Becoming BDSM in an online environment

This chapter presents the voices of five young BDSM practitioners discussing the development of their identities, and the role of online pornography – and other texts – in that process.

There exists a lot of research into young people and BDSM online – although little of it is honest about its object of study. There exists a longstanding tradition of research into the relationship between young people, online pornography and violence (see for example Bhuller, Havnes, Leuven, & Mogstad, 2013; Lam & Chan, 2007; Peter & Valkenburg, 2009; Wallmyr & Welin, 2006), but it is notable that most of this research doesn't distinguish between 'violent' sexual materials and consensual BDSM (McKee, 2015). Instead, much of this work deliberately confuses consensual and non-consensual sex acts, so that the majority of the material being studied under the rubric of 'violence' is in fact consensual kink and BDSM material (see for example, Bridges, Wosnitzer, Scharrer, Sun, & Liberman, 2010). Concerns about whether exposure to 'violent' pornography makes young people sexually aggressive often turn out to be concerns about whether exposure to consensual kink turns people into consensual BDSM practitioners. That is to say – as we explain in this chapter - research into young people, pornography, the Internet and violence often turns out to be – at least implicitly - work on the development of BDSM identities.

The Heteronormative Brain That Changes Itself

In his influential book *The Brain That Changes Itself,* Norman Doidge offers a possible model of how the internet pushes consumers to embrace a BDSM identity:

> in 2001, shortly after he first went online, [Thomas] got curious about the porn everyone said was taking over the Internet … galleries of naked girls, of common types of sexual fantasies …Then one day he came across a site that featured spanking images. To his surprise he got intensely excited … 'This was the moment', he writes 'that the real addiction set in … What other kinks was I harbouring? What other secret and rewarding corners lurked in my sexuality that I would now be able to investigate … Plenty as it turned out …'. Until he happened upon the spanking pictures, which presumably tapped into some

childhood experience or fantasy about being punished, the images he saw interested him but didn't compel him (Doidge, 2007, pp. 109-110)

Using terminology from neuroscience Doidge explains how he believes that everyone who encounters images of BDSM is at risk of being infected by this 'perversion' (Doidge, 2007, p. 102):

the plastic influence of pornography on adults can also be profound, and those who use it have no sense of the extent to which their brains are reshaped by it … The content of what they [porn consumers] found exciting changed as the Web sites introduced themes and scripts that altered their brains without their awareness. Because plasticity is competitive, the brain maps for new, exciting [ie, BDSM] images increased at the expense of what had previously attracted them (Doidge, 2007, pp. 103,109)

Doidge is not alone. The model of BDSM as caused by exposure to dangerous images underlies much academic writing about the dangers of pornography, often expressed through slippery-slope language of 'graduation' (Zillmann & Bryant, 1986, p. 574) 'desensitization' (Seigfried- Spellar & Rogers, 2013, p. 1997) or 'escalation' (D'Orlando, 2011, p. 59). People start looking at images of vanilla sexuality, these academics argue, but when they become bored with these (as they assuredly will, in this model), they respond not by switching off the Internet and going to do something more interesting instead but rather – inevitably, these researchers claim – by becoming interesting in more 'exciting' (to use Doidge's term) BDSM images.

It is worth stating explicitly that, despite the popularity of this model, there is no evidence to suggest that sexual identities – whether BDSM, vanilla, heterosexual or homosexual – are so plastic that they can be 'caught' from exposure to images. It is true that the research tradition exploring how people form BDSM identities is not so well developed as the literature on, for example, the development of gay and lesbian identities. There exists less of a tradition arguing over whether BDSM is natural or cultural (Kruse, 1985), or the sophistication of arguments about whether such binaries are in themselves cultural constructions (Sedgewick, 1991, pp. 26-27). This chapter does not engage with these considerations, although they are important. Rather, it presents some data from the perspective of young BDSM practitioners on their experiences of becoming BDSM, and the role of online media in that process. The

chapter makes no claims about the nature or stability of BDSM, its root in nature or culture, or its status as an identity. But it does offer young people's insights into the role of online materials in the formation of their BDSM identities.

Listening to young BDSM practitioners

Five practitioners under the age of 30 were recruited in Brisbane, Australia – Participant 1 (female, age 26), Participant 3 (female, age 20), Participant 3 (female, age 21), Participant 4 (male, age 29) and Participant 5 (male, age 21). The group met for a focus group and individual follow up interviews.

