

MAJORING IN KINK

*Conversio
Virium's
quest to
educate
the next
generation
of BDSM'ers*

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“Turn her around so we can see her face when you do that,” shouts a young man to Dov, a middle-aged six-foot-plus man with long curly hair and black leather Frye boots. The boots are currently being used to kick Gabriel—an attractive, young, resent NYU grad currently in bra and underwear—in the crotch from behind, as she is twisted uncomfortably around his arm, his big hands firmly gripping her thick black hair. I flinch at the sadistic request before remembering the nature of the demonstration.

It's Monday night in Hamilton 304, after the unfortunately timed Core classes have filtered out of the building. I'm at the semester's first meeting of Conversio Virium, Columbia's BDSM, or kinky sex, education group, witnessing famed fetishist Dov demonstrate “rough body play,” or “thug play.” The demonstration is instructional, with an emphasis on avoiding actual bodily harm, but it's easy to forget this as Dov maneuvers her onto the floor, grip strong, demonstrating an impressive and creative repertoire of ways to twist her body and apply force. His verbal manipulation ranges from the cliché (“Say hello to Mr. Boot!”) to the nostalgic cliché (“Why do you keep hitting yourself, huh?”), as the crowd makes inside jokes, giggles, and asks probing questions about the anatomy of the lesson.

He leans over and digs his hands into her thighs, grabbing at a specific point as she squirms on the floor and giggles. “These are the pressure points you want to find, they create an intense sensation.” He holds tighter and she writhes, smile on her face. A smirk comes across his. “It's almost as if she actually likes it or something.”

A rough start

Fast forward to the end of the meeting, and language about pressure points and how to avoid

paralyzing the still-bare grad student is replaced by dialogue that would be familiar to attendees of an NSOP consent seminar.

Conversio Virium meets every week to teach young kinksters proper and safe BDSM technique, in addition to serving as a safe space to discuss, intellectualize, and joke about the kink scene in New York. For readers not familiar with the terminology, BDSM is an umbrella term for sexual fetishes which incorporate pain and imagined power relations into routines for arousal. BDSM is sexual in nature, though it may or may not include actual sex.

IT FACILITATES A UNIQUE TYPE OF INTIMACY, ONE THAT ENCOURAGES PARTICIPANTS TO THINK CRITICALLY ABOUT CONNECTION, SEX, AND DESIRE.

BDSM stands for bondage, dominance/submission, slave/master, and sadism/masochism (see sidebar for a more thorough description), and the act of participating in BDSM is called “scening” or “playing.” CV is a BDSM education stronghold in New York City, known for being a safe and welcoming environment in New York's larger kink scene, and attracting a diverse crowd, including Columbia undergrads, a sizable grad student population, a solid NYU constituency, and a number of commuters of all ages who travel from as far as Rockland County each week. I spent one month attending CV meetings and interviewing members about their sex lives, their opinions, and

learning the norms of their non-normative community. I learned the modern 20-something kinkster is not exactly (at all) Pulp Fiction—leatherman status, but rather a young, maybe slightly adventurous student or postgrad who procrastinates on FetLife rather than Facebook, and is, on average, very, very satisfied with his or her sex life.

Partially due to the nature of the type of sex they engage in, members of the kink scene repeatedly emphasize the importance of consent and open communication. In bondage, displeasing one's partner doesn't mean failing to achieve orgasm, but possibly causing them undesired physical pain. Kellie Fox-Gonzales, president of CV and a sophomore in CC, says, “We have such an ethos in the BDSM community. We're so focused on ethics and consent, and if somebody violates that once, they're pretty much blackballed from the entire community.”

“Negotiation” is the process of discussing a scene beforehand, what the different participants will do and what they want to get out of it. “Limits”—undesired actions—are discussed, and people are encouraged to know and understand their triggers. During a scene, a “safe word” (which commands someone to immediately stop), is aided by a “red light, yellow light, green light” system, which is used to indicate to a partner how one is feeling about actions in a scene without breaking it too drastically. “Aftercare” is the kinky word for cuddling and emotional and physical first aid. It's more than just a douche move to skip out on aftercare—like many aspects of a given BDSM scenario, it's discussed beforehand, and held to a high standard. Dov explains during the demonstration: “You just beat the crap out of somebody, made them have 600,000 orgasms, whipped them until they've cried... Now you cuddle them.” It's a difficult balance between upholding a fantasy (especially one that involves theatrical elements of non-consent or resistance) and communicating feelings—one that can only be safely toed with



much preparation and knowledge of a partner's needs and desires.

