"Switch it up": A qualitative analysis of BDSM switches

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Abstract

As the field of BDSM studies continues to develop, further research is needed that explores the wide range of internal diversity within the BDSM population. Part of this diversity results from differences between BDSM participants in terms of their BDSM role preferences. Switches are a category of BDSM participants who take on both dominant-type and submissive-type BDSM roles. Although switches comprise a substantial part of the BDSM population they have been largely overlooked within academic research. This article involves 15 in-depth interviews with self-identified switches. It uses constructivist grounded theory to analyse what being a switch means to switches and the factors that switches consider when deciding which BDSM role to take on at a particular time. This analysis generates a complex account of BDSM switches that conceptualises how switches are open to diverse BDSM activities/roles, connect switching to their sense of self, experience varying limitations on their role flexibility, and play differently when engaging with fellow switches. This analysis also generates a theoretical model that explains how switches make situational role choices.

Introduction

BDSM (Bondage and Domination, Discipline and Submission, Sadism and Masochism) is an umbrella term for a wide range of desires, activities, identity categories and communities built around consensually playing with physical restraint, power dynamics

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and/or pain. BDSM has become increasingly visible within popular culture and other media representations (Pillai-Freedman et al., 2015; Turley, 2022). Academic interest in BDSM has also increased, both in terms of the range of disciplinary areas addressing BDSM and the sheer amount of research on BDSM (Simula, 2019b). A series of recent literature reviews about various aspects of BDSM (Brown et al., 2020; De Neef et al., 2019; Dunkley and Brotto, 2018; Sprott and Randall, 2017; Wuyts and Morrens, 2021) indicate the maturation of this academic area and highlight pathways for future development. Of particular importance is the need for research that moves beyond generalised accounts of BDSM and that is attuned to the internal diversity within the BDSM population (Dahl et al., 2023; Hébert and Weaver, 2015; Simula, 2019b). To meet this call, this article focuses on a specific category of BDSM participants: those who identify as switches.

People who engage in BDSM activities typically do so by adopting one or more BDSM roles. Some roles involve taking on power within the BDSM dynamic, such as dominants (who take control), tops (who administer sensations) and sadists (who inflict pain). Other roles involve giving up power, such as submissives (who relinquish control), bottoms (who receive sensations) and masochists (who receive pain). This article will collectively refer to these as dominant-type roles and submissive-type roles. Switches are people who take on both dominant-type roles and submissive-type roles. Demographic data (see below) indicates that switches comprise a significant proportion of the BDSM population (Schuerwegen et al., 2020; Walker and Kuperberg, 2022; Webster and Klaserner, 2019). However, the author has located no published empirical work that focuses entirely on the experiences of BDSM switches. This article begins to fill this gap in the literature by engaging in an exploratory qualitative analysis centred around two research questions: (1) What does being a switch mean to switches? (2) What factors do switches consider when choosing which BDSM role to take on at a particular time?

BDSM Studies

Although examples exist throughout history of connections between pleasure, pain and power, modern understandings of BDSM are linked to a particular discursive framework originating in the late 19th century (Murray and Murrell, 1989). This framework conceptualised BDSM as a rare, pathological and "deviant" form of sexuality that was the professional purview of sexologists and psychologists (Simula, 2019b). However, contemporary academic understandings of BDSM have largely dismantled this framework. Although prevalence estimates vary it is nonetheless clear that BDSM activities, fantasies and desires are not rare (Brown et al., 2020). A nationally representative survey of 20,094 Australians aged 16-69 years found that among participants with a sexual partner 2.5% of men and 1.6% of women had participated in BDSM activities in the previous year (Richters et al., 2014). In Belgium, a nationally representative survey of 1,027 adults aged 18-65 found that 46.8% had participated in a BDSM activity at least once in their lifetime and that 12.5% did so regularly (Holvoet et al., 2017). Demographic data also tells us that the BDSM community is made up of a diverse range of people, including substantial proportions of LGBTQIA+ participants (Hughes and Hammack,

2019; Walker and Kuperberg, 2022; Williams et al., 2016). In a shift towards de-medicalisation, current iterations of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 2022) and *International Classification of Diseases* (World Health Organization, 2019) no longer pathologise consensual BDSM desires and activities that are not distressing to the person involved. Furthermore, studies show that BDSM participants are similar to the general population in terms of their psychological health and rates of abuse/trauma history (Connolly, 2006; Richters et al., 2008; Wismeijer and Van Assen, 2013), sexual distress (Pascoal et al., 2015) and relationship distress (Rogak and Connor, 2018). Part of the dismantling of the historical conceptualisation of BDSM has involved recognising that BDSM people and communities themselves are authorities on BDSM and should be listened to (Beckmann, 2001; Langdridge, 2006). To this end, empirical fieldwork-based research has played an important role in bringing the lives and experiences of BDSM participants to the forefront of academic consideration (Beckmann, 2009; Newmahr, 2011; Weiss, 2011).

