 1.93		1.54	0.86, 2.78		1.46	0.79, 2.71	
Other	0.45	0.53, 1.34		1.46	0.84, 2.56		1.35	0.80, 2.27		1.47	0.91, 2.65		1.48	0.78, 2.78		1.81	0.96, 3.41	
Married	REF			REF			REF			REF			REF			REF		
Persons of Color	0.85	0.55, 1.32		0.94	0.56, 1.57		1.61	1.00, 2.59		0.74	0.41, 1.34		1.39	0.81, 2.38		0.74	0.39, 1.41	
Personal Income	1.01	0.88, 1.16		1.02	0.87, 1.20		1.05	0.89, 1.23		1.07	0.89, 1.28		1.12	0.93, 1.35		1.06	0.87, 1.29	
Generation Z	1.05	0.65, 1.70		1.20	0.70, 2.04		0.65	0.36, 1.17		1.74	0.99, 3.07		1.92*	1.08, 3.43		1.57	0.84, 2.91	

*Significant at $p < .05$.

**Significant at $p < .01$.

+ Failed Omnibus Test.

Table 10. Logistic regression analysis of BDSM-related attributes on purpose for participation in BDSM ($n = 723$).

	Enjoyment+		Sex		BDSM Needs		Mental Health		Personal Growth		Connection	
	Odds Ratio	95% CI OR	Odds Ratio	95% CI OR	Odds Ratio	95% CI OR	Odds Ratio	95% CI OR	Odds Ratio	95% CI OR	Odds Ratio	95% CI OR
Left, Side of Slash	0.83	0.54, 1.26	0.91	0.57, 1.45	1.07	0.65	0.26**	0.13, 0.51	0.44**	0.25, 0.77	0.87	0.49, 1.55
Right, Side of Slash	1.00	0.71, 1.42	0.67*	0.44, 0.98	1.35	1.76	0.86	0.57, 1.30	0.35**	0.23, 0.55	0.84	0.52, 1.35
Private Only	0.93	0.69, 1.26	1.11	0.78, 1.59	0.56*	0.89, 2.03	1.02	0.69, 1.51	0.86	0.57, 1.30	0.88	0.57, 1.35
Years of Experience	1.00	0.99, 1.01	1.00	0.98, 1.01	1.01	0.39, 0.81	0.99	0.97, 1.00	0.97**	0.95, 0.99	0.99	0.97, 1.01
Self, Introduction	0.93	0.68, 1.29	1.68**	1.13, 2.49	1.15	1.00, 1.03	1.04	0.69, 1.58	1.26	0.81, 1.96	1.20	0.76, 1.91
Partner Introduction	1.03	0.70, 1.50	0.64	0.39, 1.03	1.00	0.64, 1.56	0.68	0.40, 1.13	1.72*	1.06, 2.79	0.40**	0.21, 0.78

*Significant at $p < .05$.**Significant at $p < .01$.

+ Failed Omnibus Test.

as were urine (i.e., watersports/golden showers) with scat (0.24), CNC with breath (0.33), and knives with fire (0.50).

Table 13 presents ordinal logistic regression analyses for the frequency of each type of activity participated in and whether there was good model fit (model fit, goodness of fit, and test of parallel lines). The odds ratio and 95% confidence interval for the three variables included in the analyses are provided, along with the level of significance. The analyses consisted of three variables – sex at birth (male/female), private only, and years of experience in BDSM. Females were more likely to incorporate impact, CNC, temperature, fire, knives, and needles more regularly than males. These ranged from 44% to 78% more likely. Across almost all activities, those who had played both privately and publicly were more likely to engage in that activity regularly than those who only participated in BDSM privately (i.e., at home). Of those that were statistically significant, the range was 1.45 times (CNC) to 4.67 times (knives) more likely. Finally, those with more years of experience participating in BDSM were more likely to engage in most activities regularly. Put another way, those who were new to BDSM engaged in a small number of activities; however, as experience levels increased practitioners branched out into a wider range of activities, more regularly. Where there was the most difference was in riskier activities such as water (e.g., waterboarding), fire, needles, medical, urine, and scat (although non-significant).

