

Fifty Shades of Belgian Gray: The Prevalence of BDSM-Related Fantasies and Activities in the General Population

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ABSTRACT

Background: Bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadism and masochism (BDSM) is gaining popularity through the mainstream media. Nevertheless, very little is known about the prevalence of BDSM-related fantasies and activities in the general population.

Aim: To determine the prevalence of BDSM fantasies and behavioral involvement in four different age groups of the general population in Belgium.

Methods: By use of a cross-sectional survey questionnaire, the level of interest in several BDSM-related activities was investigated in a sample representative of the general Belgian population (N = 1,027). The questionnaire evaluated interest in 54 BDSM activities and 14 fetishes. Self-identification as BDSM practitioner, situational context of BDSM practice, age at awareness of these interests, and transparency to others were queried.

Outcomes: Individual item scores and summary scores on four BDSM categories were included in the analyses.

Results: A high interest in BDSM-related activities in the general population was found because 46.8% of the total sample had ever performed at least one BDSM-related activity and an additional 22% indicated having (had) fantasies about it. Interestingly, 12.5% of the total population indicated performing at least one BDSM-related activity on a regular basis. When asked whether they saw themselves as being interested in BDSM, 26% stated this to be the case and 7.6% self-identified as BDSM practitioners. Interests in dominant and submissive activities were comparable and, remarkably, were highly intercorrelated. BDSM and fetish interests were significantly higher in men than in women. The older group (48–65 years) had significantly lower BDSM scores compared with their younger peers. Of participants with a BDSM interest, 61.4% became aware of it before 25 years of age.

Clinical Implications: There is a high level of interest in BDSM in the general population, which strongly argues against stigmatization and pathologic characterization of these interests.

Strengths and Limitations: This is the first thorough study concerning prevalence of interest in and fantasies about a wide range of BDSM-related activities in the general population worldwide. Although our findings tend to argue against it, we cannot completely rule out participation bias introduced by non-interest in the non-completers. In addition, some topics might have been subject to interpretation by the respondents.

Conclusion: Interest in BDSM is present in most of the general population. Further research is needed to destigmatize it by confirming BDSM as a leisurely preference rather than a psychiatric affliction. **Holvoet L, Huys W, Coppens V, et al. Fifty Shades of Belgian Gray: The Prevalence of BDSM-Related Fantasies and Activities in the General Population. J Sex Med 2017;XX:XXX–XXX.**

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INTRODUCTION

BDSM, which denotes a combination of bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadism and masochism, refers to (sexual) experiences in which, by mutual consent, physical restraint, intense sensorial feeling, and/or fantasy about dominance and submission play a key part in role play.^{1,2} A related phenomenon is fetishism, which refers to the use of a specific non-living object, non-genital part of the body, or a certain act in attaining sexual arousal.

An increasing ambivalence concerns the general perception of practices and interest in BDSM-related activities. On the one hand, the practice is gaining attention in popular media, literature, and art, as evidenced by the huge commercial success of the recent *Fifty Shades of Grey* books and movies. On the other hand, there is a distinct stigma surrounding the spectrum. Practitioners of BDSM or related behaviors commonly report being stigmatized and discriminated against,³ often resulting in them concealing their BDSM-related preferences, with self-protection or protection of others most often stated as the reason for this concealment.⁴ This is mirrored in the fact that BDSM-related activities are included in the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM),⁵ thus labeling them as potentially deviant (eg, sexual masochism disorder or sexual sadism disorder). Including these behaviors in a psychiatric classification system can have societal consequences of importance (eg, in the context of custody cases).⁶ In this light, comparisons have been made with homosexuality, which also was a DSM diagnosis before it was removed from the third edition of the DSM in 1973.⁷ Moser and Kleinplatz⁸ proposed the removal of several sexually related disorders from the DSM, including those based on activities within the BDSM spectrum, because of changing cultural and historical factors and, more importantly, because of the lack of objective data to support their characterization as a mental disorder.