A broader scope and scale of research has emerged from the dismantling of the historical conceptualisation of BDSM. Across the preceding decades, the intermittent publication of edited collections on BDSM has highlighted both the evolution of topical academic thinking about BDSM as well as the increasingly diverse range of academic perspectives on BDSM (Kleinplatz and Moser, 2006; Langdridge and Barker, 2007a; Simula et al., 2023; Weinberg, 1995). Contemporary BDSM research now spans a variety of disciplinary areas, including sociology (Newmahr, 2011), event management (Webster and Ivanov, 2019), fashion (Guglielmi and Reddy-Best, 2021), tourism (Tomazos et al., 2017) and sociolegal studies (Khan, 2014). So much research has accumulated that multiple literature reviews have recently been published addressing different aspects of BDSM, including prevalence, etiology, psychology, and interpersonal factors (Brown et al., 2020), relevant biopsychosocial factors (De Neef et al., 2019), clinical considerations for therapists (Dunkley and Brotto, 2018), health implications and disparities (Sprott and Randall, 2017), and relevant biological mechanisms (Wuyts and Morrens, 2021). Simula (2019b) has heralded the exponential growth in BDSM research as the emergence of "BDSM studies", a new field of interdisciplinary inquiry. This diverse field is unified by a set of core understandings about BDSM, namely that it is consensual and non-violent, that it is non-pathological, and that it is a complex set of social practices (Simula, 2019b).

These core understandings enable contemporary research to generate new perspectives on BDSM. For example, there is an emerging trend of research that highlights the benefits of BDSM. This includes research showing that BDSM practice may be positively linked to mindfulness (Dunkley et al., 2020), that participation in the BDSM community can lead to personal growth, acceptance, friendships and fun (Guglielmi and Reddy-Best, 2021), that some participants report BDSM improves their mental health (Reynish et al., 2022), and that BDSM can be used to explore sexual orientation and gender identity (Sprott and Benoit Hadcock, 2018). A healthy diversity of research topics currently characterises BDSM studies, including the extent to which BDSM takes on sexualised meanings and involves sexualised activities (Faccio et al., 2020; Fennell, 2021; Simula, 2019a; Sprott et al., 2021) and the role that BDSM communities and spaces/events play in the lives

of participants (Graham et al., 2016; Newmahr, 2011; Webster and Ivanov, 2019; Webster and Klaserner, 2019). However, for the purposes of this article, the research topic that is especially important is BDSM and identity.

BDSM and Identity

The burgeoning literature around BDSM has paid increasing attention to the potential connections between BDSM and identity. Recent work has explored the intersection of BDSM and other aspects of personal identity, including gender (Simula and Sumerau, 2019), LGBTQIA+ identity (Speciale and Khambatta, 2020), race/ethnicity (Cruz, 2021), and engagement in Consensual Non-Monogamy ("CNM") (Bauer, 2019; Ling et al., 2022). Recent work has also explored whether and how BDSM could be regarded as its own particular kind of identity. A person's connection to BDSM can come in a variety of different forms, including desires, fantasies and behaviors (Dahl et al., 2023), as well as online and/or in-person BDSM community engagement. The strongly embedded, lifelong and persistent character of some participants' connection to BDSM has given rise to the suggestion that BDSM may be akin to a sexual orientation (Gemberling et al., 2015; Sprott and Williams, 2019). However, the fact that some people's connection to BDSM develops and deepens through practice, education and community engagement suggests that there are both sociocultural and learning components to becoming a BDSM participant (Beckmann, 2009; Weiss, 2011). Thus, for some participants, BDSM may be more akin to engaging in serious leisure than having a sexual orientation (Sprott and Williams, 2019). Given the variety of ways in which a person can be connected to BDSM, there is contestation within the literature about the most appropriate framework for understanding BDSM: should it be regarded as a "behavior/practice, identity, orientation, interest, or some combination thereof"? (Simula, 2019b: p. 8) Despite this contestation, some strands of research are proceeding on the basis that BDSM identity is a viable and valuable site for academic inquiry (Dahl et al., 2023; Vivid et al., 2020).

If we bracket the broader theoretical debate about whether and how BDSM constitutes its own particular kind of identity, we can turn our attention instead to the empirical fact that the BDSM community is internally structured by a range of BDSM-based identity categories. As noted in the Introduction, different BDSM roles are arrayed across dynamics such as power, pain and flexibility (Dahl et al., 2023). These roles can function as sources of both self-identification and social identification for BDSM participants. In terms of self-identification, BDSM participants may identify themselves in ways that reflect the role/s they prefer within BDSM activities. Thus, participants may talk about or label themselves as being a "sadist", a "submissive", a "switch", etc, or some combination of roles, such as being both a "dominant" and a "top". Demographic surveys demonstrate that BDSM participants use these identity categories to distinguish between even seemingly-related role preferences, as different proportions of participants identify as dominants, tops or sadists, and so too different proportions of participants identify as submissives, bottoms or masochists (Dahl et al., 2023; Walker and Kuperberg, 2022). In terms of social identification, a BDSM participant's preferred role/s shape not only who they engage in BDSM activities with (as role complementarity is necessary) but also their

social opportunities for doing so (Newmahr, 2011). BDSM role preferences can inflect how BDSM participants socially interact within one another within BDSM community spaces, especially spaces where adherence to role-based social protocols is expected (Newmahr, 2011), and can even impact on access to BDSM community spaces, as there are certain online forums and in-person social events that restrict access to BDSM participants with particular role preferences (such as a munch just for submissives). BDSM participants may also present themselves in ways that socially signify their preferred BDSM role/s, such as through their choices around dress (Guglielmi and Reddy-Best, 2021).

