

Examining Power:
An Evaluation of Feminist Critiques of BDSM

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Introduction

At first blush, it may seem that feminism and BDSM¹ are antithetical to one another. The former is concerned with the liberation of women and other historically oppressed groups; the other is usually represented by, alternately, mildly unattractive men in leather tying up, whipping, and humiliating beautiful young women, or beautiful young women in leather tying up, whipping, and humiliating mildly unattractive men. Either way, the women seem to be objects of pleasure for men rather than enthusiasts in their own right.

This conflict came to the forefront of the feminist movement during the “sex wars” of the 1980’s, when radical feminists raged against lesbians who picked up BDSM activities from gay leathermen (BDSM). Eventually an uneasy truce was declared between the two resulting camps: the “sex-positive” feminists who supported BDSM, as well as pornography and sex work, and the radical feminists who felt such activities contributed to the subjugation of all women.

Calling such conflict a “war” may be overwrought, as, for most modern feminists, “this is a Both/And argument about the tensions between free will and the systems of power over others in the social hierarchy, not an Either/Or position” (tigtog). Regardless, this does not stop either camp from taking potshots at each other to this day, and – as with any conflict that can affect people’s lives – this conflict should not be ignored.

Hence, I have developed this project to examine both sides of this issue. Using sociological techniques, I will attempt to assess the validity of radical feminists’ critiques of BDSM, sex-positive feminists’ rebuttals, and hopefully come to a satisfactory conclusion. I will examine a variety of sources, including scholarly feminist articles, sociological studies, one of the most popular kinky porn sites, and blogs maintained by both pro and anti-BDSM feminists. I also performed my own small demographic

¹ BDSM is a condensed acronym for Bondage/Discipline, Domination/Submission, and Sadism/Masochism, which are generally considered the three main “categories” of this subculture. It has gained popularity in recent years over the term SM or sadomasochism, which tends to have a negative connotation and is viewed as not broad enough a term.

study of the BDSM networking site FetLife.com, the results of which I will discuss later in this piece; a full explanation of my methods is available in the Appendix.

The radical feminists' criticism of BDSM can be broken down into three main points, as articulated by Patrick Hopkins in "Rethinking Sadomasochism": 1) BDSM relationships replicate traditional patriarchal power structures, 2) it is impossible to truly consent to BDSM activities in a patriarchal society, thus rendering the "consent" defense irrelevant, and 3) BDSM actually supports and sustains patriarchy, though perhaps participants do so unintentionally (118).² Laid on top of these arguments is the charge that BDSM is "male-oriented," with radical feminists pointing to the apparent numerical majority of men in the BDSM community as evidence (Ardill and O'Sullivan 113).

These critiques are based on the assumption that a patriarchy exists, that everyone is indoctrinated with patriarchal values, and that, as a result, any non-egalitarian power structure between people (particularly men and women) is inherently patriarchal. Therefore, since radical feminists believe dismantling the patriarchy is vital to women's liberation, BDSM is antithetical to the feminist movement under this logic.

There are two main counterarguments to radical feminists' claims. The first, which I will refer to as the "libertarian defense," uses the concept of right to sexual privacy. Essentially, it says that one's privacy in one's metaphorical bedroom is a fundamental right, and criticism of others' sexual practices is an infringement upon this right. This defense tends to de-politicize sexual behavior and remove it from the larger context of society; it operates under the assumption that humans have certain intrinsic rights (the right to privacy being one of them), that individual behavior can be separated from societal pressures and influences, and that criticizing behavior is the same as oppressing said behavior.

² Though Hopkins is specifically referring to the lesbian kink community in his article, the criticisms he outlines are commonly used against the heterosexual community as well; gay male kinksters are generally not considered by feminist critiques.

