

Sexuality as a lived experience – Preliminary analysis of the evolution in identification and interest in kink and BDSM throughout the life course

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Introduction

The rapidly accumulating literature on kink/BDSM has mostly focused on depathologizing and normalizing what is still often seen as a 'paraphilia', or a form of 'deviant' sexuality. Literature has also focused on stigma, discrimination, and on the diverse ways in which it is possible to experience kink/BDSM. Much less attention has been paid to how individuals encounter BDSM/kink as part of a broader experience of themselves as someone who has a time-specific, and potentially fluid, Sexual Configuration - and how that comes into play through processes of dis/identification with kink/BDSM, or with specific facets of kink/BDSM.

Design and Method

Drawing from existing research on sexual fluidity, and its applicability to kink, we aimed to understand how a stigmatized sexual group, people who identify as kinksters/BDSM'ers, in Portugal, experience and perceive changes in their identification and practices, what sources of change or evolution they identify, and how those experiences are integrated into their self-experience as sexual subjects. We deployed an online survey with, among others, open-ended questions about how kinksters in Portugal report any changes in their identification, practices and what those mean to them. By using Reflexive Thematic Analysis, we map out both the different sources of (un)change, and how change is experienced in relation to their subjectivity.

Research question

How do people comprehend their practices and/or identities in kink/BDSM through a biographical narrative approach?

Results

Preliminary results are congruent with existing research, and expand on it. We found that there are **various types** of experiential and identity sources that may become a part of kinksters' evolving engagement with BDSM, such as media representations, community and in-group resources, and intimate relationships. These can both promote **changes** in behavior and identification, or lead to what is felt as a **consolidation of practices or identity/ies**. We also found that, for some participants, change meant an evolution towards a **'truer' form** of sexual self-expression, whereas others saw it as an **opening up of potentials** in an open-ended process of experimentation.

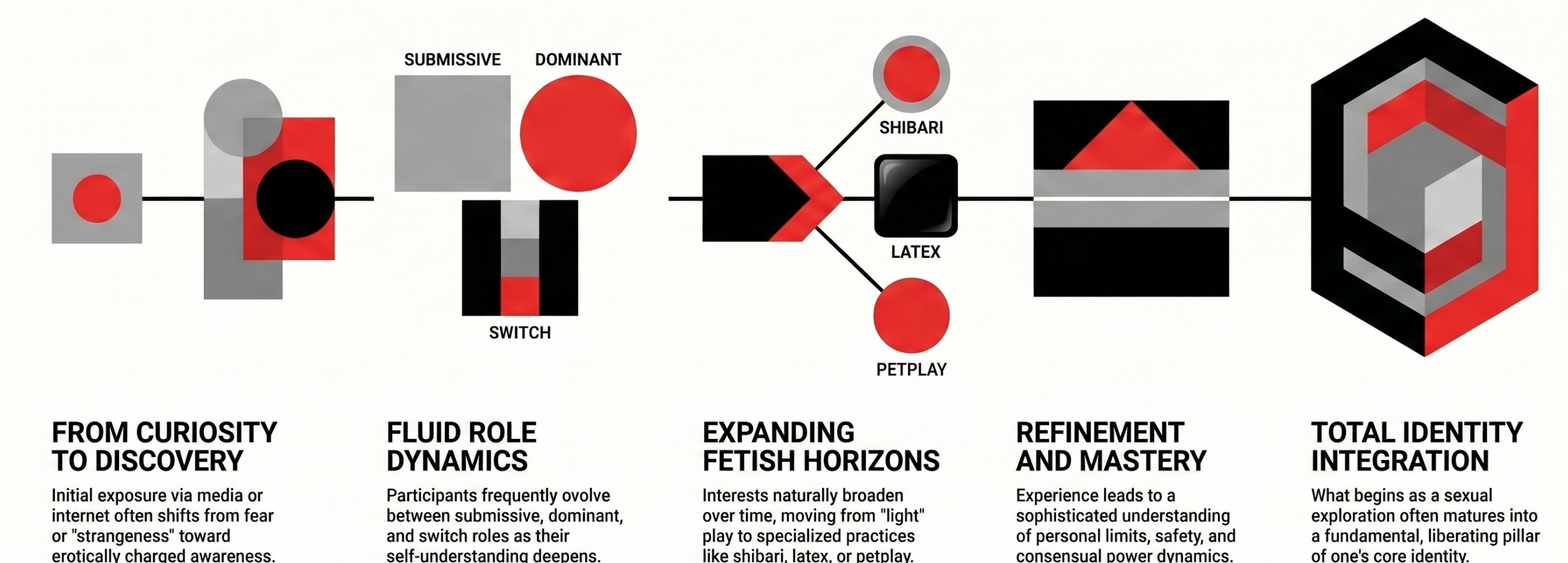
Conclusions

There are no universal pathways into BDSM, nor a unitary model of kink identities that can account for the various ways in which people feel themselves change (or not) through kink. Sexuality research needs to consider the multitude of pathways through which sexuality develops during the life course. Both positive and negative experiences can directly impact people's perception of their own sexual self-hood, especially in the presence of social stigma.

Takeaway point

There is **no singular entry path or life course narrative** when it comes to BDSM/kink. Kinksters can both challenge and reinforce narratives about sexuality as a hidden inner truth that needs to be 'discovered'. Still, this change through the life course often comes accompanied of more reported **self-acceptance and personal fulfilment**.

Branching paths



Partial references

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