Discussion

As BDSM continues to permeate the societal ethos, it is important to better understand the varying characteristics of practitioners and the journey they take from initially learning about BDSM to translating fantasy into long-term practice. The current study sought to provide a foundation for future research by examining the five W's of participation – who, what, when, where, why, and how. In doing so, six important findings emerged. First, entrance into BDSM appears to occur in a stepwise progression over many years, beginning with initial exposure and culminating with public participation. This process often starts at a young age (i.e., adolescence), but for some the process starts later in life (e.g., late adulthood). Overall, demographics were better predictors of age of participation, with medium to large effect sizes (0.22 to 0.54), while sources

of introduction and purpose were poorer predictors, with small effect sizes (0.02 to 0.09). In parsing out onset into four stages, the current study helped explain why prior research has reported such diverse ages of onset. Given the extended time frame in which the stages of BDSM exploration occur, varying definitions of participation (e.g., participating privately versus publicly) can impact research results.

Second, introduction to BDSM comes from a myriad of sources; however, the current research pointed toward people being more prominent initial sources than media and/or pornography, which is often cited as the most common in prior research. Although many practitioners noted self-introduction, partners and friends also play prominent roles in BDSM introduction. Third, this study revealed that a person's source(s) of introduction can impact their purpose for participation, who they co-participate with, and to a lesser degree (i.e., small effect sizes) the age at which they begin exploring BDSM. Those who were self-introduced were more likely to cite sex as their purpose, participate alone, and be younger at each onset stage (learn, interest, participate publicly, participate privately). In contrast, those who were partner-introduced were more likely to cite self-growth as their purpose and were older when learning about and becoming interested in BDSM.

Fourth, while previous research has predominantly focused on associating BDSM participation with sexual practices, the current study revealed that personal enjoyment and fun, not sex, was the driving purpose for many. Yet, practitioners are diverse in their motivations as few demographic or BDSM-related attributes predicted purpose. Fifth, the current study provided new insights into how we conceptualize BDSM participation as practitioners identified multiple people with whom they co-participate, including those outside of their romantic partner(s), such as friends, strangers, BDSM-only partners, and even alone.

Sixth, this research revealed that participation in BDSM activities evolves as a practitioner's years of BDSM experience increase. Many start with one or two activities (e.g., rope bondage) but then venture into a wider range of activities over time, with increasing frequency and risk (i.e., more edge-play activities). Combined, these six findings demonstrated that BDSM practitioners are a heterogeneous population both in terms of demographics and motivations. As a result, it is important to consider how future research sampling methods of BDSM practitioners can greatly impact the ways in which BDSM practices are described. These implications are discussed in four specific ways.

²³This involves using a knife blade to either psychologically induce an adrenaline rush by gliding a knife across the body, or with actual cutting.

Table 11. Logistic regression analysis of demographic attributes on who practitioners participate in BDSM with (n = 696).