The second counterargument, which I will call the “subversive defense,” takes almost the opposite approach; it claims that, because BDSM is considered “deviant” by American society, its practice inherently destabilizes the oppressive sexual hegemony (Cohen 74).³ Therefore, BDSM is actually a feminist activity. In this defense, sexual behavior – deviant sexual behavior in particular – is fraught with political meaning and liberatory potential. This argument assumes that individual, personal actions can affect larger societal structures and that the social hegemony is oppressive and should be dismantled.

Is BDSM Male-Majority?

The first matter I will address is a matter of simple demographics. Despite the fact that the “sex wars” were sparked by *lesbian* practice of BDSM, it is a truism among anti-BDSM feminists that the kink community as a whole is primarily male – possibly because the lesbian practitioners adapted their behavior from gay male subcultures. However, this claim can easily be tested.

In the fall of 1999, sex therapist Gloria G. Brame, Ph.D. performed an online survey of 6,997 kinksters who volunteered to fill out a questionnaire. Though there were some problematic elements to her questions – for example, she grouped transgenderism with sexual orientation (homosexual, etc.) instead of separately asking if one’s gender identity did not coincide with one’s “biological sex” – her results show that 57% of her respondents were male, only 8% of whom identified as gay.⁴

Though there is no data on respondents’ race or ethnicity, the data that is available paints a picture of relative privilege: most respondents have at least some college education, are married, are

³ In Cohen’s work, she uses the term “libertarian feminists” to describe proponents of the argument I have just illustrated; I feel this term is slightly inaccurate, given libertarians’ fundamental focus on protecting individuals’ rights and actions rather than inciting revolutionary/subversive behavior, which I think tends to have a more collectivist mindset.

⁴ Brame did not provide separate statistics for male and female bisexuals or heterosexuals, so we cannot determine how the remaining 92% of male respondents identified.

middle or upper-income, and hold high-tech or business-related jobs (Brame). Based on this information, perhaps the radical feminists' depiction of well-off men, egos swelled by their patriarchy-endowed sense of entitlement, expressing their privilege by tying up their wives, has some basis in reality.

However, Brame's study was conducted over a decade ago, when internet access was still more in the realm of IT technicians and business management – areas over-represented by men. Now that the internet is more egalitarian in its accessibility, a more accurate representation of the kink community may be available. With this in mind, I collected the profile information of 800 random US members on FetLife.com, a social networking site designed for the BDSM community.

Keeping in mind that my sample size was significantly smaller than Brame's, I nevertheless discovered an interesting result: *women* outnumbered *men* by three percentage points.⁵ Though the difference is small – possibly negligible – it is nevertheless a reversal of Brame's results. Is it that women are now more accurately represented in the online community, or has the makeup of the BDSM community as a whole changed in the past decade?

John Baku, the founder of FetLife.com, has explicitly said that he designs his site to attract women (since men will join regardless), leading to a female-to-male ratio larger than other fetish dating sites. "The majority of dating sites have under five to 10 per cent women, but we have a ratio of almost 50-50," he boasts in an interview (Zanin). This raises the question: does FetLife.com have an *accurate* or an *inflated* representation of kinky women? It is impossible to tell without further information, but in any case it casts doubt over radical feminists' allegations.

Fun-House Mirrors Reflecting the Patriarchy

Nevertheless, mere numerical majority does not guarantee freedom from oppression, as any

⁵ Women constituted 48.5% of the population, men constituted 45.3% of the population, and the remaining 6% fell outside the traditional gender binary.

feminist well readily point out. Therefore, I will move to what I believe is the strongest of radical feminists’ arguments as laid out by Hopkins: most, if not all, BDSM relationships and interactions replicate patriarchal power structures. In patriarchy, the thinking goes, women are supposed to be subservient to men, and in BDSM most women are submissive to men; therefore it is just taking implicit patriarchal gender roles and making them explicit and exaggerated.