A lack of knowledge about the nature and prevalence of participation in the BDSM spectrum within the general population could fuel the stigmatization mentioned earlier. Until recently, there has been no proper investigation globally on the prevalence of interests, fantasies, and practices of different domains of BDSM. One study based on telephone interviews queried about various sexual practices, including a stand-alone question about having performed BDSM-oriented sex within the past 12 months,⁹ and found fewer than 5% of these respondents reported engaging in such activities. In contrast, an older Canadian study found that 65% of university students fantasized about being tied up by a sexual partner.¹⁰ The divergent results of these two studies could reflect inherent population differences and/or a potential gap between having fantasies and actually playing them out. A study gauging 184 individuals active in the BDSM community indicated that most individuals engaged in certain actions but not others.¹¹ Thus, interest could be focused on a limited set of activities within a wider range of possible BDSM-related behaviors. Other research suggested different preferences in BDSM-oriented activities in women and men,^{12–14} with a potential effect of age. As such, the BDSM spectrum could be a cluster of very heterogeneous, independent profiles of interest.

To our knowledge, no study has ever combined exploration of interest in and the level of practice of different aspects of a wide spectrum of BDSM-related actions in the general population. Therefore, the present study aimed at determining the prevalence of BDSM fantasies and behavioral involvement in different age groups of the general population in Belgium.

METHODS

A cross-sectional survey was carried out from February 2017 to March 2017. A digital invitation for participation in the survey was e-mailed to 8,041 subjects by iVox (Leuven, Belgium), a market research and polling agency with access to a panel of 150,000 Belgian citizens representative of the general population. Data of 1,027 residents were collected and divided into four age groups (Table 1; group 1, 18–27 years old; group 2, 28–37 years old; group 3, 38–47 years old; group 4, 48–65 years old).

The invitation contained the following minimal information: duration of time needed to complete the survey (15 minutes), potential reward for participation (gift card), and the mention that the questionnaire topic concerned “a special theme.” Invitees opening the link were categorized as responders and those not opening the link were categorized as non-responders. To minimize participation bias in the non-responders, an explanation of the content of the study and an informed consent form were presented only after opening the link.

Subsequently, socioeconomic status (age, sex, education, occupation) and general information concerning sexuality (sexual orientation, sexual habits) were requested. Next, a list of 54 BDSM-related activities was presented, including items from the dominant (eg, hitting a sexual partner with a whip) and submissive (eg, being hit by a sexual partner with a whip) perspectives. For each of these items, participants had to indicate their level of interest: (i) “I would never do this,” (ii) “It doesn’t seem to interest me, but I’m open to it,” (iii) “Never thought of it, but I’d like to try,” (iv) “I have fantasized about it once, but have never tried it,” (v) “I fantasize about it regularly, but have never tried it,” (vi) “I have put it into practice, and I didn’t like it,” (vii) “I have put it into practice, and I liked it,” (viii) “I do this regularly,” and (ix) “It is indispensable for me.” In addition to these individual responses, three response patterns were created for analysis: (i) “no interest,” (ii) having fantasies about the activity but never having practiced it (“fantasies”), and (iii) having actually carried out the BDSM-related activity in reality (“put into practice”).

After these 54 items, interest in 14 fetish-related activities was gauged by use of a five-item Likert scale. Participants had to indicate to what extent they identified themselves as interested in BDSM and answer 11 questions concerning the situational conditions in which these activities had been performed, when they became aware of their interests, and whether they had shared these interests with anyone.

Based on a factor analysis of the same questionnaire in a sample of 353 members of the BDSM community (ten Brink et al, unpublished manuscript), four BDSM-related categories were defined: (i) dominance (including 18 items such as “blindfolding a partner,” “impose rules to partner,” “hitting a partner”), (ii) submission (including 23 items such as “kneeling before a partner,” “being hit by a partner,” “use a title to address

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