In asking about the role specifically of online materials in the development of BDSM identities it is useful to know whether BDSM attractions predate the consumption of Internet content. We found it interesting that several of the participants recalled incidents from their childhoods that they see as part of their developing BDSM identities. These occurred before they encountered BDSM materials on the Internet. In some cases there were no immediately identifiable texts involved in the memories: Participant 1 talked about a powerful sex dream when she was four. She vividly recalled being tied up by a woman with a penis, who did things that 'felt naughty, but…felt so good at the same time'. Similarly, a recurring theme in Participant 3's childhood was an affinity for animal personas. Her biting, scratching and miaowing practices saw her suspended from school several times at the age of 10. She now identifies this as a part of her developing BDSM identity. Participant 4's key point in his sexual development did not occur until he was 14:

> My first blow job was also my first orgasm and, was in front of 20
> people. I was at a party and didn't understand the power of drinking
> vodka straight out of the bottle. (…) I've always had kinks from there,
> I started off with exhibitionism (…) I was 16 when I started
> swinging… (Participant 4)

In these memories we immediately see a very different account of the evolution of BDSM identity from that claimed by writers like Doidge. In these cases, even before exposure to explicitly BDSM identified texts, the participants were able to point to memories of an evolving identity. The memories also point to the complexity of

BDSM identity – more sophisticated than just the "spanking" that Doidge identifies as a potential trigger for becoming BDSM.

For other participants early exposure to non-explicit materials about BDSM immediately resonated with them. Participant 2 remembered being approximately eight or nine years old, and watching a video at her grandmother's house. It was a children's movie that had been recorded from the television, so when she went to fast forward the advertisements, she accidentally pressed stop:

> …and what was playing on the TV was an SBS special on Japanese rope bondage (…) I remember thinking about that for, years to come. That would always be at the [back] of my mind, going… 'What is this? What is that?', because I could see the bruising, and I could see the marks that these ropes were leaving on this girl, but she looked…so ecstatic…that it was fascinating to me. (Participant 2)

None of the participants identified any sexual abuse, and they expressed no regret for their actions or shame related to their key events.

At the time these incidents occurred the participants did not have BDSM identities, and did not understand these events in relation to BDSM. But in retrospect they claim them as part of their sexual development. For example, Participant 1 now recognizes the woman from her dream as transgendered. It was incidents such as these that inspired the participants to start to 'research' (as Participant 3 puts it) BDSM online as they grew older.

Seeking out material

Participants 1, 2, 3 and 4 had key events in their lives prior to their online learning processes about BDSM. Participant 5's story is different in that he spoke about a significant event online when he was 13. He mentioned a pornographic banner advertisement that he saw while viewing a game site aimed at young males. He clicked the ad, which took him to a BDSM site that asked for a credit card number. The image on the page still resonates with him today: 'There were clothes pegs involved', he says. He still remembers this image; it was all he could access without a credit card. Participant 1 said she could relate to Participant 5's story of only having the one image to 'inspire' her, and that she understood the difficulty of being a minor

(with no credit card) and having to rely on erotic images on the sign-in pages to fuel masturbatory fantasies.

However, as adolescents the participants had many ways of finding pornographic material. Participant 1's first sex search online occurred at age 12, after her parents left her to babysit her brother:

> [imitating her parents] 'Now, you can go on the computer but don't do anything stupid like type in SEX into the search engine.' I hadn't even had the idea in my head until [my mum] said it ... I was just like '…I wonder what would happen?' (Participant 1)

Participant 1's first Google Images search for sex proved it to be an easy-to-obtain source of erotic imagery, and her age was not a problem in accessing this material. In Participant 5's follow up interview, he said that age restrictions on pornographic websites were 'pretty irrelevant', in particular highlighting the ease with which a 14 year old could tick 'Yes I am over 18' on the website's opening page. Participant 2 however had to go to a lot of effort to circumvent her high school's internet filter:

> …I had to pay $5 and my [snack] bar to… [another child], so he would fix my internet filter on my computer at school, so that I could access all of the naughty things that I wanted … Because his dad worked for the IT department in the school so he knew how to get around the little Internet filter (Participant 2)

Participant 2 didn't give her age at the time of this event, but she indicated that she didn't have access to a home computer until she was 14. Participant 2 wanted to access these 'naughty things' so badly that she was willing to do this in the only public places where she had internet access; the public library (where she hid her computer screen as she searched) and the high school.

In contrast to the idea that young people are accidentally finding pornography, the participants' stories emphasise their agency. They were choosing to access pornography to answer personal questions and to arouse themselves.