	Romantic		BDSM-Only+		Sex-Only		Friends		Strangers		Alone		Non-Sexual	
	Odds Ratio	95% CI OR	Odds Ratio	95% CI OR	Odds Ratio	95% CI OR	Odds Ratio	95% CI OR	Odds Ratio	95% CI OR	Odds Ratio	95% CI OR	Odds Ratio	95% CI OR
Sex (Female)	2.48**	1.54, 3.99	0.91	0.65, 1.27	0.88	0.60, 1.28	1.28	0.88, 1.86	0.78	0.52, 1.15	1.24	0.81, 1.89	0.64*	0.41, 1.00
Transgender	0.91	0.41, 2.05	1.42	0.79, 2.58	2.00*	1.07, 3.72	1.81	0.97, 3.35	1.73	0.91, 3.28	1.44	0.75, 2.75	1.81	0.85, 3.84
Non-Cisgender	1.14	0.48, 2.69	1.15	0.65, 2.06	0.76	0.38, 1.52	1.85*	1.01, 3.36	1.97*	1.07, 3.64	2.67**	1.44, 4.95	4.38**	2.31, 8.30
Bisexual	1.26	0.64, 2.47	1.03	0.63, 1.68	1.35	0.77, 2.35	1.03	0.61, 1.76	1.10	0.62, 1.94	0.66	0.38, 1.15	1.51	0.77, 2.96
Pansexual	1.27	0.56, 2.90	2.07**	1.26, 3.40	1.56	0.89, 2.73	2.16**	1.27, 3.67	2.38**	1.36, 4.16	1.78	0.95, 3.34	1.47	0.78, 2.79
Other Sexual Orientations	0.69	0.35, 1.38	1.47	0.89, 2.45	1.14	0.63, 2.03	1.40	0.80, 2.45	1.40	0.77, 2.54	2.90**	1.59, 5.28	0.87	0.43, 1.76
Heterosexual	REF		REF		REF		REF		REF		REF		REF	
Canada	1.06	0.52, 2.17	1.06	0.67, 1.67	0.89	0.53, 1.49	1.64*	1.02, 2.63	1.14	0.68, 1.89	0.83	0.47, 1.47	0.71	0.38, 1.31
United Kingdom	0.83	0.36, 1.94	0.98	0.54, 1.78	0.65	0.32, 1.32	1.05	0.55, 2.00	0.90	0.45, 1.82	1.07	0.53, 2.19	0.62	0.26, 1.46
Rest of World	0.63	0.36, 1.12	1.08	0.71, 1.66	1.03	0.64, 1.66	0.62	3, 0.36, 1.04	0.68	0.40, 1.18	0.90	0.53, 1.55	0.60	0.32, 1.12
USA	REF		REF		REF		REF		REF		REF		REF	
Dating	1.98	0.95, 4.13	1.29	0.84, 1.98	3.38**	2.04, 5.60	1.73*	1.07, 2.79	1.55	0.93, 2.57	0.79	0.44, 1.41	2.17**	1.22, 3.87
Single	0.45**	0.26, 0.79	1.29	0.84, 1.98	2.84**	1.71, 4.73	1.35	0.83, 2.20	1.56	0.94, 2.59	2.42**	1.44, 4.06	1.37	0.75, 2.50
Other	1.61	0.77, 3.39	1.29	0.81, 2.04	1.53	0.87, 2.70	1.51	0.90, 2.54	1.26	0.72, 2.19	1.03	0.57, 1.88	1.83	0.99, 3.39
Married	REF		REF		REF		REF		REF		REF		REF	
Persons of Color	1.29	0.68, 2.44	0.87	0.56, 1.35	0.81	0.49, 1.33	1.49	0.84, 2.37	0.98	0.59, 1.63	0.84	0.50, 1.43	1.05	0.59, 1.88
Personal Income	1.10	0.91, 1.35	1.10	0.96, 1.26	1.07	0.92, 1.25	0.89	0.77, 1.04	1.10	0.93, 1.28	0.86	0.73, 1.02	1.04	0.86, 1.24
Generation Z	0.65	0.35, 1.23	0.74	0.46, 1.19	0.81	0.48, 1.35	0.54*	0.32, 0.91	0.78	0.45, 1.37	1.32	0.78, 2.23	0.49*	0.24, 0.99

*Significant at p < .05.
 **Significant at p < .01.
 + Failed Omnibus Test.

Table 12. Logistic regression analysis of BDSM-related attributes on who practitioners participate in BDSM with (n = 746).

