

Pathways and Patterns of Entrance into BDSM

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Abstract:

Prior limited research on entrance into BDSM divided paths of entry into external or internal factors (Yosta & Hunter, 2012), while research on age at entry into BDSM has not considered variation by BDSM role identity, gender, sexual orientation, and other demographic differences. In this mixed-methods exploratory study, we contribute to this literature by collecting and analyzing qualitative interviews with 96 self-described practitioners of BDSM to more fully describe distinct pathways into BDSM, adding nuance to prior descriptions of entry. We also collected and analyzed surveys with 2,017 self-described practitioners of BDSM to examine patterns of age at entry into BDSM practices and fantasies, and selection into older or younger age at practice and age at fantasy by BDSM role identity, gender, sexual orientation, and other demographic characteristics. Interview respondents told "constructionist sexual stories" describing introductions to BDSM via popular culture including pornography and other media, the Internet, or a sexual partner that awaked an inherent interest, along with "essentialist sexual stories" which described self-discovery solely attributed to an inherent personality characteristic. Survey data revealed that age at fantasy and onset of behavior varied by social–environmental factors. Pathways and patterns into BDSM behavior and fantasies therefore reflect a combination of idiosyncratic interests, exposure to ideas via the media or partners, and stratified social norms and opportunities related to sexual behavior.

Keywords: sexual practices | sexual fantasies | BDSM | media influences | pornography

Article:

Introduction

The colloquial term BDSM (Bondage, Discipline, Domination, Submission, Sadism, Masochism) describes a wide range of consensual behaviors designed to facilitate a power exchange between partners. Despite the stigma often attached to BDSM practices (Stiles & Clark, 2011; Wright, 2006), one study estimated roughly 5 million people in the USA and Canada engage in BDSM on a regular or semi-regular basis (Newmahr, 2010; Rubinsky, 2020; Sagarin et al., 2015), and a Belgian study found almost 47% of a general sample previously engaged in at least one BDSM act, with 22% fantasizing about BDSM (Holvoet et al., 2017). In this mixed-methods exploratory study, we examine pathways and patterns of entrance into

BDSM fantasies and practices among self-identified BDSM practitioners, revealing how individuals become involved in this stigmatized sexual activity, and the extent to which social–environmental factors can affect this entrance. Findings expand knowledge of entrance into BDSM, informing research on entry into stigmatized sexual practices more broadly. Further, much prior research on entry into BDSM fantasies and practices leaves out women and/ or ignores sexual orientation, potentially important moderators to BDSM behavior (Pascoal et al., 2015). We add to this literature by interviewing 96 self-described practitioners of BDSM to describe distinct pathways into BDSM: those based on external factors including pornography and other media, the Internet, and partners, and those based on internal self-discovery. We also surveyed 2,017 self-described practitioners of BDSM to examine patterns of age at entry into BDSM fantasies and practice, and selection into these ages by BDSM role identity, gender, sexual orientation, and other demographic characteristics.

BDSM Practice and Identity

BDSM participation occurs on a spectrum, with exploration of fantasies on one end and continuous, intense implementation throughout daily life on the other. Activities range “from mild to extreme, where the mild version may not even be identified as BDSM” by the participants themselves (Kimberly et al., 2018, p. 120). While BDSM is often practiced concurrently with sexual activity, some practitioners do not consider these activities sexual, nor practice them as a prelude to sexual activity (Dancer et al., 2006; Sagarin et al., 2015; Weiss, 2006). A range of roles exist for practitioners to enact and identify with (e.g., dominant, submissive, master/mistress, slave, top, bottom, sadist, masochist, switch). At times, folks use the term “kink” synonymously (Rehor, 2015).

In part due to negative media representations and a general lack of understanding, BDSM practitioners remain stigmatized (Bezreh et al., 2012; Dunkley & Brotto, 2020; Lindemann, 2013). Many non-practitioners harbor negative impressions of BDSM as an inherently unkind practice filled with violent acts, despite consent and desire for those acts being key components of BDSM (Bauer, 2014). Researchers have also pathologized BDSM, often associating the practice with mental disorders and past abuse (Ortmann & Sprott, 2015; Richters et al., 2008); despite others finding most BDSM practitioners do not meet the criteria for mental illness (Connolly, 2008; Kleinplatz & Moser, 2006; Williams, 2015). Due to stigmatization, many practitioners conceal BDSM practices and identities (Damm et al., 2018; Martinez, 2018; Stiles & Clark, 2011) making study of entrance pathways relevant to the study of entrance into stigmatized and concealed sexual practices more generally.

We examine only self-identified BDSM practitioners, yet individuals can engage in sexual practices associated with specific identities without claiming that identity (Kuperberg & Walker, 2018; Walker, 2014a, 2014b). Many incorporate BDSM activities into sex play (e.g., spanking, pulling hair) without awareness or acknowledgment. One survey found 20% reported past BDSM activities, but only 5% claimed a connection to or practice of BDSM (Durex, 2005). Consciousness and degree of erotic need can distinguish those identifying as practitioners from those who incorporate BDSM into sexual intimacy without that identity (Brame et al., 1996).

Theorizing Entrance into BDSM

In explaining their entrance into BDSM practices, participants construct a sexual story (Plummer, 1995). Through stories, people construct identities for themselves and others in an effort to make sense of the world and culture around them, and their sense of past experiences (Plummer, 1996). Narratives of intimate lives, or sexual stories, contextualize sexual experiences, integrating them into coherent accounts “that makes meaning of life events” (Hammack & Cohler, 2009, p. 4), shaping perspectives, and giving purpose and a frame to those experiences. Frames or “schemata of interpretation” are an important tool for understanding relationships between people and the society in which they live (Goffman, 1974). This is especially true when sexual practices and identities face stigma, with sexual stories often including speculation regarding the onset of sexual desire or interest. Non-stigmatized sexualities are often regarded as lacking a need for explanation, but people with stigmatized sexualities may feel they must provide a rationalization for their interests (Plummer, 1995).

Essentialism and Constructionism

Prior research on BDSM found participants drew upon internal essentialist and external constructionist explanations of entry (Yosta & Hunter, 2012). An essentialist perspective is the notion that one’s sexual orientation or desires are inherent, something within them from birth, and represent their “true self.” Essentialist sexual stories are the dominant narrative when it comes to sexual identities more generally, in part because they allow an escape from negative moral judgement by arguing identities are “real” or biologically determined, but they do not account for shifts in sexual interests and identities over the lifetime (Hacking, 1995; Kuperberg & Walker, 2018; Plummer, 1995; Yosta & Hunter, 2012). By contrast, sexual constructionism describes a process by which external forces shape sexual desires, interests, and sexual scripts, which are culturally influenced expectations about how sexual scenarios will unfold (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). In this theoretical framework, “sexuality is created by culture, by the defining of some behaviors and some relationships as ‘sexual,’ and the learning of these definitions or scripts by members of the society” (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998, p. 14).

Media Effects on Construction of the Sexual Self

Media depictions can expose individuals to previously unknown sexual practices, influencing practices and fantasies and contributing to the construction of sexual interests. The best-selling *Fifty Shades of Grey* book series (first published in 2011 and later released as a movie trilogy) which focused on a BDSM relationship, and increasing depictions of BDSM acts in erotica and romance novels, brought BDSM into mainstream culture (Kimberly et al., 2018). Additionally “popular magazines now encourage heterosexual women to incorporate ‘kinky’ practices to spice up their monogamous sex lives and keep their partners interested” (Barker et al., 2007, p. 110). Media exposure can affect sexual activity (Diekman et al., 2000). In one study, 86% of women who read the *Fifty Shades* books reported they influenced sexual attitudes, and 22% reported they motivated them to try BDSM activities (Deller & Smith, 2013).