CV Vice President Simone Wolff, BC '13, describes how the physical risks facilitate an awareness that she thinks may even lead to safer practices than “vanilla” (non-kinky, normative) sex. “A lot of people have sex without ever talking about it or thinking about it or educating themselves. ... The concept of negotiating sex beforehand is something that I totally learned from the kink community, and I think it can be applied to everything,” she says.

Many participants say these community standards foster a unique type of intimacy, one that encourages participants to think critically about

connection, sex, and desire, and one that can be a draw, in and of itself, to “communicators” like Wolff. “I like to talk about sex and I like to really communicate with my partners, and the scene has so many people who are on the same page. That's a community I want to be part of, that's a community I want to fuck my partners in,” Wolff says.

Despite strong community standards, understanding the nature and gray lines of communication and consent can be challenging, especially for sadist who may need to come to terms with the nature of their desires against the backdrop of societal norms. No one understands this better than Dov, the sadist conducting the thug play demo, who has been in the scene since 1993. When

I meet him at a Queens Starbucks the next week, his frizzy hair is tied back, but I recognize the jet black leather boots he used to dominate Gabriel a week beforehand. Though they are discreet and commonplace, to someone who had seen him in action, the footwear takes on a new, disarming “hiding in plain sight” meaning as he walks over to retrieve his soy chai latte.

A known rope and whip expert, Dov brings both his kink expertise and his experience with the ambiguities of consent to CV meetings. “I would say I'm a sadist,” he tells me. “But I'm not a sociopath, I do have a certain level of empathy. ... There's a big distinction between playing with somebody with pain and just hurting somebody.”



FIREPLAY

Batons or wands, resembling fondue forks with cotton gauze on the prongs, are wrapped with a kevlar mesh screen. The participants apply rubbing alcohol (70 percent, because 90 burns too hot) and then light the skin on fire. In some cases, this is accomplished by painting on a trail or pattern with one baton, and in others by hitting the skin with a lit baton which causes some to come off. One uses a free hand to put out any residual fire to prevent burns.

A 24/7 master-slave arrangement involves a power dynamic between people that extends to all aspects of life, which can get difficult when the need for open, equal communication comes up. Dov describes his own personal journey toward understanding the blurry lines between fantasy and sober communication, something he experienced during his first 24/7 master-slave relationship involving “nonconsensual consent.” “Early in the relationship, we had this huge knock down drag out fight and she was ready to walk out of the apartment, and I said ‘Well, I don’t want you to leave, let’s talk this out, what’s wrong?’ and she said ‘Don’t you want to just punch me in the face, knock me on the floor, fuck me in the ass and win this argument?’ and I was like, ‘Well, yeah, that had crossed my mind, but I don’t want you walking out the house right now, you’re angry,’ and she said ‘No, that’s the point,’” Dov explains. “That was the point I realized I could figure out where my little gray lines were. We had the consent, we had the relationship, that these were good things, and that hurting her and using her within this context was OK,” he says.

Doing it (yourself)

The next week, CV hosts “kinky crafts.” We get a lesson on how to glue strips of old jeans onto a wooden stick from Michael’s. “The super glue’s expensive, don’t waste it... And no gluing yourselves together!”

I’m proud of my DIY flogger—a wooden stick wrapped in someone’s cut up blue jeans with denim strips sprouting out the end.

“Flog me with it!” I ask Cody Fulcher, Foxx-Gonzalez’s primary partner, and a sophomore at NYU Polytechnic Institute. He shows me how to swing it in a figure 8 and then hits my back a few times. Though not heavy leather, the denim strips send mild shocks up my spine. I’m aware this is tame—Dov referred to floggers as the “giant puffballs” of the scene—but still. “I can see why people are into this,” I say as he hands it back to me.

In a corner, a girl shouts out “Look, you guys, I’m labeling all these clothing pins with different body parts in different colors!” as another works on a brightly colored pair of fake feather pasties. Leather and latex are nowhere to be found.

For starving college students who can’t afford a leather jacket, let alone a dominatrix cat suit, BDSM is prohibitively expensive. As a result, DIY materials prevail among the younger generation. However, the particulars of DIY have also helped shape a new aesthetic for a new generation—one that represents a departure from the hardcore Leatherman culture of the pre-dot com era.