	Romantic+		BDSM-Only		Sex-Only		Friends		Strangers		Alone		Non-Sexual	
	Odds Ratio	95% CI OR	Odds Ratio	95% CI OR	Odds Ratio	95% CI OR	Odds Ratio	95% CI OR	Odds Ratio	95% CI OR	Odds Ratio	95% CI OR	Odds Ratio	95% CI OR
Left, Side of Slash	0.95	0.51, 1.79	0.98	0.63, 1.51	0.68	0.42, 1.07	0.77	0.48, 1.24	0.60*	0.36, 0.99	0.27**	0.14, 0.49	0.99	0.59, 1.67
Right, Side of Slash	0.72	0.44, 1.20	0.75	0.52, 1.07	0.82	0.57, 1.19	0.52**	0.35, 0.78	0.69	0.46, 1.03	0.83	0.56, 1.22	0.59*	0.37, 0.95
Private Only	0.68	0.44, 1.04	0.28**	0.20, 0.39	0.57**	0.41, 0.81	0.11**	0.07, 0.18	0.19**	0.12, 0.29	0.81	0.56, 1.17	0.16**	0.10, 0.28
Years of Experience	1.00	0.99, 1.02	1.00	0.99, 1.02	1.00	0.99, 1.01	0.99*	0.97, 1.00	1.01	1.00, 1.02	0.99	0.98, 1.01	1.01	0.99, 1.02
Self, Introduction	1.16	0.74, 1.84	0.97	0.69, 1.37	0.86	0.60, 1.22	0.66*	0.45, 0.97	1.09	0.74, 1.62	1.68*	1.12, 2.53	0.86	0.56, 1.32
Partner Introduction	1.35	0.77, 2.37	0.90	0.61, 1.34	1.31	0.87, 1.96	0.54**	0.34, 0.86	1.39	0.89, 2.16	0.83	0.51, 1.34	0.70	0.41, 1.19

*Significant at p < .05.
 **Significant at p < .01.
 + Failed Omnibus Test.

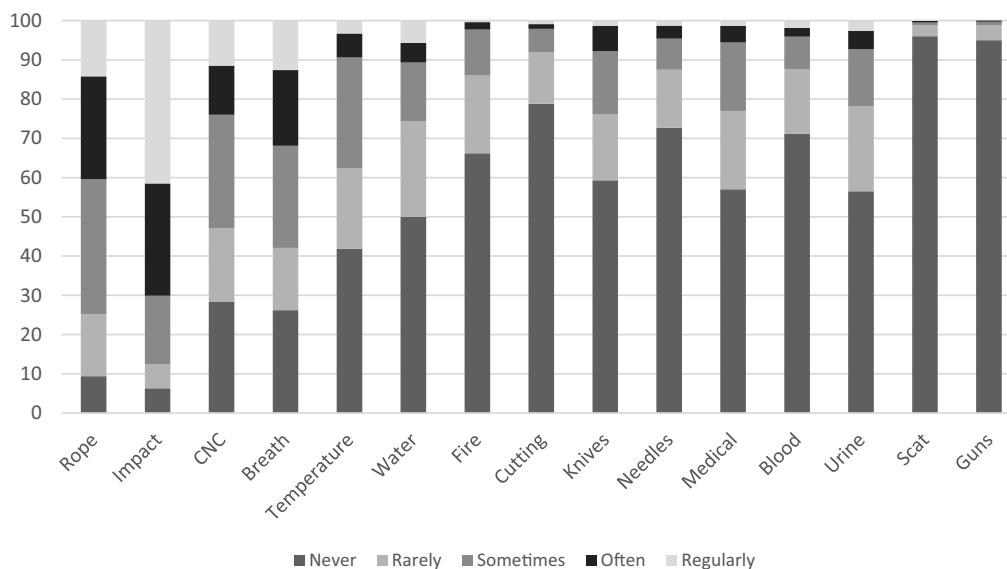


Figure 1. Frequency of participation in 15 types of BDSM activities.

Table 13. Odds ratios (OR) and confidence intervals (CI) for frequency of 15 types of BDSM activities.