In an attempt to verify this claim, I decided to record what I call the “power orientation” of FetLife.com users. In BDSM relationships, people tend to favor one side of the power dynamic, though they have diverse labels for these preferences, and, as with anything involving sexual identity, these preferences are far from absolute (Moser, Weinberg and Williams 384). Nevertheless, the self-labels of Top, Sadist, Master/Mistress, and Dominant/Dominator/Dominatrix/Domina⁶ are constructed as orientations of power (i.e. these people control the BDSM “scene” or relationship), while the self-labels of bottom, masochist, slave, and sub are constructed as powerless orientations.⁷ For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to the former identities collectively as “Doms,” and the latter identities as “subs.” Those who do not prefer one orientation or the other are called “switches,” and many people who are new to the BDSM community are unsure of their preference.

Below are the results of my study, in percentages. Raw numbers are available in the Appendix. Numbers have been rounded, so totals may be slightly above or below a hundred percent.

	Men	Women	Non-binary
% Dom	48.6	14.1	14.6
%	34.1	34.3	52.1

⁶ In this paper I will follow the BDSM community’s convention to capitalize “powerful” orientations, while leaving “powerless” orientations uncapitalized.

⁷ It is interesting that many “powerful” identities are written as gender-specific (i.e. a man is a Dom while a woman is often – though not always – a Domme) while “powerless” identities are hardly, if ever, gendered (e.g. one does not hear of “subs” and “subettes”). Perhaps having one’s gender recognized is a symbol of power, and this uneven grammatical construction is a way of symbolically stripping bottoms of part of their identity/power.

switch/unknown			
n			
% sub	17.3	51.5	33.3

Figure 1: Percentage breakdown of each gender's orientation.

	Doms	switch/unknown	bottom/sub
% Men	74.1	44	22.6
% Women	23.0	47.2	71.7
% Non-binary*	2.9	8.9	5.7

Figure 2: Percentage breakdown of each orientation's gender.

It seems radical feminists are on to something. Fully half the women in the survey identified as subs, while almost half the men identified as Doms. Men were heavily over-represented in the Dom population; they made up almost three-quarters of the Doms counted, but constituted less than half the total measured population. Similarly, women made up 71.7% of subs counted, when they were only 48.5% of the total. Since the default – if implicit – power dynamic in heterosexual relationships under the patriarchy is dominant man/submissive woman, it appears that trends in BDSM relationships are indeed affected by the patriarchy; if it were truly free of influence, one would expect a roughly 50/50 gender-power ratio.

However, if BDSM relations are a reflection of the patriarchy, they are a reflection in a fun-house mirror: still recognizable, but twisted and warped. Note, for example, the near-identical rate of “switchiness” in both men and women – slightly over one-third. Those who transgress the male/female binary have a “switchiness” rate of fifty-two percent. If one presumes that trans* people are already

bucking the patriarchy by rejecting the gender binary, it is possible the high rate of switches among trans* people is a sign that switching is another way of subverting the patriarchy. In this light, the fact that one-third of men and women are switches would suggest that patriarchy's hold over BDSM is far from absolute.

One also has to keep in mind that, just because a man identifies as a Dom, that does not mean he wants to dominate *women*. Unfortunately, there was no easy way to determine a user's sexual orientation (i.e. preference in gender of partners) while I was collecting data, so it's unclear what proportion of members identify as something other than heterosexual. Considering that estimates on the number of trans* people in the US run as low as 0.2% and as high as 8% (Transgender Population and Number of Transgender Employees), it's impossible to use the rate of 6% trans*-identified people in this study as a gauge of how the diversity of the sample differs from the national population. However, considering FetLife.com is intentionally and openly a safe space for sexual minorities, it isn't unreasonable to suspect the number of homosexuals, bisexuals, etc. in this study is higher than the national average rate.