Elle, a recent NYU grad, who wished to remain anonymous, says, “I used to ride horses, and horses were a less expensive hobby than BDSM. A good whip is going to cost you \$200. ... The DIY stuff is great. I have a pair of vampire gloves I made myself (leather gloves with very tiny, very sharp needles all over them)—they’re so much fun, oh my God, they’re awesome—they could cost you \$100. I made my own pair with a pair of heavy leather work gloves and tacks.”

For Elle, having a close group of kinky friends also helps facilitate more elaborate scenes. Her friend holds regular swap meets in Brooklyn

where they trade equipment, and she feels totally comfortable calling up her friends and borrowing anything from whips and cuffs to strap-ons (“If I swear to bleach it afterwards!”). They also host share-the-wealth scenes where everyone brings their own props.

Many new scene kids speak of the old days of New York kink, the “Leatherman culture” and Hellfire—Hell’s Kitchen’s infamous underground dungeon-filled BDSM club—as grittier and more exclusive than the current scene. The leather look is seen as somewhat old school, or retro among the younger crowd. “I know a lot of people who just don’t want to do leather, for environmental, animal-loving reasons. And it is expensive. The whole leather aesthetic is just not as big with younger people. Some young people love it, other people want to invent a new style,” says Wolff, noting that she’s observed a return of the “burlesque aesthetic,” especially in the queer community.

I ATTACH A CLOTHESPIN TO THE SOFT PART OF MY UPPER ARM, WHICH HURTS A SURPRISING AMOUNT. I TAKE IT OFF.

This change in preference and look also hints at a generational divide between older and younger scene members. Many members cite ideological differences between age groups—notably, a decreased stigma against “switches,” or people who like to play the role of both dom and sub, in the younger generation. Participants also speak of a problematic and occasionally exploitative dynamic between younger and older people in the scene.

“There are some fucking creepy predators out there,” Elle adds. “Old dudes, for the most part, who look around and see a bunch of kids, a bunch of 20 to 22 year olds, and think ‘They can’t know that much about what the norm of our culture is, they can’t know that much about the standards of our community, so this is an opportunity to prey on them, to isolate them.’ I speak from experience here. And unfortunately it’s really, really prevalent. It’s problematically prevalent.”

Elle mentions the phenomenon of “Tribe parties,” a part of the kink community started by two men in their forties in an effort to pick up submissive girls in their 20s. As a reaction to this, a group called The Next Generation has formed in the last year to give 18 to 35 year-olds a safe space for exclusive young people parties.

And then there’s FetLife, a social network for kinky people with a similar clean interface and interprofile link capabilities to Facebook (only, linking a profile to your “Daddy” is much less likely to be a statement of genetic heritage than on Facebook’s family section). Everyone at CV emphasizes that FetLife is not a dating website. Most people use it to see what their friends are up to, post statuses, and look up how-to info on one of the many vibrant discussion groups.

“FetLife is full of us being dorks. ... There’s a great group called ‘Kink and Academia’—I just learn a ton,” says Elle.

Though not necessarily a generational phenomenon, a surprising characteristic of the kinksters I talked to was the shameless abandon with which they pursue their most obscure, whimsical, and elaborate fantasies. Devon, another member of Conversio Virium who wished to remain anonymous, describes a scene he witnessed where a man dressed up in an orange tuxedo and a fox mask was chased by several humans pretending to be dogs (as part of a fetish called “puppy play”) as a fantastical fox hunt. He let me use my imagination about what happened when the puppies caught the fox. Wolff notes the popularity of T-Rex style bondage, where the wrists are attached to the shoulders to create a short arms look. “Dinosaurs are big in the scene,” she says. Dov contributes a story about his friend who dressed in all Victorian garb and was stalked by a vampire: “the idea is he hypnotizes her and takes her back to his lair to do evil things,” he says. Wolff herself participated in a self-referential “What’s the safe word?” interrogation scene, which plays off a meta kink-specific humor. “You name it, people fetishize it,” says Dov.

Hard to pin down

“I was at Home Depot this morning, and the guy asked me what type of clamp I needed. I said I wasn’t sure yet, and he was like, ‘Well, what are you going to use it for?’”

“Ummm, an art project?” Libra continues as she passes a string of monkey wrenches, pressure clamps, stationary supplies, hair products and weights, demonstrating on her own pierced nipples how to apply pressure using various specialized tools.