As a type of media depicting sexuality, and often viewed in conjunction with masturbation or sexual encounters, pornography may especially influence sexual scripts, practices, interests, and attitudes, serving as a source of socialization, or sex education (Braithwaite et al., 2015; Brown & L'Engle, 2009; Doornwaard et al., 2015; Leonhardt &

Willoughby, 2018). Past research found increased pornography viewing affected attitudes of men and women, and increased the likelihood that men reenacted scenes, requested partner participation in pornographic sex acts, imagined or watched porn during sex, had more sexual partners, or purchased sexual encounters (Sun et al., 2016). Early sexual debut correlates with early use of Internet porn (Svedin et al., 2011), and exposure to sexual content in films (O'Hara et al., 2012).

Entry Into BDSM and BDSM Practitioners

Prior research on age at entry into BDSM often analyzed limited samples of men, finding interest and sometimes engagement in BDSM usually began in adolescence or earlier. Researchers place average age at sexual debut between 15 and 18 (Brouwer et al., 2019; Cha et al., 2016; Shafi et al., 2007), with 55% debuting by age 18 (CDC, 2017). Age at BDSM practice onset follows similar patterns, with older research on male BDSM practitioners finding 26% reported first face-to-face experience at age 16 or under (Moser & Levitt, 1987) and half reported awareness of interest by age 14, with interest typically developing by their twenties (Breslow et al., 1985); around 9% of male patrons of a Finland S&M club reported interest prior to age 10 (Sandnabba et al., 2002). In newer studies including both men and women BDSM practitioners (but not presenting differences in age at onset by gender), the majority of a Belgian sample reported awareness of interest prior to age 25 (Holvoet et al., 2017), and all 20 participants in another study reported interest by age 15 (Bezreh et al., 2012). Interest can precede participation by years; one study found participants waited an average 6 years to act on BDSM interests (Pascoal et al., 2015).

Research on pathways of entry into BDSM is even more limited. Yosta and Hunter (2012) surveyed 268 men and women BDSM practitioners about their entry into BDSM, dividing open-ended question responses into those who understood participation as related to their intrinsic nature (43%) or due to external influences (35%), with 21% discussing no primary motivation. They did not find gender differences in overall responses, but found among submissive-identified participants that men were more likely to report interest was due to their intrinsic nature, and women were marginally more likely to attribute interest to outside sources. Sexual orientation was not measured. Our in-depth interviews add nuance to this survey research, more fully describing specific pathways.

Past research found BDSM engagement varied by gender, sexual orientation, and education; age at entry into fantasies and practice may also vary by these factors. Men reported higher interest in BDSM than women, and sexual minorities reported higher involvement in BDSM compared to heterosexuals (Holvoet et al., 2017; Richters et al., 2008). Sexual double standards in society where women are viewed more negatively when engaging in casual sexual activity (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009) may explain this pattern and increase the reluctance of women to engage in sexual practices that face stigma, such as BDSM, delaying or reducing entry into this practice. While women and men have similar ages at sexual debut, sexual minority men and women report an earlier average age of sexual debut (Cavazos-Rehg et al., 2010; Halkitis et al., 2021), which may also be reflected in their age at BDSM practice; as sexual norm breakers, they may also face fewer additional costs to engaging in further stigmatized activity, accelerating participation. BDSM practitioners tend to earn higher incomes and education compared to non-practitioners, and samples of BDSM practitioners tend to be highly educated, which may be the result of bias in data collection methods (Martinez, 2018; Sandnabba et al., 2002; Wismeijer

& Assen, 2013). One study found higher education among those visiting public BDSM events; however, differences disappeared among those practicing BDSM at home and with lower levels of intensity (Coppens et al., 2020).

Race/ethnicity, religiosity, mothers' education, and parents' coupled status are related to selection into different types of and motivations for sexual practices (Kuperberg & Padgett, 2016; Thorpe & Kuperberg, 2021), but have not been studied systematically with regard to BDSM fantasies or practice, nor has BDSM role identity. Past research on BDSM studied primarily White respondents, with inadequate attention paid to race; Internet recruitment methods and White researchers limited respondents of other racial groups, but patterns also likely reflect a reluctance of historically marginalized groups to take on additional stigmatized identities (Sheff & Hammers, 2011). While African-American people and Afro-Caribbean men report earlier ages at sexual debut (Cavazos-Rehg et al., 2010; Jayakody et al., 2011), people of color may avoid or delay stigmatized sexual practices because of an increased perception of or actual scrutiny of their sexual practices (Kuperberg & Padgett, 2016). Religiosity delays age at sexual debut and can similarly delay or reduce entrance into stigmatized sexual practices, but can affect sexual practices of women and men differently (Kuperberg & Padgett, 2016; Kuperberg & Walker, 2018; Thorpe et al., 2021). Parental coupled status may influence the time adolescents spend unsupervised at home, increasing opportunities for sexual experimentation.

We add to prior literature by asking: How do practitioners of BDSM find out about these sexual practices and begin to practice them and make sense of their involvement? At what ages do self-described practitioners of BDSM typically begin to fantasize about and engage in BDSM practices? How do these ages vary by BDSM role identity at survey, gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, religiosity, education, parents' education, living with both biological parents at age 14, and age at survey? We draw upon both interview and survey data to answer these questions. As this study was exploratory, we did not form specific theoretical hypotheses.

Method

Participants and Procedure: Qualitative Sample

Due to difficulties in finding and recruiting sexual minority populations (Gorman, 2003; Hash & Cramer, 2003; Sullivan & Losberg, 2003), we recruited participants from a wide variety of outlets for both interviews and surveys after obtaining IRB approval. Student assistants posted flyers around campus and local sex shops. We posted recruitment calls on Twitter and Facebook and asked connections to share widely. With permission from moderators, we posted study calls online on Reddit in r/BDSM and r/Sex discussion forums, and in Facebook groups called BDSM and Fetish Community, BDSM Singles and Seekers, and BDSM Questions and Answers. Of note, these online communities are not restricted to respondents from the USA, but include a wide range of English speakers. With permission from the site, student researchers created profiles on a site catering to fetish lifestyles called FetLife with study recruitment information in the profile. Using the keywords BDSM, sub, dom, slave, master, and bondage, student researchers searched personal ads in major US cities on Craigslist, and those using keywords received email invitations for surveys and interviews, although none participated in interviews. Data collection ran from October 2016 through March 2018.

Because participants needed to meet specific inclusion criteria, we used purposive sample methods. This ensured they not only experienced the phenomenon under study, but were also

capable and willing to discuss those experiences with us. Participants interested in completing the survey simply followed the link included in the recruitment call. Those willing to participate in an interview contacted us by email. In response, they received a form letter describing the study with the informed consent form attached. We collected demographic information and assigned each participant a pseudonym. We conducted interviews via telephone or email. The bulk of respondents opted for email interviewing, which functioned as a virtual conversation. That is, we sent one question at a time via email, and participants responded to the question. Based on the response, we posed follow-up questions. A single interview often took weeks to accomplish. Email interviews self-produced transcripts, which were sent back to the participant for member-checking. Once confirmed, we identified transcripts only by the pseudonym and destroyed the electronic correspondence to ensure confidentiality. Interviewing continued until we assured saturation occurred. Due to the nature of the sample (that is, it contains subsets of groups), assurance of saturation occurred with 86 interviews completed. However, another 10 interviews remained in-progress and were thusly completed as well for a total of 96 interviews.