Still, radical feminists argue, it does not really matter what the gender of the "oppressor" is as long as the "oppressed" is a woman; since women are oppressed in the patriarchy, *any* relationship with the woman in a subordinate position reflects patriarchy (Ardill and O'Sullivan 112). One would assume that the logic ran in reverse – that is, it doesn't matter the gender of the subordinate person as long as the dominant person is a man, since men are dominant in the patriarchy. By this logic, the only "acceptable" form of BDSM – that is, one free of patriarchal taint – is a relationship with a female Domme and a male sub; all relationships between women or between men *must* be egalitarian. I do not know where trans* people would fit in this structure, as they are generally not considered in radical feminist analysis.

If the problem with this line of reasoning isn't already apparent, consider what happens when it

is extended beyond the realm of sexual relationships; after all, patriarchy is present in all aspects of society, not just sexuality. In this scenario, the only acceptable organizational structure is having women in charge and men subordinate to them – or no hierarchical structure at all, resulting in society-wide anarchy. Clearly the former option – matriarchy – is no better than patriarchy, while the latter option is simply infeasible. Therefore, the idea that *any* subordination of *any* individual woman is a reflection of the patriarchy (and therefore bad) is intellectually unsound. However, the strong, distinct *trend* in BDSM for women to be submissive to men *is* a probable result of patriarchal influence and should be met with concern.

Only Consent When I Say So

Now I shall address the tricky issue of consent. According to radical feminists, patriarchy is so insidious that its roots penetrate every aspect of our thoughts and actions; we cannot make decisions without being influenced by the patriarchy. Therefore, it is impossible for a woman to “truly” consent to BDSM activities because her judgment is tainted by her patriarchal socialization to be submissive – she is merely doing what she has been told by society.

The idea that patriarchal conditioning can affect our ways of thinking and acting is not an outlandish one, and is shared by almost all branches of feminism. Indeed, when given the disproportionate number of submissive women, unless they were blatantly coerced – and, considering that the BDSM community is very explicit about its emphasis on consent (Moser, Weinberg and Williams 385-6), that’s unlikely – it is probable that many women are influenced by patriarchy when they consent to being submissive. However, the idea that these women’s consent is rendered *invalid* because of the existence of patriarchy is problematic, to say the least.

First of all, the taint of patriarchy must be escapable; otherwise women would not be able to consent to any sexual activity at all. If there is no legitimate way to consent to sex, all sexual activity is

therefore done without consent. This means, elegantly put, “violation is a synonym for intercourse... intercourse is both the normal use of a woman... and a violative abuse,” (Dworkin 154) – commonly (and controversially) paraphrased as “all sex is rape” (Trinity). However, it also means that *nothing* is rape, as without a model of consent to contrast it with, the concept of *non*-consent collapses. Under this worldview, the only surefire way to avoid sexual violation is to abstain from sex completely, which is a completely untenable course of action for most people.

But most radical feminists must think there is some way to legitimately consent to sexual activity – after all, many of them are in sexual relationships that they do not consider abusive or coercive. Many are even in relationships with men. Therefore, it is not consent itself that is suspect, but what one consents *to*. Essentially, it is when a woman consents to submission that her consent is suspect, and if she were self-aware and examined the sources of her sexual desires more, she would realize the patriarchal origin of them and cast them off for a more feminist sexuality.

The logic of this viewpoint is deceptively circular. It assumes that kinky women have not already examined their desires in great detail, and that there is no legitimate reason for a feminist-minded woman to enjoy BDSM. If an intelligent, ardent feminist insists that she has thoroughly examined her desire to sexually submit, and has constructed her desire in a way that she feels is compatible with feminism or even pro-feminist, the rebuttal is simple: she is still brainwashed by the patriarchy. Because there is no way to physically look inside someone’s head and see what is influencing them, there is no way to disprove this claim. However, that also makes this argument intellectually dishonest.

Setting a Bad Example

The final prong of radical feminists’ criticism of BDSM is that, in reflecting the patriarchy, it legitimizes oppression and perpetuates it. There are two main ways it accomplishes this: the first is by claiming that BDSM tendencies are natural or innate, and the second is through the proliferation of kinky

porn via the internet.