Building relationships online and offline

5

The participants were not just looking for pornography online. Participant 4 'went through a phase where [he] thought cybersex was a great idea'. In retrospect he considers his actions as an adolescent as 'irresponsible' - although he thinks they did contribute to his sexual identity development. He was already participating in offline swingers events, but was having additional experiences online by roleplaying sexual scenarios with a range of different people. His choice to stop using the internet for cybersex came about as he grew older, and this transition coincides with his involvement in the Brisbane BDSM community. In addition, the new people coming into the local scene were closer to him in age than his previous connections in the scene.

Participant 3 also explored relationships and identities online. She met a person online when she was 14 and she recognised it as her first experience with learning the master-slave dynamic. This allowed her to test things that she had not had a chance to experience in the real world with someone who had the 'same sort of curiosities' as herself. Later, as an 18 year old she could finally practice BDSM in the bedroom with her then-boyfriend. What is apparent for both participants is that online resources played a part in the way they formed relationships with other people.

Participant 2 also explored her BDSM identity through online relationships. Like Participant 3 she was able to use the internet to test out 'this whole other life'. She spoke of a profile she signed up for on VampireFreaks.com, a profile that was 'entirely based on who I wanted to be rather than who I was'. As a 13 year old on this Gothic themed website she could tell people that she liked handcuffs and power control, and not have to admit that she had never tried them. The quality she appreciated most from this group of people was the support, and the community's validation of her new identities was reinforcement of her desires. But she was disappointed at the lack of knowledge in this 'juvenile' community. This search for information led to her Alt.com, another place where she could be 'really honest' about what she wanted and who she wanted to be. When she was 17 a man in Sydney made contact with her through Alt.com. While she acknowledges that their relationship could have 'led to a very dangerous situation' (discussed below), she also saw the positives. Her social skills developed through the long-term interaction with this man, and importantly she began to accept that it was a real part of her personality, and something that she no longer wanted to keep as a 'dirty little secret'.

For Participant 1, online support was important not so much for allowing her to discover her BDSM identity as for helping her to stay in the community. While serving as a submissive in an offline relationship, she was not allowed to voice an opinion on BDSM websites without the permission of her dominant. The pair shared a joint profile on Collarme.com, and Participant 1 asked for permission to start forming online friends. This request would prove beneficial when the relationship fell apart:

> my only real experience with it had been this one person who was all
> kinds of messed up in the head … if I was just going to go off that then
> I would have written it off completely but, through the online friends
> that I'd made and counselling with them they've gone 'No, it's… like,
> he's the kooky and crazy one, not you, it's okay' (Participant 1)

Participant 5's lack of offline support was for different reasons. Growing up in a strict Catholic household, he wanted to know if he was a normal 13 year old for his kinky proclivities. Despite being straight like his peers, he still had no one to discuss his BDSM interests with in the offline world or test out BDSM relationships with. This all came when he turned 18. Participant 5 identifies himself as someone who likes to take what he's learnt online and apply it in the real world.

For these young BDSM practitioners, using BDSM pornography to achieve arousal was only one part of their use of online materials. Participant 5 and Participant 1 gained their first exposure to bondage and dominance fantasies online, and their preferences developed as they explored the available materials. Trying on different identities online proved useful to Participant 4, Participant 3 and Participant 2. This afforded them opportunities to simulate sexual practices, BDSM etiquette, and get closer to being the people that they wanted to become. Once Participant 2 and Participant 1 came closer to who they wanted to be, the online support networks they had formed for themselves proved essential to reaffirming their identity politics and beliefs. All of this would go on to shape their experiences online as they took the next steps towards being BDSM practitioners both on- and offline.

It is notable that even at a young age these BDSM practitioners had a sense that they were developing an identity that marked them out as different from their peers. Friends the same age were exploring the internet in the same way and being exposed to similar images – the banner ad involving clothes pegs was visible to anybody

clicking through to that site. But for these young people these images resonated in a particular way.

Using online resources today

The participants in this study still regularly use online resources, but now for a different purpose. The online experiences we have discussed so far have been about the identity construction process, and started before the participants turned eighteen. Now as adults the internet continues to contribute to their identities. They talked collectively about getting into the offline scene in Brisbane. When asked how she coordinated her social calendar, Participant 2 noted that she regularly takes advantage of Fetlife's Facebook-style layout for events and connecting people. Whether it is munches (social events including food), play parties or other events, Participant 2 has a potential interest in up to thirty events on any given week. Of those, she usually chooses about three to attend. Participant 1 also enjoys the Fetlife social experience, referring to the discovery of Fetlife being akin to the opening of Pandora's box.