Ninety-six participants completed interviews, a large sample for qualitative work (Dworkin, 2012). Another 46 started but never finished interviews, a common phenomenon in email interviewing (Bowden & Galindo-Gonzalez, 2015; Hershberger & Kavanaugh, 2017; Walker, 2014a, 2014b, 2017, 2020); we discarded those. Of the 96, 42 (44%) identified as women; 43 (45%) as men; and 11 (11%) as genderqueer or genderfluid. Among role identities, 32 (34%) identified as submissives/slaves/bottoms, 30 (32%) as dominants/masters/tops, and 29 (31%) as switches. Most reported multiple BDSM roles and identities. Sixteen (17%) identified as masochists, nine (9%) identified as sadists, and seven (7%) reported interest in age play. While roughly two-thirds of BDSM practitioners identify as heterosexual (Neef et al., 2019), in our sample only 45 (47%) participants did, while 50 (53%) identified as non-heterosexual (e.g., bisexual, pansexual, queer, heteroflexible), and one as asexual. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 62. Their years of experience with BDSM ranged from 1 to 50 years. Fifty-seven (60%) reported they had a bachelor's degree or higher. Sixty (63%) reported having no children. Twenty-five (26%) reported being married and monogamous; another fourteen (15%) reported a polyamorous or open relationship or marriage. Another 23 (24%) reported being partnered (e.g., engaged, living with someone, ongoing monogamous relationship), while 28 (29%) were single. Only six (6%) reported a racial identity other than White. Among those identifying as dominant, only eight (8%) were female, while only seven of those reporting themselves as submissive were male. The sample included only two female sadists and five male masochists, and only one participant who reported their interest as age play was male.

Qualitative Analysis

We analyzed data that yielded information about the participants' perceptions of their experiences. The method of qualitative data analysis we employed was grounded theory, which utilizes the constant comparative method credited to Glaser and Strauss (1967). With grounded theory, the researcher inductively analyzes data to understand the lived experiences of the participants and approaches the research without a hypothesis or predetermined theory regarding the phenomenon in question. Rather, the data itself guide theory formation (Corbin & Strauss, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Using this methodology, a repetitive comparison of concepts, themes, and experiences both between and within data is utilized (Merriam, 1998, 2002). In grounded theory, researchers conduct data analysis in distinct phases (Corbin & Strauss, 1998) as

data are analyzed on several levels, including description, category construction, and making inferences to explain the phenomenon in question (Creswell, 1998). We reviewed transcript documents line by line, identifying themes and patterns that shaped data. This coding, conceptualizing, and categorizing took place by hand, providing the means of “distilling large quantities of information to uncover significant features and elements that are embedded in the data” (Stringer, 2007, p. 95).

Qualitative methods produce data reflective of experiences and meanings that are culturally and socially shaped. The results of grounded theory analysis can provide insight into social norms, but the shared nature of these meanings and experiences limits our ability to isolate which influences are sociocultural and which are individual (Rothe, 2000). This methodology allowed us to discern the meaning-making of the participants in the study and to examine their experiences and contributions to knowledge regarding experiences with BDSM.

Participants: Quantitative Sample

A total of 2,408 respondents filled out at least some of the survey, although many skipped some questions. 2,026 responded to questions about age at BDSM debut and 2,033 responded to questions about age at onset of BDSM ideation; we retained the 2,042 respondents who responded to at least one of these two questions. Since the first two questions we asked were about age and gender, we were able to examine differences in survey completion by these measures; among those who began the survey, younger or male respondents were significantly less likely to finish it. We removed 25 additional people from the sample for missing responses to independent variables, and one who reported age at BDSM debut as 55 and age at BDSM fantasy as 97, but age at survey as 27. We retained 161 additional respondents missing age at survey by controlling for age at survey as a categorical variable and including a dichotomized control variable for missing age. Our final sample size was 2,017.

Our sample is not representative of all BDSM participants; 82.4% of respondents took the survey within one month of posting to two Reddit forums and may be a more select group than those participating in BDSM more generally. A total of 1,079 respondents (53.5%) responded to the link posted to r/BDSM. (Due to requirements by group moderators to not include incentives, these respondents were sent a separate survey that we later merged with the full dataset.) 582 respondents (28.9%) responded within one month of posting to the r/sex group. 304 respondents (15.1%) responded before recruitment materials were posted to Reddit, recruited from other avenues discussed above, and 52 (2.6%) responded more than a month after the Reddit posts; these respondents may have found the link on Reddit or other recruitment avenues, although we were unable to determine which one.

Table 1 presents the age distribution by sample source; those recruited through Reddit sources were significantly younger than those recruited through all other avenues (ANOVA: $p < 0.001$; chi-square based on age categories: $p < 0.001$), indicating our quantitative sample is skewed toward a younger population. To account for this, we present both total age distributions for age at BDSM fantasy onset and entrance into practice, and results calculated separately by age at survey, and in multivariate analysis control for age at survey.

Measures

Our quantitative analysis focuses on responses to two questions: “At what age did you begin practicing BDSM?” and “Approximately how old were you when you began fantasizing about engaging in BDSM?” We present descriptive statistics for these two questions by age at survey, with age at onset of practice and fantasies divided into 0–12 (pre-adolescence), 13–15 (early adolescence) 16–17 (late adolescence), 18–22 (traditional college age), 23–29, 30–39, 40–49, and 50–70. We next present results of OLS regressions predicting selection into age at practice and age at fantasizing by BDSM role identity, gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, highest level of education, religiosity at survey, parent’s highest level of education (a measure of socioeconomic status background), whether the respondent lived with both parents at age 14, age at survey, and source of survey data (Reddit r/BDSM, Reddit r/sex, pre-Reddit and post-Reddit). We also present a model predicting age at BDSM practice that controls for age at BDSM fantasy and age at BDSM fantasy squared. In additional analyses (available from the corresponding author), we controlled for age at first sexual encounter to predict age at BDSM practice, but found this only slightly improved model fit from an adjusted R-squared of 0.3376 to 0.3540 and did not affect any of the other relationships in the model; we therefore do not present these results. Finally, we briefly discuss models run separately by gender, but do not present results in tables

BDSM role identity was measured from a question asking “With what BDSM role do you identify? (check all that apply)”; we coded responses into the dichotomous variables dominant, submissive, switch, sadist, masochist, kinky, and other or missing ($N = 1$ missing). Age at survey is controlled for categorically using dichotomous variables based on categories in Table 1, including a variable for “missing age at survey” to retain those missing age at survey. Gender was coded into three dichotomous variables; Man, Woman, and Other Gender, with the Other Gender category combining the categories Transgender MTF ($N = 33$), Transgender FTM ($N = 15$), Intersex ($N = 3$), Genderqueer ($N = 52$), Genderfluid ($N = 52$) Bigender ($N = 11$), Agender ($N = 20$), Two Spirit ($N = 6$), and Other ($N = 11$). Sexual orientation was coded as a series of dichotomous variables for a question in which respondents could “check all that apply”; categories included heterosexual, bisexual, pansexual or polysexual, homosexual/ lesbian/gay, bicurious, heteroflexible, asexual, demisexual [a label used to describe only feeling sexual attraction to a person they have an emotional bond with], or unsure/questioning. Race/ethnicity was coded in dichotomous variables for White non-Hispanic, Black non-Hispanic, Hispanic or Latino/a or Spanish Origin, Asian, or Other Race, which combined the responses Native American or Alaskan native, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and biracial or multiracial. Parents’ education measured highest education level of either parent, based on separate questions of mother’s and father’s education, and is measured categorically using the same categories used for respondent’s highest level of education: less than high school; high school degree or GED; some college, associates degree or technical degree; college degree; and graduate degree. Religiosity was measured by the question “Over the past year (12 months or 52 weeks) how often did you attend religious services?” with responses: never, 1–11 times, or 12+times (once a month or more). Finally, we control for the question “Did you live with both biological parents at age 14?” with responses yes, no, and “one of my parents was deceased at that time.”