While there are some kinksters who “firmly and strongly believe that it is a woman’s role to be submissive to a man” (maymay), there are just as many – if not more – who are firmly anti-sexist (the author of the post just cited, for example). However, though they may adamantly deny that *all* women are naturally submissive and *all* men are naturally dominant, they will insist with equal vehemence that submission or domination is natural and inherent *to them* as individuals. They experience their interest in BDSM as orientational, akin to homosexuality or heterosexuality; however, like homosexuality and heterosexuality, sadomasochism (the psychological term for interest in BDSM) is a socially constructed identity that arose during the Victorian era (Moser, Weinberg and Williams 380).

Therefore, radical feminists technically have a point, albeit an oblique one, when they criticize kinksters for claiming their sexual proclivities are “natural.” Strictly speaking, BDSM isn’t “natural” – but neither is heterosexuality or homosexuality or any other human sexual behavior. Everything we do is built up with meaning, tradition, language, and culture. However, the idea that what is “natural” is therefore “good” is one of the most well-known fallacies in existence, and neither side will get a pass for using it.

But what of radical feminists’ second worry – that proliferation of kinky porn, which often shows women being tied up, slapped, spanked, flogged, and called names like “slut,” among other things, will make the (apparent) abuse and degradation of women seem normal? In order to investigate this claim’s legitimacy, I first decided to see what “average” kinky porn actually entailed, given the reputation anti-porn feminists had of hyperbolizing the depravity of pornography. Thus, I visited what is probably the most well-known BDSM porn site, Kink.com. The company is actually a constellation of different porn sites, each catering to different fetishes. Though most of the site requires payment to view, one can view short previews and a handful of stills for free – enough to get the gist of each video.

Of the 22 sites run by Kink.com, eleven focus on female submission. However, only two specifically entail female submission to *men*. Four others focus on women dominating women, and the rest involve both men and women as Dominants. One site is exclusively women using elaborate “fucking machines” to masturbate; since there’s only one person in the video, there isn’t really any power dynamic. Two sites focus on cis⁸ women dominating men, while one has trans women dominating men, and three focus on gay men dominating each other. One was a Sims-style game in which users could make characters of any gender and orientation they wished; another site ostensibly involved Doms and subs of both genders, but in the preview images I only saw female subs. Thus, while female submission is definitely more prevalent than male submission, male Dom/female sub is far from the only dynamic shown.

Supporters of BDSM in general and kinky porn in particular reject the claims of violence and abuse because the activities are both consensual and part of a larger fiction. Even in private acts of BDSM, there is often a certain amount of role-playing, in which both the Dom and the sub *act out* the fantasy of powerlessness while knowing it is ultimately a farce that will end (Moser, Weinberg and Williams 383-4). In porn another level of fiction is added – the fiction of the camera, which with clever editing can erase the decidedly un-sexy negotiations, unexpected hurdles, and breaks in character that inevitably occur. The concern is that uneducated viewers will not understand that an actress is acting when she says, “Stop! I’m so scared!” in a kinky video and will therefore think it is normal to continue sexual activity when a woman says to stop. “Pornography cannot portray the caring and concern that could stop *apparently* violent and degrading sexual practices from being humiliating and harmful [emphasis added]” (Cohen 82).

In response to this critique, Kink.com has gone to extensive lengths to show the consensual

⁸ “Cis” is often used as the opposite of “trans,” in the same way “hetero” is the opposite of “homo.” A cis woman is a person who is gendered as “woman” by society because of her anatomy and her self-identity is also that of “woman.”

context in which its shoots occur. Every video includes a post-shoot interview with the sub in which she or he discusses her or his emotional and mental reaction to the shoot; even the 40-second trailers always include a final shot of the actor/actress smiling and chatting about how much he or she enjoyed the experience. Kink.com also provides free access to behind-the-scenes videos that show how various shoots are set up, the actors and actresses in the process of preparing, and how the directors use various film techniques during the shoots. These videos are also revealing in that they show the makeup of the film crew – it seems about half are women!