Participant 4's experience with the Brisbane scene 'before Fetlife' emphasises the importance of this online resource:

> before Fetlife, [the] Brisbane scene was run out of Yahoo! Groups and
> to become a member of the Yahoo! Group you had to know somebody
> in the Yahoo! Group who would vouch for you and before you could
> go to a party, you had to know someone willing to vouch for you, and
> the only way to meet people was to go to the party (Participant 4)

In the interview, Participant 4 called himself an 'early adopter' of Fetlife, having signed up for a profile when the site first opened in 2008. He talked with pride and at length about how a Fetlife member can determine which number their membership carries. His own membership number is 'in the 2000 range', and he also has 'the dubious honour of owning Group #69' on the website.

The accounts from Participants 1, 2 and 4 paint a picture of a BDSM scene that is more accessible than it used to be. It's also important to appreciate the different viewpoint that Participant 4 comes from. He faces the puzzling situation of still being a young BDSM practitioner, but being considered part of the old BDSM scene. He fought hard to find his identity in a scene that didn't support his choice to be a young

dominant, and he is even 'a little jealous' of the young practitioners coming through in the last five years.

Online resources are still a major part of how young practitioners in Brisbane participate in the scene, and there is a blend of online and offline interaction. This merging of the two spheres is also prominent in issues of safety.

Safety first

Safety is paramount in BDSM practice (Langdridge & Barker, 2007), and this raises important issues in relation to the use of online resources by young BDSM practitioners. When it comes to BDSM safety online there are two elements: physical safety when practicing BDSM related techniques, and personal safety when choosing who to meet offline. Trust is key in both of these elements. Lack of supervision or experience has led to a number of deaths in the BDSM community, most commonly in the case of autoerotic asphyxiates (Downing, 2007). The issue of trust and safety came up in the discussion when Participant 5 said that 'the anonymity [of the Internet] works two ways'; in that 'it's a great way of putting yourself forward' but the predators and the 'creeps' can also come out. Participant 4's response to this covers the importance of trust between play partners and some of the safety issues of the internet:

> If you're at a rock climbing club and somebody introduces themselves and says that they're a rock climbing instructor and gives you a whole bunch of advice … [but] if they don't know what they're talking about you're going to fall and die. And most people aren't quite that irresponsible. In BDSM lots of people think that because they watched some porn, or been on Second Life, that they're perfectly qualified to give you rock climbing advice … (Participant 4)

Misrepresentation of expertise is a recognized problem online (Morpheous, 2008, p. 52). Participant 4's rock climbing analogy is a confirmation of this problem in the Brisbane BDSM scene. Participant 2 knows first-hand that there are people online who can take advantage of the young and vulnerable. The man she met on Alt.com was an example of this kind of person, and even as a 17 year old she realized that it was a dangerous situation. In the end, it was her self-preservation mechanism that

prevented her from flying to meet the man in Sydney. Participant 3 also admitted that as a 15 year old, she knew very little about the truth of her online chat partner.

Having said this, all of the female participants said that they have created their own safety filters as part of developing their sexual identities. For some this is their own judgement. For others, as in Participant 1's case, it is 'good close friends' that she relies on to serve as her 'safety filter'. Both Participant 1 and Participant 2 refuse to give out contact information on the BDSM social networking sites, but are happy to meet people at public fetish parties such as Hellfire. Participant 3 suggested that in developing their safety filters Fetlife's social networking structure has played an important role. There is a strong reliance on a 'six degrees' style approach to trusting people online. Knowing someone who can vouch for you makes you more appealing to practitioners such as Participants 1, 2 and 3. This recalls Participant 4's comments about old Yahoo! Groups for BDSM in Brisbane where you had to know someone personally to be invited. This is similar to offline groups such as Club Libertine

Conclusion

The dominant model in academic research for thinking about the relationship between young people and online BDSM materials is the slippery slope argument, powerfully articulated by Zillmann and given new life for the Internet by writers like Doidge. In this model, young people who might otherwise happily repress their perversions are contaminated by visual materials and become BDSM – at least for as long as those materials are available to them. Such approaches display little interest in the experiences or arguments of BDSM practitioners – indeed, writers such as Doidge explicitly argue that we should not listen to such practitioners, whose very happiness with their identity proves their 'perversion'.