Table 1 Age at survey by sample source (N and percent)

Age at Survey	Reddit: r/BDSM	Reddit: r/Sex	Pre-Reddit	Post-Reddit	Total
Mean	27.6	26.7	35.1	32.5	28.7
N	992	531	288	46	1,857
18–22	298	178	48	11	535
	27.6%	30.6%	15.8%	21.2%	26.5%
22–29	378	221	64	13	676
	35.0%	38.0%	21.1%	25.0%	33.5%
30–39	228	91	82	10	411
	21.1%	15.6%	27.0%	19.2%	20.4%
40–49	67	31	45	6	149
	6.2%	5.3%	14.8%	11.5%	7.4%
50–69	21	10	49	6	86
	2.0%	1.7%	16.1%	11.5%	4.3%
Missing Age at Survey	87	51	16	6	160
	8.1%	8.8%	5.3%	11.5%	7.9%
Total N	1,079	582	304	52	2,017

Table 2 Descriptive statistics for survey sample

<i>Age at BDSM Practice (Mean)</i>	21.5	<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	
<i>Age at BDSM Practice (Med.)</i>	20	White	84.7%
N	2,001	Black	1.7%
<i>Age at BDSM Fantasies (Mean)</i>	15.3	Latino/a	4.2%
<i>Age at BDSM Fantasies (Med.)</i>	15	Asian	4.1%
N	2,011	Other Race	5.4%
<i>Age at Survey (Mean)</i>	28.7	<i>Religious Service Attendance</i>	
<i>Age at Survey (Median)</i>	26	Never	67.4%
N	1,857	1–11 times/year	26.1%
<i>BDSM Role Identity</i>		12+times/year	6.5%
Dominant	33.5%	<i>Education</i>	
Submissive	57.4%	Less than High School	1.1%
Switch	38.0%	High School Degree	12.9%
Sadist	19.9%	Some College/Associates/Tech. Degree	38.6%
Masochist	31.6%	Bachelor's Degree	33.7%
Kinky	44.7%	Graduate Degree	13.7%
Other identity or missing	7.3%	<i>Parents' Education</i>	
<i>Gender</i>		Less than High School	1.6%
Man	39.7%	High School Degree	15.9%
Woman	51.2%	Some College/Associates/Tech. Degree	24.3%
Other Gender	9.1%	Bachelor's Degree	24.8%
<i>Sexual Orientation</i>		Graduate Degree	33.4%
Heterosexual	52.2%	<i>Lived with Both Biological Parents at 14</i>	
Bisexual/Pansexual/Polysexual	36.2%	Yes	70.4%
Homosexual/Gay/Lesbian	3.3%	No	27.1%
Heteroflexible	16.0%	One parent deceased	2.6%
Bicurious	8.3%	<i>Survey Source</i>	
Queer	6.3%	Reddit r/BDSM	53.5%
Asexual	2.4%	Reddit r/sex	28.9%
Demisexual	12.6%	Pre-Reddit	15.1%
Questioning/Unsure	3.1%	Post-Reddit	2.6%
		N	2,017

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for the quantitative sample. Many survey respondents reported more than one BDSM role identity. The most common identity was “Submissive” at 57%. The second most common identity was “Kinky” at 45%, followed by Switch (38%), Dominant (33.5%), Masochist (32%), and Sadist (20%). 7% had another BDSM identity; text responses included Age player, Baby girl, Bottom, Brat, Daddy, Fetishist, Hedonist, Kitten, Little, Little girl, Master, Middle, Mistress, Mommy, Owner, Pet, Primal, Prey, Princess, Property, Pup, Puppy, Rigger, Rope Top, Sensualist, Service submissive, Service top, Slave, Slaveowner, Slut, Cuckold, Swinger, Vanilla, and Voyeur.

Similar to the qualitative sample, just over half of survey respondents identified as heterosexual (52.2%). Over one-third (36.2%) identified as bisexual, pansexual or polysexual, 16% as heteroflexible, 8.3% as bicurious, 12.6% as demisexual, 6.3% as queer, and less than 4% as homosexual/ gay/lesbian, asexual, or questioning. 51.4% were women, and 9% were other gender. Respondents were primarily White (84.7%), never attended religious services (67.4%) and lived with both biological parents at age 14 (70.4%). Only 14% lacked any college education, and 33.4% had at least one parent with a graduate degree. Respondents had a mean age of 28.7 and a median of 26 at the time of survey.

Results

Qualitative Results: Pathways into BDSM Practices

Interviews revealed constructionist sexual stories that attributed entry to external forces and essentialist stores crediting inherent propensities; narratives did not differ by demographics.

Constructionist Sexual Stories

Participants who told constructionist sexual stories framed entry as the result of exposure to learning about BDSM from external sources, specifically popular culture and sexual partners.

Popular Culture

Sixty-four (67%) of the 96 interview participants reported entry into BDSM sexual practices occurred via exposure to pornography, romance novels or vampire television shows, Internet chat rooms/forums, or sex education reference materials, and two mentioned The Dan Savage Show specifically, all forms of popular culture.

Pornography ranked as the most common point of entry to BDSM (33%, $N = 33$). Some expressed that a lack of satisfaction with vanilla porn led them to BDSM porn. Leigh Ann (26, 8 years in BDSM, slave, not heterosexual, female, married) explained:

[At 15] Shortly after I discovered vanilla porn, I stumbled across BDSM, and it made sense to me. At the time I thought vanilla porn was repulsive, but BDSM wasn't. Was a little nerve wracking because I was confused over maybe there was something wrong with me. Sick in the head.

Leigh Ann found vanilla porn “repulsive,” yet felt drawn to BDSM porn. Her sense of concern that something might be “wrong with” her resonated with many participants. Edward (32, 13

years in BDSM, master/sadist, not straight, male) echoed this discontent with vanilla porn:

I first learned like most people via the internet, looking at porn sites and not getting anything from "vanilla" styled sources. I don't know that I can state what it was that attracted me to the experiences other than the fact that "vanilla" porn was not interesting to me, and I enjoyed the odder and more extreme things. The more I researched the further down the rabbit hole it led.

Others also suggested that viewing non-mainstream porn led to more viewing of other non-mainstream categories of porn. Cameron (31, 5 years in BDSM, sub, heterosexual, male, married) reported, "The first time I ever saw someone in a BDSM situation and thought, 'Wait, this is different, and I would love that to be me,' was actually while browsing furry porn while I was in college." Two participants mentioned viewing BDSM acts as a consequence of viewing Japanese animated porn. Ken (26, 25 years in BDSM, masochist/bottom, heterosexual, male, single) said "I was first introduced to BDSM concepts probably around 5-6th grade, so 11-12 years old, when I discovered bondage hentai. Then [I] moved on to other kinks/fetishes from there."

The sense of "going down the rabbit hole" came up multiple times. Seth (25, 5 years in BDSM, switch, pansexual, male, partnered) agreed:

As a Millennial I grew up with the internet, of course. Once you find one link to a porn site the rabbit hole opens. As a teenager going through puberty... I'm innately curious by nature, so it wasn't long before I was finding and exploring BDSM-type activities online.

For these participants, stumbling across BDSM porn led to consumption of more BDSM porn. Drew (23, 8 years BDSM, switch, pansexual, male, partnered) described his experience:

When I was 11 or 12 and it popped up as internet porn and I just, something clicked for me, and I was like; "Wow, I like this thing, this is definitely something I can get into," and from there, just kept trying to learn. As I got older, trying to learn more about it, before then it was just porn.

For those constructing this sexual story, the sense of their first viewing of BDSM porn as a sort of "before" and "after" moment in their porn viewing life proved salient.

While some deliberately sought out non-mainstream porn after viewing other forms, for many others, their entry was just a chance happening. Adam (24, 1 year in BDSM, dominant, heterosexual, male, married) said "I learned about it through porn actually. Just came across it. I first learned about BDSM about six years ago." Many participants reported the experience of a mundane session of watching porn turning into an exposure to BDSM. Some were very young. Spencer (34, 10 years in BDSM, dominant, not heterosexual, male, married) reported that it was "probably from internet pornography as a kid." Others professed a lack of awareness of BDSM prior to accidental exposure through pornography. Todd (21, 2 years in BDSM, dominant, heterosexual, male, single) recalled "[I] first learned about BDSM through porn. I didn't know it was an actual thing." Still others ran peripheral searches that led them into BDSM. Carter (21, 2 years in BDSM, switch, heterosexual, male, single) "Searching the internet one day I came

across pictures of girls tied down, and it just went from there.” A sense of inevitability once exposed to BDSM activities ran through the narratives. Many participants framed their participation as springing from a single exposure, which led them to seek out more exposure and more “kinks.”