It is apparent that differences in BDSM role preferences can thus reflect differences not only in how BDSM participants see themselves but also differences in how they understand and experience BDSM and how they are seen and treated by other BDSM participants. For these reasons, BDSM role preferences and the identity categories they connect to are important factors to consider in research around BDSM. Indeed, research attuned to differences in BDSM role preferences suggests that these preferences may be linked to other differences around issues such as the types of BDSM activities a person likes to engage in (Botta et al., 2019), the extent to which a person sexualises their BDSM activities (Fennell, 2021), and the kinds of benefits/challenges a person might experience from engaging in BDSM (Hébert and Weaver, 2015). The complex and heterogeneous nature of the BDSM population is a rich site for analysis and further research is needed that explores the differences between BDSM participants and between BDSM identity categories (Dahl et al., 2023; Hébert and Weaver, 2015; Simula, 2019b). In particular, switches are a significantly under-researched BDSM identity category.

Switches

The use of the term "switch" to refer to someone who takes on both dominant-type roles and submissive-type roles during BDSM activities originates from sometime in the 20th century (Murray and Murrell, 1989). Other less commonly used terms include "switchable", "dual", "middle" (Murray and Murrell, 1989), and "versatile" (Breslow et al., 1985; Moser and Levitt, 1987; Spengler, 1977).

What proportion of BDSM participants identify as being a switch? Table 1 extracts data from a range of recent studies, highlighting the prevalence of switches within demographic information gathered from BDSM participants and stratifying this by gender (where reported). Demographic survey items varied across these studies and thus different criteria have been used to identify participants as switches. Nonetheless, switches clearly comprise a substantial proportion of BDSM participants.

Information about switches is limited by inconsistent data collection and analysis around BDSM role within empirical research involving the BDSM community. Some studies do not collect/report data on BDSM role (Damm et al., 2018; Dunkley et al., 2020; Hughes and Hammack, 2022; Sprott et al., 2021), whereas other studies report on participation in BDSM activities without reporting on role (Pascoal et al., 2015; Rehor, 2015). Some studies elide switches for the sake of a simpler binary analysis of dominant-type and submissive-type groups, doing so either explicitly (Hébert and Weaver, 2014,

Table 1. Proportion of switches in recent studies of BDSM participants.

Study	Sample (N)	Switch role (%)
Botta et al. (2019)	266	27.7% males, 23.2% females
Dahl et al. (2023)	1036	26.1%
Martinez (2018)	185	22.3%
Rogak and Connor (2018)	163	20.1%
Schuerwegen et al. (2020)	256	23%
Waldura et al. (2016)	99	34%
Walker and Kuperberg (2022)	2017	38%
Webster and Klaserner (2019)	1111	35%
Williams et al. (2016)	919	25% males, 23% females, 37% queer or gender-queer/fluid, 27% transgender
Wismeijer and Van Assen (2013)	902	18.3% males, 16.4% females
Yost and Hunter (2012)	272	29.7% males, 25% females

2015; Rogak and Connor, 2018) or incidentally (Lammers and Imhoff, 2016). Studies that do not collect or analyse data on switches are missed opportunities. This is because other research indicates that there can be significant differences between switches and people with different preferred BDSM roles (Schuerwegen et al., 2020; Walker and Kuperberg, 2022). For example, Botta et al. (2019) found that when comparing dominants, switches and submissives, switches reported more preference for erotic-type BDSM activities and less preference for pain and permanent marks of ownership. Similarly, Martinez (2019) found that switches are more likely than dominants and submissives to disclose their BDSM involvement to their friends.

Although switches are occasionally addressed in generalised research into BDSM, the author has been unable to locate any research that specifically focuses just on switches. There is, however, some qualitative research that partially engages with switches as subsets of broader samples. In a sample of 49 dyke, trans* and/or queer participants, Bauer (2014) noted that 25 identified as switches and they reported that their BDSM role choices depended on context, they did not necessarily engage in equal levels of topping and bottoming, and they switched roles in a range of different patterns (some switched within a relationship whereas others only switched across relationships). The most detailed work to address switches is Martinez (2018), which reports results around BDSM role fluidity and the connections between role, gender and sexual identities generated from a larger mixed-methods project involving 202 surveys and 25 interviews with BDSM-identifying participants. It found that switch participants not only reported more role fluidity than other participants but also that switches of different genders reported different factors as being important to their choice of BDSM role at a particular time (Martinez, 2018). Female switches identified their partners' preferred BDSM role and their perceived skill level as being important, whereas male switches identified their own preferred BDSM role, their partners' sexual identity, and their own personal growth as being important (Martinez, 2018).