Type of Activity	Sample Size	Sex OR (CI)	Private, Only OR (CI)	Years of Experience OR (CI)
Rope+	662	1.28 (0.96, 1.71)	1.27 (0.96, 1.69)	1.00 (0.88, 1.15)
Impact	664	1.50 (1.11, 2.02)**	2.64 (1.96, 3.55)**	1.20 (1.05, 1.39)**
CNC	661	1.64 (1.23, 2.19)**	1.45 (1.09, 1.93)*	1.21 (1.06, 1.39)**
Breath+	659	1.62 (1.21, 2.16)**	1.42 (1.07, 1.89)*	0.93 (0.81, 1.06)
Temperature	656	1.62 (1.20, 2.19)**	1.82 (1.35, 2.46)**	0.90 (0.79, 1.04)
Water	652	0.97 (0.71, 1.32)	2.02 (1.48, 2.76)**	1.25 (1.08, 1.44)**
Fire	656	1.44 (1.01, 2.05)*	4.24 (2.89, 6.24)**	1.37 (1.16, 1.62)**
Cutting	658	1.33 (0.88, 2.01)	3.67 (2.29, 5.88)**	1.23 (1.02, 1.49)*
Knives	656	1.77 (1.26, 2.49)**	4.67 (3.26, 6.68)**	1.25 (1.07, 1.47)**
Needles	653	1.78 (1.21, 2.62)**	4.50 (2.90, 6.96)**	1.57 (1.31, 1.88)**
Medical	654	0.84 (0.61, 1.16)	1.83 (1.32, 2.52)**	1.44 (1.24, 1.68)**
Blood+	656	1.89 (1.29, 2.77)**	4.18 (2.75, 6.37)**	1.32 (1.10, 1.57)**
Urine	660	0.76 (0.56, 1.05)	2.14 (1.55, 2.95)**	1.28 (1.10, 1.49)**
Scat	654	0.68 (0.30, 1.56)	1.99 (0.78, 5.11)	1.46 (0.97, 2.19)
Guns+	657	0.89 (0.43, 1.84)	1.88 (0.85, 4.17)	1.17 (0.83, 1.65)

+Failed one or more tests of model fit.

*Significant at $p < .05$.

**Significant at $p < .01$.

BDSM and Identity Formation

First, BDSM appears to play a role in identity formation related to sexual practices, orientation, and interests (e.g., hobbies). Most participants reported becoming aware of their interest in BDSM between 10 and 21, which aligns with Erikson's (1993) fifth stage of identity development (age 11–19) – identity vs confusion – whereby adolescents' question and experiment with their sexuality, personality, and interests. Likewise, those newer to BDSM (i.e., fewer years of experience) and those who identified as switches were more likely to cite personal growth as their purpose. Building upon Erikson's work, these findings suggests that BDSM can play a role in what Marcia (1966) described as the *moratorium* status of identity development. This status consists of high exploration and low commitment, whereby people seek out new experiences (e.g., BDSM) and roles (i.e., "switch" between Dominant and submissive roles) to determine what most suits them.

Specific to sexual practices, the current study reinforced that for some BDSM is part of their sexual identity (Bauer,

2014; Moser, 2016; Yost & Hunter, 2012). These practitioners are likely to view BDSM through the lens of sexual activity and thus their activities, co-participants, and potentially sources of introduction may be different than BDSM practitioners whose purpose is not predominantly sex. The current study also provided support to those who suggest that BDSM can be viewed more in terms of sexual orientation (Gemberling et al., 2015; Sandnabba et al., 1999). This is because some participants did state that their interest in BDSM was a part of who they were and that there was an inherent "need" to engage in BDSM activities. Importantly, these practitioners were more likely to participate in BDSM in public environments, which further point to research recruitment methods (e.g., in-person) impacting conclusions about BDSM practitioners. Finally, specific to interests, as many participants reported engaging in BDSM for enjoyment purposes, the current study also provided support for viewing BDSM through the framework of a leisure activity (Newmahr, 2010; Sprott & Williams, 2019; Williams et al., 2016). High rates of solo