“I have clover clamps I bought at a kink shop, but I don’t like them as much as the really mean stuff from Home Depot,” she explains.

Meanwhile, a scene unfolds on the other side of the room. A CV-er has taken his shirt off, and a few members have put clothespins on his arms, ears, down his neck, circling around and on top of his nipples, and down his abdomen. A series of carpentry tools, office supplies, and hair clips (“There are a lot of fun things you can do to penises with these... but that’s another lesson,” Libra interjects) are passed around for demonstration. Libra shows us her pair of wings: a string of clothes pins tied to bright orange feathers she attaches to the skin of her back for various fantasies. I attach a clothespin to the soft part of my upper arm, which hurts a surprising amount. I take it off.

As the meeting comes to an end and people resign their various clamps and gadgets, it’s time for the grand finale. The CV-ers had threaded a piece of string through all the pins attached to the member’s body, and now he is standing on one end of Hamilton 304 with a dom on the other end. I watch as the dom yanks the string, and all the clothes pins snap off his body at once in what’s referred to as a “zipper.” The chest area is pinched red and irritated, and a few members come over to soothe and pet it. He has an oddly victorious and gleeful look on his face—but, I guess, this shouldn’t be too odd to me at this point.

The specificity of Libra's fascination with and extensive expertise on pressure toys—particularly her love of clothing pins—is not uncommon in the kink community. FetLife allows users to list highly specific sexual interests, with options ranging from “ball gags” to “gothic school girls” to “clown-gangbang-office play.” BDSM takes practice, so members of the community frequently develop a skill set in a few areas of particular interest, like rope play or singletailing. This sexual division of labor (if you will), along with an already non-normative outlook on sex and love, adds to a community where polyamory and multiple sexual partnerships is the norm.

Elle elaborates: “The way the dynamic in kink works in my experience is kind of like trying to make all the cogs on the gear and interlock it at once. You can't do it—you're going to get three or four at once, and that's great, but you're going to have all these unfulfilled desires, and the other person is going to have all these unfulfilled desires. If you can have four of these things that you love to do satisfied in your relationship with one person, and 3 in another, and another 4 in another, you're ultimately probably feeling a lot more sexually and emotionally satisfied and fulfilled. Whereas if you're sitting there going ‘God, just spank me already! Why don't you want to spank me?’ all the time, you're probably getting really angry.”

ATTRACTION ISN'T THAT BIG OF A DEAL, AND NEITHER IS CASUAL SEX, OR PLAY, OR ANY COMBINATION OF THE TWO.

Kellie discusses how much of CV's board and many regular members date each other and play regularly. FetLife allows members to list multiple relationship statuses referencing various power, family, and ownership dynamics, ranging from the simple “owner of/owned by” to the obscure “member of a leather family with/toy of.”

While non-exclusivity is widely practiced, it is by no means a rule. Devon says that until about a year and a half ago, he was a “serial monogamist,” and Elle describes her own complicated status: “I'm fundamentally monogamous but I'm dating, like, five people and they're all polyamorous.” And though the complexity of polyamorous webs can facilitate more sexual and emotional satisfaction, it also brings new complications. Elle clarifies her status: “I'm dating one of them very seriously; it's just that he has other girlfriends, so I thought ‘Well, if you can have other girlfriends, I want other girlfriends and boyfriends.’ If I were offered the opportunity to make this relationship monogamous, I would in a heartbeat.

When asked if she gets jealous, Elle responds: “Oh yes, yes I do, and anyone who says they don't get jealous is full of shit.”

Foxx-Gonzalez and Fulcher, who have been dating since high school, manage their occasional jealousy through communication: “Cody is my primary partner, so I would defer to him. We have to tell each other if we do anything with anyone.

It's not like an approval process, it's just an ‘I'm letting you know.’”

Wolff describes herself as “the least jealous person ever.”—“I like sharing,” she says. “It works with who I am.”

“There's definitely an attitude among monogamous people that jealousy is to be played to, like you should listen to it and be guided by it. Your partner should do things to make you less jealous, you shouldn't work on your own jealousy,” Wolff says.

In addition to having a different type of sex from the vanilla community, kinky friends also seem to have a different attitude about sex and sexual interest. Sexual attraction is freely discussed. Attraction isn't that big of a deal, and neither is casual sex, kinky play, or any combination of the two. Elle says of her friend group: “One of my friends Vivian—we universally acknowledge that everyone wants to fuck her and we talk about it all the time.”