There is a clear need for further research in this area. Switches comprise a distinct and substantial proportion of the BDSM population. Preliminary steps have been taken towards unpacking the unique aspects of being a switch and the differences between switches and people who identify with dominant-type or submissive-type roles. However, there is much work left to do. The major limitations of the existing work are that our understanding of switches derives primarily from broader studies that address a range of different BDSM identity categories simultaneously and thus only pay partial attention to switches, and that where switches are more closely addressed this has been through analytical lenses focused on other considerations, including role fluidity, gender and sexuality. To build on this literature, this article engages in a targeted analysis that focuses specifically on switches in order to learn about switches.

Methods

This research involved 15 semi-structured individual interviews. The inclusion criteria were that participants be 18 years of age or older, be located in Australia, identify as a switch and have at least 1 year of involvement with the BDSM community. This research is part of a larger study that also looked at the experiences of switches within the BDSM community. Initial recruitment took place via convenience sampling. Flyers were posted to online groups for Australian BDSM participants on Facebook and Fetlife. Additional recruitment took place via snowball sampling from initial participants. Prospective participants were provided with a research information sheet and opportunities to ask questions about the research. Every participant signed a written consent form. Participants were eligible to receive a $20 giftcard as reimbursement for the costs involved in their participation.

Data collection was conducted by the author between August and October 2022. Due to COVID-19 public health risks, interviews took place via online teleconferencing. Interviews followed a schedule which was supplemented, where necessary, by follow-up questions seeking further detail. As an exploratory analysis, the schedule involved open-ended questions designed to elicit information about foundational aspects of switch experience. Examples of questions include: "What does being a switch mean to you?", "When are you more likely to take on a top/dominant role?", "When are you more likely to take on a bottom/submissive role?", etc. The schedule was piloted with the first 2 participants, who were invited to provide feedback about the wording and appropriateness of the questions. Neither pilot participant indicated that changes were necessary. Participants agreed to their interview being audio-recorded and transcribed, and for the transcription to be included in the data analysis. Interview recordings varied in length from 22 minutes to 51 minutes (523 minutes total). Transcriptions were provided to the participants for member-checking before incorporation into the data pool. 3 participants made minor changes to their transcript, involving editing their expression and/or adding further content to their answers.

Theoretical saturation was provisionally identified after 13 participants. This was the stage at which no meaningfully new analytical material emerged from the constant comparative analysis of the transcript data (see below). 2 further participants were

recruited to confirm that theoretical saturation had been reached. This was confirmed and recruitment ended.

This research project was approved by the author's institutional human research ethics office. In order to protect participant privacy and confidentiality, data is reported using pseudonyms and without personally-identifying details. Participant demographic details are set out below in aggregated form for the entire sample to ensure that participants are not individually identifiable to members of their own local BDSM groups.

Data analysis

This article uses constructivist grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2014, 2021). Grounded theory approaches develop knowledge and theory that is entirely grounded within the data gathered by the research project (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This kind of methodology is useful when engaging with areas that lack well-developed existing knowledge and theorising (Liamputtong, 2020), such as around BDSM switches. The grounded nature of this approach is particularly important for researching BDSM, as some historical strands of theorising about BDSM have diverged from the experiences of participants themselves around issues such as the importance of pain and the role of sex (Cross and Matheson, 2006), or have been based on pathologising medical frameworks that do not reflect the voices of BDSM participants (Langridge and Barker, 2007b).

Constant comparative data analysis began with the finalisation of the first transcript and continued throughout the remainder of the data collection (Belgrave and Seide, 2019). Finalised interview transcripts were analysed in multiple stages, beginning with initial line-by-line coding and followed by multiple rounds of increasingly focused coding using inductive-abductive reasoning and guided by the usefulness and fit of the focused codes (Charmaz, 2014). Coding was facilitated by NVivo software. As the focused codes became increasingly refined, inductive-abductive reasoning was then used to construct abstract analytical categories to conceptualise the data (Charmaz, 2014). Theoretical saturation was reached at the point where later transcripts' initial codes matched existing initial/focused codes or otherwise added no new properties to the emerging analytical categories.

Grounded theory research involves not only coding data but also developing theory (Liamputtong, 2020). Where grounded theory has been used within BDSM studies it has typically not led to the development of grand theoretical models but rather to small-scale theoretical gains such as the identification and explanation of key meanings, patterns, processes or mechanisms (Bauer, 2021; Faccio et al., 2014; Simula, 2019a; Sprott et al., 2021; Wignall and McCormack, 2017). Where theoretical models have been developed, this has been around narrow aspects of BDSM such as the processes involved in the consumption and discarding of BDSM gear (Gugliemi and Reddy-Best, 2023) and the functions of gay masculinity for leathermen (Mosher et al., 2006). Following this incrementalist approach, this article develops analytical categories to conceptualise key aspects of switch experience and a narrow theoretical model to conceptualise how switches choose their BDSM role at a particular time.