participation in addition to participation with multiple others beyond romantic partners may point to some viewing BDSM as a type of hobby. This perspective may potentially signal that BDSM is becoming seen as a communal activity rather than only an intimate partner, and/or sexual, activity. Baker (2018) and Fennel (2018) provided support for this perspective as they both noted BDSM can facilitate a deeper connection with friends and partners as well as a stronger spiritual connection. Likewise, this aligns with Erikson's (1993) sixth stage of identity development – intimacy vs isolation – whereby young adults (i.e., 20–44) attempt to develop strong bonds via friends and/or romantic relationships. This coincides with when most practitioners cited beginning to participate in BDSM publicly (ages 18 to 40). Combined, these findings suggest that BDSM cannot be examined strictly from a sexual/orientation identity perspective nor from a leisure activity identity perspective, but rather as an important element of identity development more generally.

The role BDSM plays in identity may change over time, based on personal and relational factors. For example, those who view BDSM as part of their sexual practice identity may be more likely than others to continue participating throughout their life course, leading to differing opinions/views of BDSM. Then again, they may cease participating if sexual relationships change whereby new partners are not interested in BDSM. Likewise, those who see BDSM serving a purpose at a given point in their life may stop participating once they have obtained the self-growth they were seeking, their life situation changes (e.g., started having children and felt continued participation was more challenging), and/or they learned BDSM wasn't for them (e.g., it stopped being fun or their relationship dynamic changed). Not only does future research need to recognize that the lens in which practitioners engage may impact their perception of BDSM, it may also dictate why they continue or discontinue participation over time. As important as it is to understand why people engage in BDSM, it is equally important for research to determine what compels people to stop engaging in BDSM.

Geographic, Racial, and Generational Cultural Differences in BDSM Practitioners

Second, examinations of the prevalence of BDSM participation have largely focused on differences between cisgender men and women as well as those who identify as Dominant, submissive, or switch. This has led to calls for determining if there are cultural differences in the practice of BDSM (Paarnio et al., 2022). The current study found few geography-based (i.e., country) cultural differences in age onsets into BDSM, sources of introduction, and purpose, though there were some between the USA and Canada. These differences may have been more pronounced had the sample size been larger, allowing for comparisons beyond Canada, United Kingdom, United States, and “Rest of the World.” Still, the representation of 43 countries reinforced that BDSM is practiced globally and that there are assuredly geography-based cultural differences between practitioners. Some of these differences may be tied to practices but they may also be linked to perceptions of BDSM. In many regions of the world, BDSM remains highly

stigmatized (Ling et al., 2022; Simula, 2019). This means that practices, especially when it comes to sources of introduction, private/public participation, and who one participates with, may be greatly impacted.

Expanding beyond geography-based cultural differences, it has been suggested that racial cultural differences may exist. Research examining BDSM participation has been criticized for its predominantly White-skewing samples (Martinez, 2021), despite clear examples of racial differences in lived experiences (e.g., Cruz, 2016). This is likely due to the over-reliance on English-speaking, Western culture, countries for sampling, which are largely comprised of White participants. This methodological approach may provide insights as to why prior research has not found racial differences among practitioners (e.g., Walker & Kuperberg, 2022). Despite the current study attempting to address this, it was overwhelmingly White (84.1%). However, even with minimal racial diversity, there were some differences found. Most significant was that POC were younger when they became interested and participated (privately and publicly) in BDSM. Had the sample been larger, and potentially advertised through non-English means, these differences may have been more pronounced as it would have allowed for more nuance to be investigated, such as distinction between Black, East/South/West Asians, Hispanic, and LatinX practitioners.