While some participants described their first viewing as pleasurable, others reported that their interest grew only through repeated exposure. Rudy (23, 5 years in BDSM, dominant/big, heterosexual, male, married) explained:

I saw it directly for the first time around 15 or so when searching for Internet porn. I remember stumbling onto fetish websites from time to time, and being disgusted by it. With time, I began to get used to seeing these acts and eventually came to seek them out. I'm not sure if it was escalation from excessive viewing of pornography, or just me developing with time.

Though Rudy expressly described his initial response as “disgust” and stated he only viewed BDSM materials after repeated exposure to it, he still framed his participation in BDSM as “developing with time.” Others reported early exposure, and then a delayed interest. Lisa (23, 2 years in BDSM, submissive/maso/little, heterosexual, female, single) said “I first learned about BDSM from stumbling upon [it] when I would read erotica online, and finding it through porn sites when I was 14 or 15. But I didn't actively seek out more in-depth info until about 2 years ago.” Again, the participant described developing an interest in BDSM only after repeated exposure.

While online porn served as the portal for most participants who first learned about BDSM via pornography, some older participants said they first saw BDSM sex acts in adult magazines. Joshua (54, 25 years in BDSM, switch, bisexual, male) explained:

I first became aware of BDSM at a younger age— maybe 12 or 13. My older brother—in high school— had Penthouse magazines hidden in his room. I'd sneak into his room and take them to look at and sneak them back before he caught me. The pictorials—more explicitly sexual than Playboy—would have some fetish elements in them, but I also started reading Penthouse's forum section where supposedly real readers would write letters for publication about their sexual experiences. In those pages I would come across people into kink and BDSM play.

While Internet porn makes viewing BDSM sex acts easier, these older participants gained access through print materials before Internet porn was widely available, and in this case the exposure occurred in early puberty, a formative time for the construction of the sexual self.

Beyond porn, eleven (12%) participants reported that their introduction occurred via the Internet. Forums, chat rooms, fanfiction, online erotica, dating profiles, and even Tumblr served as sites of introduction. Sometimes these initial viewings confused them. Devan (23, 7 years in BDSM, submissive/maso/switch, bisexual, female, single) explained:

I was deeply into fanfiction when I was maybe 12-14, and I sought out sex scenes, and a lot of those had BDSM elements. I remember a really specific one, with a character basically torturing another and then fucking them. I wasn't exactly sure

how to parse the scene: was it sexy? not sexy? painful? good? bad? I was confused and intrigued and I wanted more. I didn't exactly have a vocabulary to describe it though.

Devan described her first exposure as puzzling, perhaps due to her age. She lacked the language to describe her own reaction and the context for which to analyze what she saw. Again, this participant described an encounter during the formative period of early puberty. Others described it as exciting from first contact. Cora (31, 10 years in BDSM, switch, submissive, sadist, bisexual, female, married/poly) said:

I first learned about BDSM in my middle teen years, probably about 15. I learned about it online, reading fanfiction (fictional stories featuring characters from other media, such as from a television show or movie). It was something that I found sexually exciting and appealing.

Those initial exciting encounters often informed present day play. Jane (31, 10 years in BDSM, switch, pansexual, genderqueer, married) added:

I have little doubt it was in the depths of AOL chat rooms. I was probably 12 or so, and "cybering" was the thing to do. The conversations I had with strangers there were a source of sexual knowledge for me. I also remember vividly, masturbating to websites that sold chastity cages, because somehow that got around the porn filter my parents installed. Many of them had photos of live models. I now use male chastity in much of my play.

Jane's early puberty exposure provided a model for their present-day sexual encounters. That early exposure queued their sexual desire and served as a script for sexual arousal almost 20 years later at interview.

These early brushes with BDSM practices led participants to seek out more contact and sometimes even a community. Bodhi (22, 5 years in BDSM, submissive, pansexual, gender fluid, partnered) explained "I first learned about BDSM on Tumblr, and then signed up for FetLife." Thus, the Internet and popular culture provided an introduction to BDSM.

Entry via Sexual Partner

By contrast, sixteen (17%) qualitative participants described an introduction to BDSM practices as the result of a relationship with a BDSM-experienced partner. Many reported this exposure occurred in late high school (senior year), college, or later. Only three reported exposure via a partner at 15 or younger. This face-to-face exposure with a trusted partner proved influential. Alan (41, 23 years in BDSM, master, hetero, male, partnered) explained:

My first girlfriend in high school introduced me to it. [Was that 23 years ago?] Yep. At first, I didn't want to, but then she basically said, "we're done unless you do," and so I did, and then we ended up having sex. At first, it was the fact that I was getting laid, and she wanted me to tie her up and you know slap her and things of that nature, and I did whatever I needed to do to have sex. And then I

realized at that point that it was something that excited me, and I never have done anything else.

The sense that discovering BDSM functioned as a moment that changed everything resonated with many in this study. Discovering a name and language for their desires in addition to an entire community of others with similar interests functioned as a “before” and “after” moment. This discovery reframed how they saw themselves and their sexual lives.

Some described a partner-led introduction within less typical pairings. Alyx (28, 6 years in BDSM, little girl, heterosexual, genderqueer, single) described the unconventional coupling where their initiation occurred:

When I was in college in 2010, I became friends with benefits with a classmate's husband (she was aware and didn't indicate any disapproval or concern). I would stay over at their apartment some nights to keep him company while she slept, since he was an insomniac and would be up late watching Netflix. One day, after we'd grown very close, he put a leather collar on me and told me I was the household pet. It was my job to continue keeping him company, and to help her with any household chores, or anything else she requested. After a couple months or so, he took the collar off me and told me that I was no longer a pet; I was his Princess, and he was my Daddy. He taught me some more about BDSM and I took it upon myself to do further research.

In these pairings, a learning curve often presented itself. Charlie (25, 6 years in BDSM, switch, bisexual, male, married) said:

I was 19ish and I was involved with an older woman, who had just been divorced and wanted me to try being a dominant as she was a natural submissive. And it was a perfect fit. My first BDSM experience was a learning curve. She had been in a 24/7 type relationship before and had to coach me at first, but after about 2 weeks I got it. It was the fact that I'm so easygoing and relaxed in an everyday setting that it gives me a chance to really flip my personality. Almost a Jekyll and Hyde type thing. Also, the fact that at times I've literally held their lives in my hands at times was wild.

For some participants, their initial encounter sparked immediate interest and excitement. However, similar to those who discovered BDSM online, some participants warmed to BDSM over time. Scott (25, 2 years in BDSM, master/switch, straight, male, partnered) added:

I first learned about BDSM from a friend of mine before I became sexually active. I saw it as something barbaric, and never thought I would get into it. It seemed scary at the time. Once I became sexually active, my second partner started to introduce me to BDSM. She started to introduce me to domination, and we would alter the roles of Dominant and Submissive. My first experience was primal, as we kept rolling around for control of the scene. Eventually, I would come out as the Dominant, and we would have sex from there.

Again, this participant initially felt disinterest in and felt negatively about BDSM, describing it as “barbaric,” yet after repeated exposure changed their view. In this case, a desired sexual partner leads Scott into BDSM acts. While most of these exposures occurred in established relationships, some described relationships initiated with BDSM practices. Gianna (31, 2 years in BDSM, sub, hetero, female, poly/ partnered, not White) said:

Totally by accident. I went on a date with a guy that I met through OKCupid and, you know, the date went really well, which almost never happens. And I ended up going back to his place with him, and he was like, “Hey! I want to do this thing.” And I was like, “I like doing things.” And he was like, “Okay, I’m going to put a blindfold on you.” And I was like, “Okay! That sounds like a great idea.” And so, I was sitting there with a blindfold on, and I could hear him like rummaging in the kitchen for something and I was thinking, “Oh my God, this is terrible idea. What did I get myself into? I’m about to get murdered.” So, I wouldn’t recommend doing it in this instance, but in my case luckily, I didn’t end up getting murdered, and I had a really good night, and I’ve ended up dating the guy for years as of now.