Constructivist grounded theory adopts the position that researchers co-construct the data alongside the participants throughout the data collection and analysis processes (Charmaz, 2021). As such, researchers are encouraged to operate in a manner that involves heightened reflexivity, especially around personal preconceptions and pre-existing knowledge of the area being researched (Charmaz, 2021). Before and during data analysis the author engaged in critical self-reflection as well as bracketing and constant critical re-appraisal of academic knowledge and personal experience of BDSM. Additional measures taken to ensure academic rigour include memo-writing at the coding stages and analytical category development stage, member-checking of the transcripts and the inclusion of thick descriptions in the participants' own words in the results.

Results

Participant ages ranged from 23 years to 52 years (mean age ~35 years). 11 participants were located in Western Australia, 3 in Victoria and 1 in New South Wales. Every participant self-identified as a switch and some also identified with other BDSM roles, including dominant, submissive, sadomasochist, rubberist, primal, rope top, brat handler, impact bottom and experimentalist. Participants' amount of experience with BDSM ranged from 2 years to 20+ years, with half of the participants having 5+ years of experience. Participants reported a range of types of involvement within the BDSM community, including maintaining an online presence, attending local events, and taking on organisational roles. In terms of gender, 7 participants identified as female, 6 as male and 2 as nonbinary. In terms of sexuality, 6 participants identified as bisexual (2 of whom also identified as demisexual), 4 as pansexual, 3 as heterosexual, 1 as queer/gender non-conforming, and 1 as bicurious.

Whilst the larger research study also addressed switches' experiences within the BDSM community, due to the richness of the data this article only reports on what being a switch means to switches and the factors that switches consider when deciding which BDSM role to take on at a particular time. Data analysis of the transcripts led to the development of five relevant analytical categories.

Openness to diverse experiences

All participants described being a switch as involving openness to a diverse range of experiences. Unlike other BDSM identity categories, there is no fixed dynamic or set of activities associated with being a switch. The resulting lack of expectations about how a switch "should or should not behave" meant that switches had the capacity "to choose your own adventure" (Jo) through BDSM. This notion of openness was framed by participants in multiple ways, including in terms of freedom, fluidity and flexibility.

Most participants described being a switch as being linked to the freedom to try out a wide variety of BDSM experiences without being limited by adherence to any one BDSM role. This freedom was expressed through an emphasis on novelty and experimentation, on "trying all of the things" (Riley). It was also expressed in terms of discovery, of

"exploring different opportunities and different experiences and sensations" (Mister Black). As Lola put it:

> I always say BDSM is an octopus with ever-growing tentacles because there's always these new things that you learn and you see … If they pique an interest, like, I get to experience those things as a submissive and as a dominant. I don't just get to experience giving it, I get to also experience taking it…

Some participants described the openness of being a switch as involving shifting across BDSM roles according to their shifting desires, that is having the capacity to "switch it up, change it up" (Terri). In doing so they described being a switch through the use of terms such as "fluidic" (Billy), "fluid" (Kit), and "fluidity and being in the moment" (Jo). This notion of fluid shifting was explained by Riley:

> I think being a switch means anyone can define it for themself as to how much they go between being more dominant or more submissive. And for me, that means my switch is a bit more of a dial it can be anywhere on a given day because of me or anyone.

Part of this fluidity involved moving between roles without feeling "locked into one specific domain" (Billy). Kit provided an illustrative account of feeling stuck after setting up a BDSM dynamic where they were a full-time submissive to their partner:

> [W]e very quickly found that it didn't work for us, because we're both quite fluid in what we want and what we need, and we … both have identified as switches since. Just because I found sometimes that the submissive role really did work for me and other days, I'd be like I don't want to do that. It doesn't feel right.

The combination of freedom and fluidity meant that many switches regarded themselves as having flexibility. This flexibility involved being able to engage in the BDSM role that suited them best at particular times. It also involved being able to connect with more potential play partners. Switches' flexibility meant that they had high potential for role complementarity with other BDSM participants and were thus "not necessarily inaccessible as a partner to certain people" (Mister Black). As Sophie explained: "because I can be everything between a full dom and a full sub, it just opens me up to anyone and everything".

Expressing a Multi-Sided Self

For most participants, being a switch meant having and expressing multiple sides of themself. That is, it allowed participants to access different parts of who they were as a complete person. Thus, for Robin being a switch enabled her to "step into different roles and express different energies", and enabled her and her (switch) partner to "express different aspects of ourselves".