Contributing to the racial diversity issue in BDSM research is the use of FetLife for recruitment, which has been argued to be predominantly heterosexual/pansexual, USA/UK based, and following pornography representations of race (Wignall, 2023). While the use of FetLife in the current study led to the inclusion of those who do not participate publicly in BDSM, Wignall argued that reliance on online social networks for recruitment may omit the experiences of LGBTQ+ practitioners, and the range of people engaging in BDSM. This was partly addressed in the current study through recruitment from sexuality organizations such as the Kinsey Institute, who informed us that participants recruited through them were more likely to be sexual minorities. Sheff and Hammers (2011) also suggested that the prevalence of White practitioners may be representative of mainstream BDSM communities but not the range of practitioners. They argued this may be because non-White practitioners may be reluctant to align with certain identities, such as BDSM practitioner, as they do not have the same risk-protection for sexual/relational non-conformity as White practitioners. They may also experience feelings of “tokenism” in public settings (whether in-person or online), discrimination, and/or community rejection, leading to them participating in more exclusive, clandestine, channels not accessible by researchers. Likewise, they may be reluctant to participate in research conducted by those who are not part of their underprivileged group. This could certainly apply to the current study, as both researchers were White. However, while these are important factors to consider in subsequent research on BDSM participation, Sheff and Hammers also suggested that “. . . on some level, there might not be anything to be *done* about the dearth of people of colour in samples of sexual minorities” (p. 218) as they may not be interested in being studied. Therefore, a balance needs to be struck whereby efforts to target non-White practitioners are attempted (such

as our advertising in discussion groups on FetLife specifically targeting these populations), but that there is an understanding that some populations simply do not want their voice to be part of research and that is okay.

In addition to geographical and racial cultural differences, it is important to examine generational cultural differences among practitioners. Reviewing the history of BDSM sub-culture, Kao (2013) explained that the 1970's saw the emergence of community organizations such as The Eulenspiegel Society and Society of Janus. In this period, gay practitioners were more open about engaging in BDSM than heterosexuals. The 1980's saw higher cultural visibility through tourist events, which fueled BDSM's legitimacy. Finally, the 2000's has seen a marked increase in the mainstreaming of BDSM. This fostered the development of safe spaces, an increased ability for mentorship and guidance (e.g., orientations/workshops), a construction of a BDSM "lifestyle," and codes of behavior. As Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012) grew up with the commercialization of BDSM ever-present, it is unsurprising that this is where generational differences were most pronounced in the current study. Most relevant was that practitioners from this generation were nearly 2.5 times more likely to participate only in private. However, there may also be differences between subgroups within generations (e.g., gay and heterosexual practitioners from the 1970's). Further highlighting the importance of connecting generation with geography, Drdová and Saxonberg (2022) described how there was a divide between BDSM practitioners who grew up prior to 1989, in communist Czech Republic, and those who came to the community post-communism. Together with the results of the current study, these highlight the importance of reflecting on the impact of all three – geography, race, and generation – on perceptions of BDSM practice, and how failing to account for each can give incomplete pictures of BDSM communities.

BDSM Experiences of Sexual and Gender Minorities (SGM)

Third, research has shown that SGM play a foundational role in the history of BDSM (Tatum & Niedermeyer, 2021) and may be more pervasive within BDSM communities than within the general population (Spratt & Hadcock, 2018). Like with geographical, racial, and generational differences, the current study demonstrated that the experiences of SGM (e.g., transgender, Genderqueer, pansexual) differ from their counterparts (i.e., cisgender, heterosexual). Practitioners from these populations were younger when they learned about, became interested in, and started participating in BDSM. They also reported engaging in BDSM with a broader range of co-participants and cited connection as a purpose more than their counterparts. Both Hughes and Hammack (2019) and Spratt and Hadcock (2018) suggested this may be to find a sense of belonging and overcome feelings of isolation. While SGM were not more likely to cite mental health as a purpose in the current study, Wilson and Liss (2022) indicated that a sense of belonging, especially among SGM, can have a strong positive impact on mental health. Additionally,

Galupo et al. (2016) found that BDSM can play a pivotal role in conceptualizations of the self among transgender practitioners. Connecting with other SGM may further reinforce this conceptualization process. It is therefore important that SGM BDSM practitioners are studied more as the current study reinforced that their motivations and experiences differ from their heterosexual, cisgender, counterparts.