It is possible that radical feminists will not find these measures enough to counteract the extreme images made during the fiction of each shoot. However, considering that many anti-BDSM feminists are also anti-*all* porn, it's quite likely that nothing done by this porn company will please them besides shutting down. However, I believe allowing viewers behind the scenes is a good first step, though perceptions of porn will need to change on a societal level as well.

It's Only Sex

Now I shall turn to the libertarian defense of BDSM. It is predicated on a “rights-based” view of morality, which focuses on the atomistic individual. Each individual is seen as endowed with certain intrinsic rights, and when two individuals are in conflict it is because at least one individual's rights are under attack (Cohen 78). Thus, the “sex wars” are conceived of as an attack by radical feminists on kinksters' fundamental rights to privacy and sexual freedom.

Rights-based morality is also how our current governmental and legal system is conceived, and thus it should have an easy time gaining legislative traction. It appeals to the individualistic “American spirit,” and so theoretically should be easy for “average citizens” to relate to. It also can be very empowering and encouraging for women to say they have the right to be sexual however they choose when they have been denied sexuality for so long. Imagine how it must feel, the libertarian argument

asks, for a woman struggling with feelings of shame over her sexuality to turn to the feminist movement, only to be told yet again that her sexuality is bad. As long as it doesn't harm another being (pedophilia, for example), someone's sexuality isn't wrong.

However, this raises the question: must feminists eschew everything to do with the patriarchy? If a woman adopts her husband's last name, wears make-up and other trappings of femininity, and becomes a stay-at-home mother, does that mean she's not a "real" feminist? Almost all feminists would immediately say of course not – the debate on whether lipstick invalidates one's feminism has been settled for decades. And if a feminist can consciously adopt a manner of dress even if that is the manner dictated by the patriarchy, then a feminist should be able to consciously adopt a power dynamic in her relationship, even if it is a dynamic similar to the patriarchal default.

In this mindset, BDSM isn't anti-feminist, but neither is it pro-feminist. It is like brushing one's teeth: a more-or-less neutral act. While this can be a smart tactical move – it's ridiculous to think that every single act in one's life can be imbued with feminist meaning, and one would go crazy trying to police every action's "feminist-ness" – it can also come off as naïve. Sexuality does not exist in a vacuum; it does not spring unbidden from our deepest, most pure psychological recesses. It is saturated with cultural meaning, and currently our culture is patriarchal. Therefore, our sexualities are at least partially informed by patriarchy.

Even if BDSM practitioners are aware of patriarchal influence and do their best to subvert it, others observing them may not be as conscious of societal forces. Many feminist submissive women are painfully aware of this:

One of the hardest things about being a female submissive in the public scene is that the ways in which other women are submissive affect people's perceptions of me. [...] I want people to look at me and see me as the competent, capable, intelligent woman that I am... even when I'm on my knees (Morgan).

Sex does not exist outside of a social, cultural context, and proponents of the libertarian defense must acknowledge this. This does not mean they must stop an activity if it could be socially misunderstood, but it does mean they must do more to explicate their personal meaning attached to the activity, which will hopefully lead to this meaning being adopted by the larger society.

Fucking Revolution

Finally, there is the subversive defense. This argument makes the bold claim that BDSM is more than just not anti-feminist – it's actually *pro*-feminist. Because women have been denied their sexuality for so long, a woman exploring her sexuality and being comfortable with it is inherently a feminist act. When this sexuality transgresses the hegemonic ideals – as does BDSM – this is even more liberatory because it upsets the oppressive structure of sexuality.