This notion of a multi-sided self came through strongly when participants who initially identified with a different BDSM role described later identifying as a switch. Such participants typically framed this shift in terms of realising previously-overlooked parts of themselves. For Jo, switching involved the "discovery of a part of myself I hadn't really explored before", whereas for Lola being a switch meant "get[ting] to see both sides of me as a human … and that feels really whole". This notion also came through strongly when participants thought about engaging exclusively in one particular BDSM role for an extended period of time. As Kit noted, they "wouldn't be able to be a full time top or bottom … because they fulfill different needs. And they allow me to feel different roles within myself". This issue was particularly problematic for switches involved in monogamous relationships with non-switch partners. For Sally, long-term monogamy with her submissive partner led to the following result:

> [A]fter being … only dominant for so many years, without the sub side I ran out of steam and I stopped enjoying it. Because I wasn't getting the other things I needed to enjoy it and like I couldn't just enjoy the sub side without getting my dominant stuff out too … you need both to fill the cup.

This was one reason why a small number of switches reported a preference for relationships with other switches. For example, Adam, who dated monogamously, reported that: "I really sort of need to date a fellow switch" because "I'm only going to be satisfied in the longterm sort of with that whole spectrum". However, being locked into one particular BDSM role because of a monogamous relationship was not a potential issue for most participants, as most participants reported that their current relationships involved some form of CNM.

Situational role choices

Switches considered a wide variety of factors when they exercised their flexibility to decide which BDSM role to adopt at a particular time. As Trinket explained, her BDSM role "depends on the day. It depends on who am I with … there's what else has been happening in my life. Yeah, there's a lot". Because the relevant factors shifted and changed, switches' role choices responded to the situations they found themselves in. Thus, for Kit BDSM role choice "really depends on the context" and involved "reading the whole environment, my internal environment and the other person's, and adjusting to that". Across different situations, participants reported that the key factors they considered were personal, partner-based and connection-based.

Most participants reported that personal factors were relevant to their BDSM role choices. Participants reported that certain roles fulfilled specific needs/desires at certain times. Billy engaged in submission and bottoming for "sexual release" whereas Charlie engaged in submission when he wanted "affection" or "attention". Sometimes switches' needs/desires were simply about wanting to engage in a specific BDSM role at that time. For example, if Adam hadn't played a particular role for a while he would "want to just experience that for a bit and change it up". Participants reported that their general mental

and physical state at a particular time could be relevant, with some participants not wanting to take on dominant-type roles when they felt low on energy or stressed/tired due to work responsibilities.

Most participants also reported that partner-based factors were relevant to their BDSM role choices. Many participants indicated that their partner's role preference influenced their choice, that is participants switched to "the role that complements" (Adam) their partner. Thus, when "playing with somebody who is … just a submissive or a bottom" Lola would "take on that top role and stay in that top role". Some switches also reported that their partner's perceived wants or needs at a certain time influenced their choice. Kit, for example, would take on a dominant role when they believed their partner was a "bit more vulnerable" and "need[ed] a bit more like kind of support and control". A partner's personal characteristics could also influence some switches' choice. Gender could be relevant, with Sally reporting that she was "more into domming women than men", and so could physical characteristics like height, with Riley reporting that it was "easier to fall into the idea of dominating" a partner who was shorter than him.

Most participants reported that their BDSM role choice depended not just on who their partner was but also how they related to one other. As Billy put it, it "depends on who the person is and what connection I have to that person". Some participants described having feelings or "vibe [s]" (Riley) about potential partners that predisposed them to want to take on a particular role. How well the switch knew their partner could also be important. Some switches reported that developing feelings of trust/safety with a partner was necessary for them to take on the vulnerability involved in the submissive role, whereas Trinket reported that this was necessary for her to take on the responsibility involved in the dominant role.

Qualified role flexibility

Although switches have flexibility to take on different BDSM roles at different times, the majority of participants reported that their flexibility was not absolute but was instead qualified in particular ways. The key limitations they reported were having a personal preference towards dominant-type or submissive-type roles and experiencing difficulty switching between roles.

Whilst some people may have a "preconceived notion" that switches are "a 50/50 coin" (Mister Black), switches' flexibility could instead be weighted towards dominant-type or submissive-type roles. Although some participants did relate to both types of roles evenly, for example Adam who noted that "If you asked me what do you prefer? I don't have an answer", most participants reported having a distinct role preference. Mister Black described how he "intuitively lean[ed] more towards like a dominant side", which meant that was "the pattern I'll fall into, generally speaking". Conversely, Trinket regarded herself as a "sub leaning switch", meaning that she would "fall into a sub role more easily in general". These preferences could also change over time, with Billy reporting that as he aged his "60/40" preference for dominance flipped to the same level of preference for submission.