BDSM-Related versus 'Traditional' Demographics in Describing BDSM Practitioners

More important than traditional demographical measures were BDSM-specific measures. Practitioners are multifaceted, often occupying a variety of contrasting and overlapping roles that potentially impact their participation in BDSM more than demographic differences. The co-existence of contrary BDSM role(s) – identifying with both the left- and right-side of the slash – within practitioners point to the need for a more nuanced approach to research construction. This is because participation attributes such as purpose, co-participants, and/or activities, may be fluid and directly tied to the role a person occupies at a given moment. It is possible that how a person participates changes depending on their role at that time. For example, a person may engage in bondage in the role of a bottom and see it as a communal activity that they participate in with friends. However, they may engage in impact activities in the role of a Dominant and see this activity as something more intimate, that is done only with romantic partners as a form of connection. This nuance is not captured within research, including the current study, and could lead to disagreement within the literature around those who occupy roles on both sides of the slash (e.g., switch). Therefore, additional research should be conducted on the process of seeking out new play partners and the pre-negotiation process that occurs prior to engaging in BDSM within various roles.

In line with previous research (e.g., Botta et al., 2019; Coppens et al., 2020; Holvoet et al., 2017), the current study revealed that while initial interest in BDSM often occurs at a younger age, there are some that do not engage in BDSM until later in life. It also revealed that the progress from learning about to participating in BDSM occurs over an extended period. Even more important though is the difference between those who have only participated privately and those who have also participated publicly. Therefore, studies that rely strictly on the age of practitioners for analyses could be conflating those, for example, who are new to BDSM but older, with those who have been practicing BDSM for a longer period but started younger. This is an important distinction as the current study demonstrated that years of experience played a role in purpose for participating, who one participates with, and especially the types, and frequency, of BDSM activities engaged in. For example, findings from this study demonstrated that as a person becomes more experienced in BDSM, the purpose appears to pivot away from personal growth and toward a myriad of other purposes, while activities, both types and frequencies, increase, especially within edge/riskier activities such as CNC, needles, and

fire. These findings suggest that participation in BDSM is an evolving practice, based on years of experience, not age, which needs to be considered within research analyses. If varying BDSM-related attributes are not adequately considered when conducting research on this population, it may lead to over- or under-representation of characteristics within BDSM communities.

Conclusion

Increasing representations of BDSM within mainstream culture is leading to considerable growth in research examining BDSM. The current study built upon the existing literature through a large-scale survey examining the attributes that predict the who, what, when, where, why, and how of BDSM participation. While previous studies of BDSM prevalence within general populations are valuable, it is important that research transitions away from viewing practitioners as homogeneous, to recognizing their heterogeneity in terms of demographics, BDSM-related attributes, pathways, motivations, co-participants, and types/frequencies of activities. Doing so lays the groundwork for recognizing the interdependency of concepts within the BDSM sub-culture rather than examining them separately. More importantly, the current study highlights how methods of participant solicitation can impact research findings and the conclusions drawn about this population. For example, if recruitment focuses on in-person methods, such as conferences, workshops, and public events, this will lead to those who only play privately being excluded as well as potentially others, such as those from Generation Z, who have not yet participated in a public setting. Conversely, it could over-represent people who are dating or single (in comparison to married practitioners), those who have been participating for a long time, and those who view BDSM as part of their identity (e.g., BDSM need). If the focus is recruitment through online channels, especially English-based websites, there is the potential to overrepresent Western cultures (i.e., White practitioners) in the narrative of BDSM practices. If the focus is instead on representative/probabilistic sampling, there is the possibility that findings do not generalize to other countries, such as those where many BDSM practices remain illegal, and, more importantly, that the nuance of BDSM practices across racial, sexual, and generational cultures are not captured. These critiques are not to say that previous studies are irrelevant, as many of these arguments could be used against the current study. Rather, researchers need to be aware of these differences across sampling methods and acknowledge them when reporting findings.

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