Despite the lack of established trust between Gianna and her partner, this initial experience proved enticing. Participants like these continued exploration into BDSM activities. Teddy (33, 9 years in BDSM, sado/switch, bisexual, male, partnered) described his first experience:

I learned about BDSM around 16. I was dating a girl when I was 24, who wanted me to tie her breasts up, and the control and restriction of her movement did something for me so I decided to further explore.

For these participants, their initial exposure to BDSM functioned as foundational to their current involvement in those practices.

Three participants in this group reported an introduction at 15 or younger. Jada (21, 5 years in BDSM, dominant, hetero, female, Black) said “Through a guy I dated when I was 14. But I came to be involved in the experience at 16.” Jada’s initial experience failed to pull her into BDSM practice. However, a later experience did. For some, these encounters occurred as part of their sexual debut. Kate (23, 4 years in BDSM, maso, pansexual/demisexual, genderfluid, single) added, “When I became sexually active at 15, my boyfriend at the time asked if I’d like to try being tied up. And I did.” These early experiences proved powerful for the participants. Patrick (18, 3 years in BDSM, sub/switch, het, male, partnered) said:

I was a freshman or sophomore in high school, if I remember right, so I was 15-16. She explained that she is a submissive and what that entailed for her. I started to realize that I had been craving BDSM for years.

Again, the participant had a sense of their first exposure simply awakening something existing within them. The experience of exposure to BDSM through face-to-face real-life encounters was powerful and meaningful.

Essentialist Frameworks: “Just Always Been a Part of Who I Am”

Participants whose sexual storytelling relied upon the essentialist narrative that BDSM interests functioned as inherent to who they are disregarded exposure to BDSM practices through media or other people. They framed their interest as simply part of who they are. In addition to the many participants describing external factors that awakened an internal interest, 13 (14%) participants either denied introduction to BDSM practices via the Internet, novels, pornography, or romantic partners, or claimed that their interest pre-dated the exposure. These participants remained adamant that their interest in BDSM functioned as simply who they had always been, and as something about which they held curiosity from a young age. Some reported an awareness during childhood play as evidence that they held an early innate interest in the activity. Brooke (62, 50 years in BDSM, master, bisexual, female, married) said “It was [at] 12 years old tying people up to trees.” Andrew (28, 5 years BDSM, switch, heterosexual, male, partnered) added, “Being totally honest, even earlier than that I remember getting some of my first erections/arousal (without knowing what they were) being tied up by, and tying up kids in the course of good guys/bad guys/ power-rangers style playtime.” Childhood play with others functioned as an awakening for several participants. Clare (60, 50 years in BDSM, master, bisexual, female, married, poly) explained:

When I was 12, I tied up a boy and a girl to a tree during summer camp and did what I wanted to them. I can identify what it was. Then it was: “if they’re tied to a tree, I can touch them where I wanna touch them in the way I wanna do it.”

More than one participant reported participation in BDSM activities while alone. Jason (40, 30 years in BDSM, bottom, hetero-curious, male, married) said, “I started doing selfbondage at 10 years old, 30 years ago. I started adding sexual activities into the bondage as I went through puberty a year or two later.” An awareness of and attraction to power proved common within these threads. Ellie (28, 3 years in BDSM, switch/brat, hetero, female) added:

I remember when I was little, I used to like, do playthings with my Barbies but that was when I was like younger, when I probably didn’t know when it was. Specifically, maybe a teen. I can’t think of a specific incident but, you know, playing out in movies I’d be like “oh, yeah, that’s something I want to do.” I think I liked the power dynamic, like the one person has more power than the other person.

The idea that the awareness of their own interest in BDSM occurred in childhood remained common within these narratives and was presented as evidence of innate interest, although participants also reported potential external factors such as movies and childhood friends.

Others explained it as just part of their personality. Lorna (46, 15 years in BDSM, dom, hetero, female, poly/partnered) said:

I’ve been dominant with boys since at least age four (my preschool report card said I needed to be “less bossy with the boys” - no joke). I have always taken the lead/ dominant role in romantic relationships and often in platonic ones. It is my

default mode.

For these participants, there remained no question as to where their interest originated. George Lucas (55, 15 years in BDSM, dom, hetero, male, married) explained, “I was less attracted to BDSM than [it was] a behavior I was already exhibiting [that] was defined by [the] BDSM community.” This sense of “this is simply who I am” was strong. Carla (28, 5 years in BDSM, switch, bicurious, female, married/ poly) added:

I can't really say how or when I learned about it as I am pretty sure I had an attraction to it long before I understood what it was. A lot of its attraction was already based in my personality. I do remember as I was first learning about what sex was, I was very attracted to the idea of someone being in charge. I knew I liked the ideas of restraints being used.

While some grew up in families who supported exploration, many did not. Sutton (24, 10 years in BDSM, sub/pet/ primal, pan, genderqueer, single) clarified:

I don't remember when I first learned about BDSM; I've always been interested in alternative sexualities, and I was raised in an environment that supported exploration. I know by the time I was fourteen, I knew about BDSM (even if I didn't know the term), and accepted that I was interested in it. My first boyfriend shared my interests, so I began actively engaging in BDSM at fifteen.

Sutton had no recall of exposure through porn or popular culture.

Some described discovering BDSM online or through popular culture, but still maintained the urges dwelt within them long before. Thea (24, 2 years in BDSM, sub/switch, het, female, single) explained:

I mean I first knew I liked BDSM probably when I was a very young teenager, and read an erotica that gave a name for all the fantasies I had. Of course, I had been having fantasies about power exchange since I can remember, probably around 8 or so?

Thus, while these participants recalled an external exposure, they disregarded its importance, instead framing their interest as inevitable and innate to them. Rochelle (24, 10 years in BDSM, dominant, not heterosexual, female, engaged) explained “Oh, I don't know: online probably, as a youth though, puberty 12. I don't know. I think I was always into it.” Rochelle's initial introduction occurred via porn, yet she maintained her interest as innate. Unlike those in the previous categories, who attributed their interest to their external introduction, these participants outright refused to give external sources any credit whatsoever. Lucy (25, 3 years in BDSM, dom, pansexual, female, partnered) clarified “I've had an interest in bondage and such for some years, but my first REAL introduction to proper BDSM would probably be the Sunstone comics.” Lucy finally recalled exposure via a comic book, but made clear that her own interest pre-dated exposure. Like others in this category, she professed belief that even prior to her first exposure, her interest existed. Some participants described early and persistent fantasies for which they reported no origin. Miranda (32, 10 years in BDSM, slave, het, female, married)

said:

I had always had fantasies about being under the control of someone else, of being in bondage. But I thought that was very abnormal and pushed it aside. I was searching for something on my computer (I don't remember exactly what) and came across a banner ad for "the Training of O" on kink.com's website. The ad showed a woman tied up with rope. I clicked on the ad and immediately went down the rabbit hole, as it were. I felt like I wasn't abnormal at all. Other people shared similar fantasies! I showed the site to my boyfriend (now husband), and we went from there.

Another participant described a partner-led entry, but maintained the interest resided within them prior to the incident. Arden (28, 10 years in BDSM, sadist/dom, pansexual, genderfluid, married poly) said:

I was 18 and my boyfriend asked me to bite his nipples "until they bleed." I was pretty shocked, and said I needed to do some research. Looking back, he was just experiencing sub frenzy, and probably would have been horrified if I'd obliged. I've always been a sadist, but didn't know about BDSM until I did the research prompted by the interaction above. I was thrilled to find that there were people out there with a lock that fits my key, so to speak.

Thus, among this small subset, they disregarded any external introductions to BDSM activities, instead asserting BDSM as simply their inherent identity and nature. These participants posited that their personality simply existed as is, and finding BDSM just confirmed they were not alone.