Participants also reported different degrees of flexibility around the ease of swapping between BDSM roles. For many switches, swapping BDSM roles was "not as simple as flicking a switch" (Billy). Some switches reported that at certain times they could only take on one particular BDSM role and were not able to switch. As Kit noted, sometimes they "can manipulate somewhat" the role they feel like taking on but at other times they "just can't … This is what I need right now. And it's not going to change". Some switches reported not being able to switch roles with certain people. Whilst Sally switched roles across different partners she did not switch roles with the same partner, that is she was "dominant with some people and then only submissive with others". Ease of quickly switching roles also varied between switches. Adam, for example, reported having no difficulty doing this and recounted how at a BDSM event the act of walking "20 steps" between scenes was "was enough … for me to shed one skin and put on another one". However, most switches reported that quickly switching roles could be difficult. Sally recounted an experience of being asked to quickly switch roles after just being dominated, noting that she found that "trying to snap out of that subby headspace to then dom someone was really tough". Some switches reported that quickly switching roles became easier with experience or when they took time to generate the appropriate mood or focus their mental state.

Switching with switches

When switches played with fellow switches the fact that both parties have flexibility around their BDSM role choice generated "a unique dynamic" (Charlie). In such situations switches approached their choice of BDSM role in a non-typical way, both in terms of the relevant factors they considered and when they made this choice.

As discussed above, switches typically considered their partner's role preference when choosing their own BDSM role. However, if their partner was a fellow switch then their partner may not have a clear role preference or may, in a particular situation, lean towards the same role preference as them. This proved problematic for some switches due to confusion or clashing expectations. For example, Kit recounted the following experience of starting to engage with their switch partner and noticing that the "vibe [was] a bit off":

> And we kind of looked at each other. And … we both expect to be the bottoms in that situation. What do we do? So we just had to … pause and be like, Wait, what are we doing? Like, we're both kind of … waiting for someone to take control.

Similarly, Lola described how she and her switch partner would occasionally "hit noses" when they were "both feeling a little bit subby". Some participants reported that these issues could be resolved through clear communication, whereas other participants reported that starting to play could organically generate a role choice. Trinket explained that if she and her switch partner did not have a clear role preference they simply began playing and "follow[ed] the mood".

Approximately half of the participants reported a phenomenon that can only occur when a switch plays with another switch, that is mid-scene switching of BDSM roles.

Here a switch's choice of BDSM role at the beginning of BDSM activities was remade during those activities. Jo described this phenomenon when recounting her experiences with a switch partner:

> [H]e might start topping me but halfway through I'd end up topping him and … it was a moving, evolving, dynamic … How it started may not be how it ended. And it was just what was happening and who was feeling what at the time.

Mid-scene switching could be a very enjoyable experience, indeed for Charlie it was "intense and amazing and fun". Most switches who engaged in mid-scene switching reported that it only happened once per scene but some switches reported that it could happen more than once. Ease of mid-scene switching also varied between switches. Sophie reported that for her "it's quite easy … to do the switch within a scene". Whereas Charlie reported that if he was going to engage in mid-scene switching he needed preparation in the form of being "rested" and "in the right mood", and he warned that it "can really drain you or sort of hit you hard".

Discussion

The analytical categories outlined within the results section combine to form a complex account of BDSM switches, in terms of both what being a switch means to switches and the factors that switches consider when choosing which BDSM role to take on at a particular time.

Switches understood themselves as having the freedom to engage in a wide range of BDSM activities and the fluid capacity to shift back-and-forth between different BDSM roles. Participants demonstrated high levels of flexibility in terms of how they could engage in BDSM activities and who they could engage with. Existing research suggests that BDSM participants have generally engaged at least once in a wide range of BDSM activities (Rehor, 2015) and that participants with different preferred roles may have different types of preferred activities (Botta et al., 2019). Switches in this study, however, strongly emphasised the importance of variety in their BDSM activities. It may be the case that sustained diversity of participation across a range of BDSM activities is a distinctive factor in how switches engage in BDSM, one that might not necessarily be captured in research focusing on lifetime participation rates or levels of preference for individual BDSM activities.

Switches also understood their flexibility to engage in different BDSM roles as being connected to their sense of self. Being a switch meant being a person whose sense of self was multifaceted and could not be expressed solely by either dominant-type or submissive-type roles but which could only be fully expressed by both types of roles. This understanding of switching as being linked to, and expressive of, a sense of self has relevance to the ongoing academic discussions around BDSM and identity. In particular, these findings align with sexual orientation models of BDSM (Sprott and Williams, 2019) in that the switches in this study understood themselves as being a particular and distinctive type of person. Switching was not just a behaviour that the participants reported

they engaged in but also a type of person that they reported they were. The significance of switching to participants was such that some reported dissatisfaction or negative relational/psychological outcomes when they were in situations where they could not switch between BDSM roles, such as in long-term monogamous relationships with non-switch partners. These experiences could partially be explained by thwarted desires but were also caused by the fact that the switches in such situations felt unable to fully express their sense of themselves as a person. Research has already indicated overlap between BDSM and CNM populations (Bauer, 2019; Ling et al., 2022), but non-monogamy may take on particular value for switches in ensuring both variety in BDSM activities as well as the ability to express their multifaceted selves.