This chapter takes a different approach. As we comment above, researchers have noted that young members of minority sexual groups grow up in cultures where they are unlikely to receive supportive or accurate information about their sexual identities from parents, schools or the mainstream media, and that for such youth the internet can play an important role in providing materials for identity formation. This study suggests that the same is true for young BDSM practitioners. Several of the participants in this study recalled feeling in childhood that they were different, and

described actively seeking out material to help them make sense of that difference. There was agreement across participants that online materials were an important part of this process. The uses made of online materials by LGBTQ youth identified by previous researchers were all mentioned by participants in this research – gathering information, validating their identities, participating in communities and forming relationships. In addition these participants identified a further use of online materials which specifically relates to BDSM identities – the promotion of safety. The participants stated that taking up a healthy BDSM identity involves learning to understand the risks involved and appropriate strategies to manage them. Online materials were identified as an important part of this process.

An interest in becoming BDSM need not accept a nature/nurture binary. It need not argue that young people are already genetically predetermined to become BDSM. The evidence provided in this chapter does make clear that the young people who embraced a BDSM identity did so with a clear sense of agency that is missing from the voices of the sad young men reported second-hand by writers like Doidge, who feel powerless in the grip of Internet pornography and are so grateful to be rescued by him from its clutches. The participants in this study have used cultural resources – both offline and online – to build for themselves identities, relationships and safe communities which remain an important and satisfying part of their lives.

In this chapter we have not proposed a mechanism for becoming BDSM. This is not only because a sample size of five young people is not suitable for making such claims. More than this, we accept the arguments of researchers like Kath Albury that teleological accounts of how one takes up a settled sexual identity do not well serve BDSM (Albury, 2015). The scope of this chapter is more modest – to carve out some space for BDSM identities away from the model of BDSM as the necessary endpoint of viewing pornography, and to return some sense of agency to young people who enjoy consensual BDSM practice.

4265 words plus reference list

Reference List

Albury, K. (2015). Identity plus? Bi-curiosity, sexual adventurism and the boundaries of "straight" sexual practices and identities. *Sexualities, 18*(5-6), 649-664. doi: 10.1177/1363460714561672

Bhuller, M., Havnes, T., Leuven, E., & Mogstad, M. (2013). Broadband internet: an information superhighway to sex crime? *The review of economic studies, 80*(4), 1237-1266.

Bridges, A. J., Wosnitzer, R., Scharrer, E., Sun, C., & Liberman, R. (2010). Aggression and Sexual Behavior in Best-Selling Pornography Videos: A Content Analysis Update. *Violence Against Women, 16*(10), 1065-1085. doi: 10.1177/1077801210382866

D'Orlando, F. (2011). The demand for pornography. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 12*(1), 51-75.

Doidge, N. (2007). *The Brain That Changes Itself: stories of personal triumph from the frontiers of brain science*. New York: Viking

Downing, L. (2007). Beyond safety: Erotic asphyxiation and the limits of SM discourse. In D. Langdridge & M. Barker (Eds.), *Safe, Sane and Consensual: Contemporary Perspectives on Sadomasochism* (pp. 119-132). Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kruse, M. (1985). Nature/nurture. *Journal of Homosexuality, 10*(3-4), 141-152. doi: DOI: 10.1300/J082v10n03_17

Lam, C. B., & Chan, D., K-S. (2007). The use of cyberpornography by young men in Hong Kong: some psychological correlates. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 36*(4), 588-598. doi: 10.1007/s10508-006-9124-5

Langdridge, D., & Barker, M. (Eds.). (2007). *Safe, Sane and Consensual: Contemporary perspectives on sadomasochism*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

McKee, A. (2015). Methodological issues in defining aggression for content analyses of sexually explicit material. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 44*(1), 81-87. doi: 10.1007/s10508-013-0253-3

Morpheous. (2008). *How to Be Kinky: A Beginner's Guide to BDSM*. n.p.: Green Candy Press.

Peter, J., & Valkenburg, P. M. (2009). Adolescents' exposure to sexually explicit Internet material and notions of women as sex objects: assessing causality and underlying processes. *Journal of Communication, 59*(3), 407-407. doi: 10.1111/j.1460-2466.2009.01422.x

Sedgewick, E. (1991). How to bring your kids up gay. *Social Text*(29), 18-27.

Seigfried- Spellar, K., & Rogers, M. K. (2013). Does deviant pornography use follow a Guttman-like progression? *Computers in Human Behavior, 29*(5), 1997-2003.

Wallmyr, G., & Welin, C. (2006). Young people, pornography and sexuality: sources and attitudes. *The Journal of School Nursing, 22*(5), 290-295. doi: 10.1177/10598405060220050801

Zillmann, D., & Bryant, J. (1986). Shifting preferences in pornography consumption. *Communication Research, 13*(4), 560-578.