Kellie describes a similar phenomenon with the people she hangs out with. “This is your group of friends where you can basically say ‘You know, I really want to have sex with you because I think you're cool and you rope really well and I want to do that, let's go,’” she says. “It's really liberating.”

It's a small scene after all

At my last meeting, CV's weekly budget has been used to purchase an array of candy, chips and beverages rather than facilitate a presentation or Michael's art supplies (a la kinky crafts). Foxx-Gonzalez envisions a symposium-like “check in time,” where the group discusses community issues and standards. Though attendance is sparser, an initial silence soon gives way to a list of intellectual topics regarding kink from “What does it mean to be a submissive?” to “WTF is sex anyway?” The conversation is candid and insightful. Foxx-Gonzalez shares a potential research topic she will engage in about the pathologization of kink in the mental health industry. One new member shares his personal experience of discovering kink, while another talks about occasional feelings of doubt or worry about the nature of his fetishes. “My kinks are things that sometimes I feel don't reflect the way I am in the world, who I am as a political and social being,” he relates. “And I have to remind myself that it's consensual, that she wants it, to keep me down to earth.” Soon after that, the fight against patriarchy and ideas about deconstructing perceived patriarchal elements in the scene are being bounced around, and the Hamilton location seems all the more fitting. This type of cerebral analysis is typical of CV, known for its seminar feel and focus on inclusion, discussion, and, appropriately enough, nerdiness. “They're very heady people,” says Devon of CV-ers.

BDSM has always maintained a spot in the margins of cultural consciousness, with Rihanna's recent “S&M” music video (refrain “Sticks and stones may break my bones / but chains and whips excite me”) playing on the mainstream perception of domme/sub imagery, and the 2002 movie *Secretary* portraying a quirky yet relatable dom/sub relationship, which draws mixed but mostly positive reviews from the scene as an honest portrayal of a kinky relationship dynamic. Many scene

DOV EXPLAINS IT...

“The **TOP** is the person doing something, while the **BOTTOM** is the person taking something.

That comes from the gay community, and what's specific and very nice about it is it's a really nondenominational ... terminology because it really does not denote power structure. The bottom can be the person on top. I have a friend who's a dominant masochist, so her slaves beat her—it's their service.

DOMINANT AND SUBMISSIVE:

Denotes a power structure. The dominant (dom for men, domme for women)—‘I dominate you;’ the submissive—‘I submit to you.’ That's a very open area, because submission does not necessarily mean ownership or anything more structured ... You can be a submissive in bed.

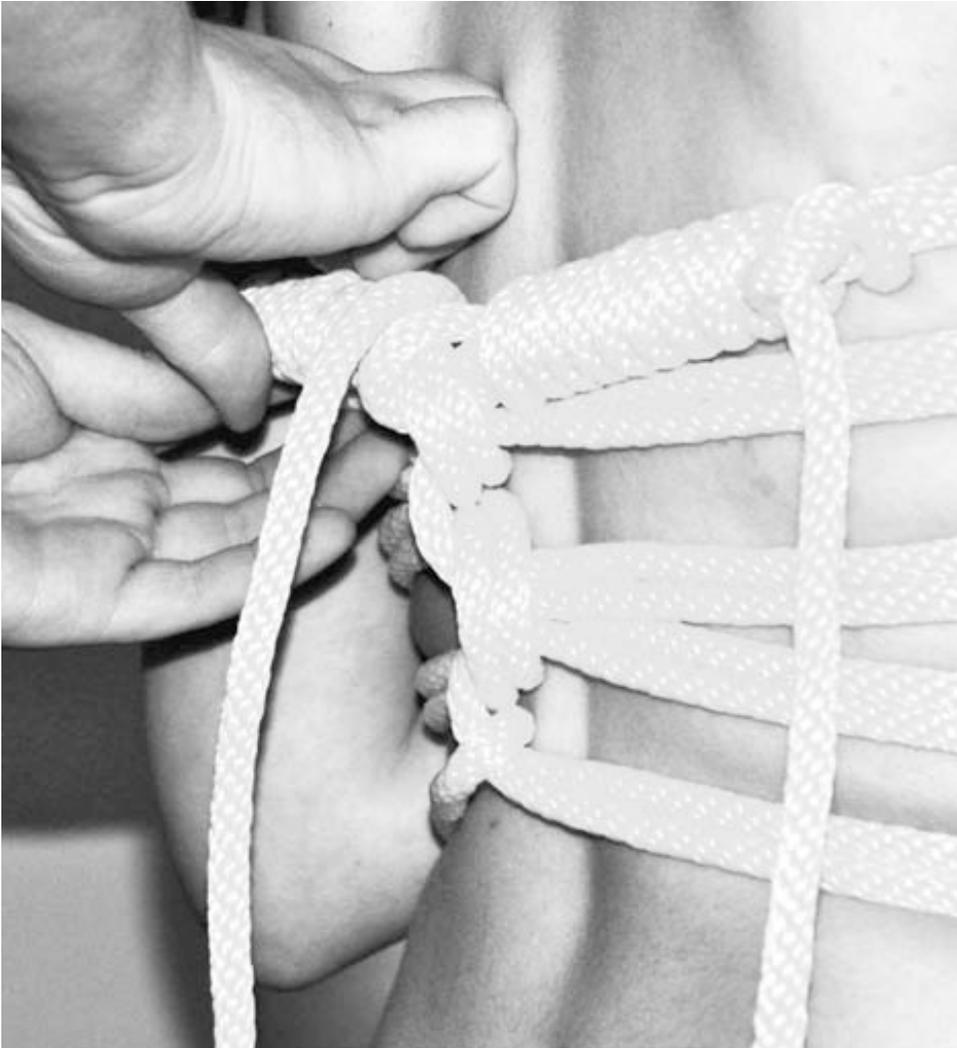
Dominant: ‘I'm going to take you down and... whatever.’