Switches consider a wide range of factors when deciding which BDSM role to take on at a particular time, including personal factors, partner-based factors and connection-based factor, all of which exist within broader contextual factors. Figure 1 outlines a theoretical model of *situational role choices* that conceptualises the array and interplay of these factors. This model reflects the fact that switches' BDSM role choices are influenced by varying combinations and types of factors across different situations. Certain factors may hold different levels of relevance for different switches or for the same switch at different times. As such, this model should be understood as dynamic rather than static, and the relative importance of each factor should be understood as variable rather than fixed. Whilst previous research has identified some of the factors set out in this model (Bauer, 2014; Martinez, 2018), this model is an important addition to the literature because it identifies a wider range of relevant factors, taxonomises them into broader categories and integrates these categories into an overarching explanatory model.

A switch's own level of BDSM role flexibility is a key personal factor in their situational role choices. Switches vary significantly in terms of the existence of qualifications or limitations on their flexibility. For example, some switches cannot switch roles with the same partner, some switches have distinct preferences for dominant-type or submissive-type BDSM roles, and some switches find it difficult to switch between roles quickly or at certain times. In the same way that the overall BDSM population is heterogeneous, so too switches are a diverse sub-population. Simplistically defining switches
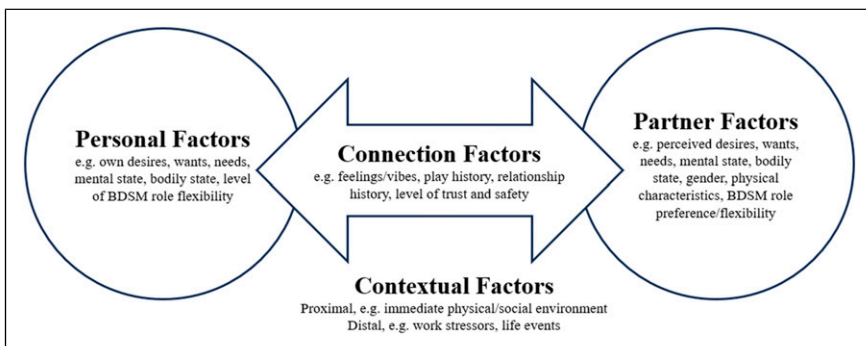

Figure 1. The factors BDSM switches consider when making *situational role choices.*

as people capable of taking on either dominant-type or submissive-type roles (Brown et al., 2020; De Neef et al., 2019; Simula, 2019b) elides significant variations between switches in terms of their individual capabilities to do so.

For switches who can quickly switch roles, playing with a fellow switch enables the possibility of mid-scene switching. Not all switches engaged in this practice but those who did reported that it was enjoyable though potentially difficult to navigate. The phenomenon of mid-scene switching is almost entirely undiscussed within the academic literature on BDSM, indeed the author has located only a single previous mention of this (Fennell, 2022: p. 119). Future research involving switches should be attuned to this unique phenomenon and investigate what it means to switches and how it operates. Of particular interest is how typical BDSM consent practices, such as safewords and aftercare (Newmahr, 2011; Sisson, 2007), function within scenes where BDSM roles are not necessarily fixed.

Conclusion

The key strengths of this article are the novel contributions it provides to understanding the rich internal diversity of the BDSM population. These contributions include important insights into switch experience and variations between switches, as well as a theoretical model that conceptualises how switches choose the BDSM role they take on at different times. The key limitations of this article relate to the generalisability of its findings and its sampling strategy. Grounded theory research is not empirically generalisable but can ideally be theoretically generalisable (Morse et al., 2021). The rich data developed in this research, as well as the sample's wide cross-section of age, gender, sexuality and BDSM experience, suggests that the analysis conducted here has theoretical generalisability. Whilst the findings of this article reflect the experiences of Australian switches, differences in BDSM cultures, conventions and local communities mean that experiences elsewhere could differ. In terms of data collection, not all potentially relevant demographic information was collected and considered, for example participant race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Furthermore, the inclusion criteria requiring participants have at least 1 year of experience with the BDSM community may have induced a selection bias towards switches with higher levels of personal investment in BDSM, and thus towards participants more likely to endorse that being a switch was reflective of their sense of self.

As the academic field of BDSM studies continues to develop, it is important that research unpacks more of the internal diversity within BDSM. This article's exploratory qualitative analysis of BDSM switches provides initial insight into this overlooked part of the BDSM population and demonstrates that further research on switches is needed. This should include quantitative research that generates empirically generalisable findings specific to the switch sub-population as well as focused research on particular aspects of switch experience, such as mid-scene switching. Our understanding of switches would benefit from investigating how switches navigate the social aspects of their identity category within the BDSM community, such as how switches indicate to other BDSM participants that they are open to taking on both dominant-type and submissive-type roles

(as BDSM clothing and manners of address typically signal one or the other), and how switches are perceived and received by non-switch BDSM participants. Given that switches have been relatively overlooked within academic research around BDSM, our understanding of switches would also benefit from investigating the visibility and representation of this identity category across other areas as well, such as within mainstream media depictions of BDSM and within education and advocacy efforts around BDSM.

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