Survey Results: Age at Entrance into Practicing and Fantasizing about BDSM

Table 3 presents age at onset of BDSM fantasies and practice by age at survey. Reflecting qualitative findings in which some indicated they had always been interested in BDSM, some survey participants indicated they first fantasized about ($N = 6$) or practiced ($N = 14$) BDSM at age 0. Onset of BDSM fantasies typically occurred during adolescence, with a modal response category of 13–15 for all ages at survey, and the median ranging from 14–16; overall the mean age at fantasy was 15.3 with a median of 15. Means ranged from 13.9 for those age 18–22 at survey, to 20.4 for those 50–69 at survey. Almost one-fifth reported onset of fantasies before age 13, 76.4% reported onset before age 18, and 92.7% before age 22. Entry into BDSM practice tended to occur later with a median of 20, a mean of 21.5, and a modal age category of 18–22. Most (79.6%) began practicing BDSM between ages 15–29. Respondents who were older at the survey were also older at age of onset of BDSM practice; those who were 18–29 at survey most commonly began practicing BDSM at age 18–22, those in their 30s and 40s most commonly started practicing in their mid to late 20s and 30s, and those in their 50s and 60s most commonly began practicing in their 30s or 40s.

Table 4 presents results from OLS regression models predicting selection into age at onset of BDSM fantasies and practice. Age at onset of fantasies was positively related to age at practice, with age at fantasy squared also significant and positive, indicating a somewhat delayed entry into practice among those older at first BDSM fantasy. Those who identified as dominant

reported older age at fantasies. Those who identified as submissive, sadists, masochists, or another BDSM identity (see Table 4) were younger at fantasy onset, and those identified as switches, sadists, or another BDSM identity were also younger at practice, although the relationship between sadists and age at practice was explained by age at fantasy onset.

There were no gender differences in age at onset of fantasies, but women were older at practice in both models. Those who identified as queer reported younger ages at onset of fantasy. Regressions run separately by gender (not shown) revealed additional differences by sexual identity that differed by gender; gay men were older at practice, while gay/lesbian and bisexual women and queer other gender individuals were younger at practice. Bisexual and heteroflexible women, queer men, and other gender individuals were also younger at fantasy onset.

Those older at survey were also older when they both first fantasized about and began practicing BDSM; these results may be driven by selection into responding to the survey, with those engaging in BDSM at younger ages more likely to be included among younger respondents to the survey. Those who did not live with both parents at age 14 were younger when they began practicing BDSM in both models, but not younger when they began fantasizing about BDSM. Race, religiosity, education, and parents' education were not significantly related to age at BDSM fantasies or practice in combined gender models, although in models separated by gender (not shown), women who frequently attended religious services reported younger ages at BDSM practice than non-attenders. Adjusted R-squared measures indicated variables explained only about one-eighth of variation in onset of BDSM fantasies (0.1290), one-third of variation in age at first BDSM practice in the second model (0.3376), and just over half (0.5055) of variation in age at practice in the third model that additionally controlled for age at onset of fantasies.

Discussion

Qualitative findings confirm and add to prior research funding entrance into BDSM that was attributed to either external or intrinsic forces (Yosta & Hunter, 2012) by revealing specific primary pathways through which respondents began to engage in BDSM practices; popular culture and Internet exposure (with pornography being the most common form), sexual partnerships with partners interested in BDSM, and self-discovery at early ages attributed to inherent personality characteristics. Even among those who discovered BDSM via an external source, participants often framed their interest as something inherent, and each eventually sought out more knowledge of the practices and interested partners. They saw the experience of encountering BDSM either in popular culture or through a sexual encounter as awakening something within them. Other individuals encounter BDSM via popular culture or sexual partners but do not become interested in it or seek out BDSM experiences.

Table 3 Age at BDSM fantasies and practice by age at survey (percents, means, medians)

	18–22	23–29	30–39	40–49	50–69	Age missing	Total
<i>Age at Onset of BDSM Fantasies</i>							
0	0.0	0.3	0.2	0.0	1.2	1.3	0.3
1–12	19.1	19.6	19.3	16.9	20.0	25.2	19.6
13–15	46.4	39.1	33.4	27.7	23.5	34.6	38.0
16–17	24.2	17.8	13.4	9.5	20.0	22.6	18.5
18–22	10.1	20.0	19.0	21.1	15.3	10.7	16.3
23–29	0.2	3.3	10.2	8.1	3.5	1.9	4.1
30–39	0.0	0.0	4.4	11.5	2.4	1.9	2.0
40–49	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.4	4.7	1.3	0.7
50–69	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	9.4	0.6	0.5
Mean	13.9	14.5	16.1	19.2	20.4	14.5	15.3
Median	14	15	15	16	16	14	15
<i>Age at Entry into BDSM Practice</i>							
0	1.1	0.5	0.0	1.4	0.0	1.9	0.7
1–12	0.8	0.7	0.2	0.7	2.3	1.9	0.8
13–15	10.3	6.7	7.8	3.4	5.8	9.6	7.8
16–17	24.3	14.7	8.8	6.8	2.3	27.4	15.9
18–22	63.1	50.6	27.1	24.3	16.3	41.4	44.9
23–29	0.4	26.9	32.7	11.5	18.6	10.8	18.3
30–39	0.0	0.0	23.4	28.4	19.8	3.8	8.1
40–49	0.0	0.0	0.0	23.7	19.8	1.3	2.7
50–69	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	15.1	1.9	0.8
Mean	17.6	20.2	24.1	28.9	33.1	19.6	21.5
Median	18	20	24	30	31.5	18	20

Bolded values indicate most common response for each column.

On the one hand, this suggests that even when the construction of sexual self is clearly shaped by external forces, adoption of certain practices may be a result of inherent differences in propensities that shape sexual interests, with the resulting identity feeling authentic to the individual because it matches their inherent interests. While individuals were aware of external factors providing introduction to novel sex practices, they reframed their participation in essentialist terms. Media presentations and sexual partners provided models of new ways of being, doing, and knowing their sexual selves. Yet individuals still framed their own enactment of those models as an expression of their true self. On the other hand, while respondents often relied upon essentialist frameworks, our analysis revealed most learned about BDSM through the media and popular culture, influencing when they first began to be interested in this expression of sexuality. In other words, many respondents acknowledged that their entry into BDSM came from an external source, but believed that exposure awakened something existing within them. Others framing sexual stories in strong essentialist terms mentioned external forces, but disregarded them. This “born this way” framework informed sexual stories and perceptions of sexual selves and largely ignored the role of external sources in the construction of the sexual self. This framing may itself be socially constructed; contemporary sexual stories often rely on essentialist narratives, which can reduce moral judgement of stigmatized identities (Hacking, 1995). Those crediting exposure to “accidental” external exposure may also be seeking to avoid stigmatization.

Timing of exposure may influence one’s tendency to seek out more experiences by shaping sexual interests at a young age and influencing access to opportunities or sexual scripts related to BDSM or sexual experimentation more generally. Many interviewees described childhood or adolescent onset of interest, and most survey participants reported onset of BDSM fantasies before age 16, but fewer than 10% engaged in BDSM before this age, with a modal age of practice of 18–22. This age range is when many leave their parents’ home and attend college, a setting and life stage associated with sexual experimentation (Thorpe & Kuperberg, 2021).

Surveys also revealed patterns of fantasizing about and engaging in BDSM related to demographic characteristics, further reinforcing that social–environmental factors influenced entry into BDSM. BDSM role identities were significantly related to onset of BDSM fantasies and participation; future research should explore explanations for these links. Participants’ gender and living with both parents at age 14 were related to age at BDSM practices but not fantasy. Women, facing more harsh judgement of their sexual behaviors (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009), may delay entrance into stigmatized sexual behaviors despite their interest. Yet they fantasized about BDSM at the same ages as men, suggesting patterns are not due to inherent differences in sexual propensities, but are instead influenced by social norms. Participants not living with both biological parents during adolescence may have enjoyed more privacy and unsupervised time with which to engage in sexual activity, explaining their earlier age at engagement in BDSM despite similar age at fantasies. Those identifying as queer reported younger age at fantasy and practice; these patterns may to some extent be driven by a wider prevalence of identifying with this category among younger generations. While the younger age at BDSM entry for lesbian and bisexual women aligns with their earlier average sexual debut, the older age at which gay men began BDSM practice does not, countering expectations. Women who frequently attended religious services entered BDSM practice at younger ages, also countering expectations and patterns related to age at sexual debut more generally (Thorpe et al., 2021); these areas both deserve further research.