Radical feminists counter this claim by saying that BDSM is not actually deviant; it is merely an amplification of “normal” patriarchal gender roles. However, those who practice BDSM are often stigmatized like other sexual minorities. They are believed to be mentally ill (Moser, Weinberg and Williams 379) and can be targeted with anti-sodomy laws, as well as laws against abuse and assault – subs can be (and have been) charged with aiding and abetting their own “assault” (mike)! They are also in danger of losing their children, if they have any, from concern that they create an unhealthy environment for kids to grow up in. Continuing to practice BDSM in face of these sanctions, therefore, is most certainly deviant. However, it is not inherently feminist in the same way being a lesbian is not inherently feminist.

“Coming out” and publicly stating one’s deviant sexuality is a political act, one designed to raise the public’s awareness and understanding of sexual minorities. It gives fellow sexual deviants a sense of community, and where there is a sense of community there is an ability to organize for legislative change. However, when a lesbian thinks “lesbian thoughts,” she is not committing a political act, nor is

she being political when she has sex with another woman in the privacy of her home.

Because politics are, by nature, a public phenomenon, what is done by individuals in private – that is, without sharing information of it with other people – cannot affect political policy. The same is true for BDSM; publicly claiming a kinky identity and making others aware of kinksters is a political act, but submitting in the privacy of the home is not. Nothing is *inherently* feminist/political; it becomes so when it is brought into the public sphere for society to attach meaning to.

Given this caveat, it's clear that BDSM *can be* feminist, in the right context. The mere act of publicly claiming one's feminism and one's submissiveness simultaneously, for example, can cause people to question their formerly held understandings of what "feminism" and "submissiveness" mean; it can also provide reassurance to women who may be struggling to reconcile their politics of equality with their sexual desire for inequality.

However, the same danger that the libertarian defense faced is present here: one cannot always control the meaning that society places on one's actions, and it is all too easy for them to be misinterpreted as falling in line with patriarchal ideals. Therefore, proponents of the subversive defense must also shoulder the responsibility of explicating the meaning of their actions – and being vocal and insistent about it, so there is no room for misunderstanding – to make sure the transgressive *intent* is also understood by the public. As with anything in society, context is key.

Conclusion

As is usually the case, no side is entirely "right" or "wrong." Though radical feminists are overreaching when they claim that all BDSM is inherently bad, they do raise valid and pressing points about how sexism affects people's sexuality. These weaknesses, as they were, must be addressed by members of the kink community; doing so will only make their cause stronger.

Similarly, while defenders of BDSM should probably abandon the "naturalness" defense, they

make a strong case about the liberatory potential of allowing women to explore every facet of their sexuality, even those facets that may seem dark and scary. While BDSM is not inherently feminist, it can be constructed and utilized as another tool to further feminist awareness, in the same way that performance of one's gender can be.

There is a lot of potential for kinksters to learn from feminists and vice versa. Kinky feminists, who embody the tension between the two groups, should be listened to when they verbalize how they experience their sexuality in context with the rest of society. Obviously, if two apparently conflicting ideas can reside in one person, it is possible for them to reside in one cohesive philosophy and strategy against oppression. A synthesis of these two ideologies holds the greatest potential for women's true sexual liberation in the United States.

Appendix: Method of demographic survey of FetLife.com

FetLife.com is a popular social networking website explicitly designed for people interested in BDSM and other “deviant” sexual activities. It is praised as one of the most diverse kink sites on the web, and its users hail from around the world, from Zimbabwe to Afghanistan. However, for the purposes of my study, I restricted my search to users who gave their location as in the United States; this is where the majority of users claim residency.

The purpose of this study was to determine the approximate breakdown of “power orientation” along gender lines. That is, how many men identified with a role constructed as “in power” (Top, Dom, Sadist, Master, etc.) versus roles constructed as “powerless” (bottom, sub, masochist, slave, etc.), and how did that compare to women’s identities?

I wanted to test the validity of two conflicting theories/stereotypes: one, leveled by radical feminists, states that heterosexual BDSM relationships reflect/amplify patriarchal power dynamics (and sometimes cause them), with the man in power over the woman; the other, which is a common stereotype, states that most practitioners are *submissive* men (often in positions of power in their workplace) who seek out and/or hire dominatrices to humiliate them in a form of stress relief. Which more accurately reflected the majority of kinksters?

At the time of my study, there were approximately 261,000 US accounts, with a new account created every few minutes. As it was infeasible for one undergraduate student to tally every single account, I instead gathered data on 800 users; I chose that number for the very low-tech reason of it was about how many tally marks I could easily record on one sheet of notebook paper.

When browsing user accounts on FetLife, each page displays around sixteen profile summaries; each summary includes a profile picture (when provided by the user), a username, the user’s age and gender, and what that user’s “power orientation” is – e.g. Top, bottom, masochist, Sadist, etc. – as well

as their state and city of residence. The only data I collected was the gender and power orientation of the users, which I recorded by hand in a chart I drew on a sheet of notebook paper.

I started data collection on the first page of US accounts, then skipped ahead four pages and recorded all the profiles on that page. I then skipped ahead four more pages, then four more, and so on until I reached 800 accounts (about 50 pages). As far as I could tell, there was no method to what order accounts were shown in while browsing; they were not alphabetical, nor were they organized by gender, age, power orientation, or location. Thus, I am confident my sample was effectively random.

In recognition of the diversity of their clientele, the creators of FetLife allow their users much broader selection than the typical “male/female” in their profiles. Therefore, I also created a category for those who fell under the transgender umbrella – that is, anyone who identified as something beyond the male/female binary. This includes trans* men, trans* women, genderqueer/genderfuck people, and transvestites/crossdressers.

Additionally, I created three categories for users’ power orientations. The first was those who signified identities of “power,” and included those labeled Master/Mistress, Dom/me, Top, and Sadist. The second was those who signified identities of “powerlessness,” including those labeled sub, slave, bottom, and masochist. The third was people who identified as “switches,” meaning they alternated between power and powerlessness, and those who didn’t indicate a clear power preference – such as those who labeled themselves “kinksters” or “fetishists,” or those who indicated they were unsure.⁹

Using a pencil, I made a tally in the corresponding box for each person based on their gender and orientation, stopping occasionally to count how many total tallies I’d made. When I reached 800 profiles, I stopped gathering data and added up the users in each category.

The resulting table looked like this:

⁹ There was one person who gave their orientation as “vanilla,” which is the BDSM community’s term for “normal,” or non-kinky, activities and people. One wonders why such a person would make an account on a place like FetLife (which is, obviously, short for “fetish life”), or why the creators felt the need to provide “vanilla” as a possible orientation!

Male Tops/Doms -- 177	Trans* Tops/Doms -- 7	Female Tops/Doms -- 55
Male switches/undecided -- 124	Trans* switches/undecided -- 25	Female switch/undecided -- 133
Male bottom/subs -- 63	Trans* bottoms/subs -- 16	Female bottoms/subs -- 200

All possible errors are human-based; I may have accidentally put a tally in the wrong place, or misread a profile's information. However, I am confident enough in my mental acuity that I believe such errors are minimal.

The most obvious limitation of this study is that it only applies to users who give their location as the United States, and I counted only 0.3% of the US users. Furthermore, there is always the possibility that users misrepresented themselves in their profiles, though it's probable that most did not. Also, because there was no easy way to immediately discern a user's sexual orientation (i.e. gay, bisexual, heterosexual, etc.), that factor could not be taken into account.

Finally, the type of person who joins FetLife.com may not be representative of BDSM practitioners as a whole. Not only would this person need regular access to a computer that is private enough for them to visit a sex-oriented website, they would need to be comfortable enough with their own sexuality to seek out a BDSM site, and they would also need to feel some sort of connection with the kink community and feel the internet is a good way to connect with said community. Those who are isolated in some way would not be factored in this study.

For further analysis of the data and what it may mean, please refer to the main body of this paper.

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