Table 4 OLS regression models predicting age at onset of BDSM practice and fantasies (betas)

	Age at BDSM Fantasies		Age at BDSM Practice		Age at BDSM Practice	
Age at BDSM Fantasies					0.22	***
Age at BDSM Fantasies Squared					0.01	***
Dominant	0.86	*	0.61		0.25	
Submissive	-0.93	**	-0.13		0.30	
Switch	-0.33		-0.65	*	-0.51	*
Sadist	-1.30	**	-0.92	*	-0.31	
Masochist	-0.87	**	-0.25		0.10	
Kinky	-0.30		-0.37		-0.25	
Other identity or missing	-1.45	**	-2.00	***	-1.20	**
Woman	0.59		1.18	**	0.78	*
Other Gender	-0.30		0.23		0.17	
Heterosexual	0.38		0.58		0.43	
Bisexual/Pansexual/Polysexual	-0.70		-0.72		-0.35	
Homosexual/Gay/Lesbian	0.08		-0.14		-0.20	
Heteroflexible	-0.50		-0.28		-0.04	
Bicurious	0.51		0.66		0.51	
Queer	-1.55	**	-1.14		-0.50	
Asexual	0.18		0.52		0.34	
Demisexual	0.09		0.70		0.67	
Questioning/Unsure	0.32		0.17		0.03	
Age 23–29 at Survey	0.77	*	2.23	***	1.87	***
Age 30–39 at Survey	2.23	***	5.91	***	4.85	***
Age 40–49 at Survey	5.04	***	10.70	***	8.05	***
Age 50–69 at Survey	6.16	***	14.79	***	11.02	***
Age at Survey Missing	0.49		1.96	***	1.57	**
Black	0.58		0.17		-0.09	
Latino/a	-0.12		0.14		0.21	

Asian	0.17	-0.43	-0.43		
Other Race	-0.61	-0.93	-0.57		
Religious services 1–11 x/year	0.42	-0.27	-0.47		
Religious service 12+x/year	-0.67	-0.88	-0.60		
High School Degree	-0.20	-0.03	-0.08		
Some College	-0.55	0.37	0.48		
Bachelor’s Degree	-0.57	0.79	0.90		
Graduate Degree	-0.65	1.48	1.57		
Parents High School Degree	1.59	-0.80	-1.72		
Parents Some College	1.04	-0.13	-0.64		
Parents Bachelor’s Degree	0.84	-1.14	-1.57		
Parents Graduate Degree	0.62	-1.27	-1.73		
Did not live with both bio parents at 14	0.02	-0.62	-0.67	*	*
One parent deceased at 14	-1.03	-0.99	-0.44		
Reddit r/sex	1.23	***	0.46	-0.02	
Pre-Reddit	0.32	1.07	1.06	**	**
Post-Reddit	0.98	-0.01	-0.56		
Constant	14.06	18.25	14.19		
N	2,011	2,001	1,995		
Adjusted R-Squared	.1290	.3376	.5055		

Note: * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$. Reference categories: Men, Age 18–22 at survey, White, Never attends religious services, Less than a high school degree, Parent with less than a high school degree, lived with both bio parents at age 14, Respondent recruited from Reddit r/BDSM.

Unlike research related to patterns of sexual behavior more generally (cf. Kuperberg & Padgett, 2016), we did not find age at onset of BDSM fantasies and practices to be related to race, education, or socioeconomic status background in this sample. African-Americans and Afro-Caribbean men generally have an earlier sexual debut, but we did not find age differences by race in this study. So, it may be that their lower rate of engagement in BDSM (Sheff & Hammers, 2011) along with reluctance to engage in stigmatized sexual practices counteracts effects of earlier sexual debut. Our sample was disproportionately young, White, highly educated, from higher socioeconomic status backgrounds, and less religious, but some of these patterns may be related to selection into using the online forum Reddit, rather than selection into BDSM practices overall. Only 1.7% of survey respondents were Black and 4.2% were Latinx;

this may result from sample recruitment methods, or lower overall engagement in BDSM among people of color (Sheff & Hammers, 2011). Previous data found that BDSM practitioners were more educated; our sample reflected those findings (Sheff & Hammers, 2011).

Age at onset of BDSM practices varied more than age at onset of fantasies for all age categories, and regression models also explained a much higher proportion of variation in age at practice than age at fantasies. Stratified opportunities and sexual norms may be more strongly related to BDSM engagement, while fantasies may be more closely tied to personality characteristics or other unmeasured variables. Sexual fantasies may also be related to processes related to puberty and sexual exploration in adolescence and early adulthood; fantasies, thoughts about sex, and sexual desire emerge in early puberty (Fortenberry, 2013). Future research should more closely examine the determinants of sexual fantasies of various types.

This study used purposive sampling, and thus, all participants self-identified as BDSM practitioners. Research subjects may therefore have had a greater degree of erotic need for BDSM than those without this identity (Brame et al., 1996). Future research should examine broader samples to determine how age at entry into BDSM practice or fantasy may distinguish those who identify as BDSM practitioners from those who engage in BDSM but do not identify as practitioners. Future research can also compare people who viewed once, sought out, or regularly view BDSM porn, but do not pursue BDSM encounters, with people who move from watching BDSM porn to engaging in BDSM activities to further explore this transition. Survey results also revealed differences in entry into BDSM practices and fantasies by sexual orientation, BDSM role identities, and religiosity which remain unexplained. Having established the presence of these differences, future research should explore explanations.

Limitations

Study recruitment occurred primarily online and only included those who self-identified as BDSM practitioners. Samples were not representative of those who incorporate BDSM practices into their sexual practices more broadly, but do not identify as a BDSM practitioner. Internet surveys also skew demographics of the sample toward White, educated, married populations and those who seek out online discussion of sexual topics; 22–33% of households are without Internet access altogether (Dillman 2012). In addition to bias in terms of self-selection into starting the survey or volunteering to be interviewed, we found men and younger respondents were more likely than older or female/other gender respondents to begin the survey but not finish it; additional factors may distinguish those who began or persisted in completing the surveys or interviews, and those who did not. While these differences should not affect group-based comparisons in regressions, overall age distributions likely reflect sample bias. Finally, both researchers are female and White, which can influence the willingness of respondents to participate, and responses.

Conclusion

Confirming prior research, we find participants told essentialist and constructionist sexual stories. Those who adopted an essentialist sexual story perceived their reenactment of sexual practices learned via external sources as an expression of their own inherent nature. Those who embraced constructionist sexual stories located the origin of their interest in BDSM in exposure to BDSM through media and sexual partners, but also drew upon essentialist frames. Exposure

can trigger or shape an innate interest and is not necessarily counter to the idea of an innate interest, as not everyone exposed to BDSM goes on to engage in BDSM practices. Survey data revealed that age at BDSM fantasy and practice varied by social–environmental factors, and age at fantasy explained a large proportion of variation in age at practice. Pathways and patterns into BDSM behavior and fantasies therefore reflect a combination of inherent interests, exposure to ideas via external sources, and stratified sexual social norms and opportunities.

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Author contributions Both authors contributed to the study conception and design of survey and interview questions. Interviews were collected, analyzed, and described in the methods and results by Walker. Surveys were distributed, analyzed, and described in the methods and results by Kuperberg. The first draft of the front end of the manuscript was written by Walker with significant input and editing by Kuperberg, and the discussion section was written and edited by both authors. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Data availability Data are not available for public analysis due to confidentiality agreements made with the respondents.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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