Submissive: ‘Oh, yes, sir!’

Then you get into MS, where you're dealing with an ownership structure. The **MASTER** is the person who sets all the rules, the **SLAVE** follows all the rules. This is where you get into leather culture.

SADOMASOCHISM:

Sexual proclivity, and what perspective you have on whatever you're doing. You can hurt someone and play with them and not be a sadist. You can have sadistic tendencies and not be a sadist. The definition of a sadist is **someone who gets enjoyment from hurting somebody**. I get enjoyment, I get a certain sexual thrill depending on how I'm hurting somebody. While I'm into MS and DS, the sadism is a very specific part of me. The other is more of an external thing: What is my power over somebody else? ‘I own you.’ The masochism-sadism thing is ‘I like hurting you and you like being hurt by me.’”



regulars note that fluffy handcuffs and spanking border on vanilla sex practices. Still, BDSM participants question and come to terms with their identities, the larger implications of their fetishes, and the role kinky sex plays in their non-kinky and family-oriented lives.

"We grow up with society," Dov says. "Society says, 'You're not allowed to hit women. Don't hit men, don't fight, don't hurt people, don't yell. I've seen grown men break down when they're told to slap someone in the face, because of the peer pressure. As long as you're functioning and everything's OK, these are not bad things.'"

BDSM appears to be making no major leaps into the mainstream, forcing some participants in the scene to carefully separate their scene persona and social life from family and career affairs. Many members have "scene names," and maintain varying degrees of anonymity in real life. For Devon, the nature of his career forces him to keep his scene self under wraps, and though he's a CV regular, few people know his real name. He describes one particular night he was going out with a bunch of his job friends at T.G.I. Friday's when a co-worker whispered "Devon" under her breath.

"I have a secret—I know you're on FetLife," she said. Though shocked, he realized that she would also understand the implications of revealing herself as a kinky person—a common reaction to the awkward run ins in what gets to be a small scene. Devon describes another time he spotted his childhood camp counselor at a BDSM convention, where they made brief deer-in-the-headlight eye contact before turning away. Later, he told his friends about it; their response: "He was your camp counselor? Oh my god—he's a legend!"

Despite the complications of anonymity and leading a double life, the issue of "coming out" is more nebulous than in the gay community—which BDSM is frequently compared to—because the nature of sex is private. Dov says, "I believe your sex life is your sex life and not everybody else's. ... A lot of people tend to go 'Oh you're a presenter, you're out, right?' and it's like 'Well, yes, but I have a life and just because I'm out doesn't mean you have any right to know what my life is.' It's like, 'Don't your parents know about this?' Well, I don't know about my parents' sex life—I don't want to know. They don't want to know about my sex life, so why should I have to tell them?'" Parents that do find out, of course,

have mixed reactions. After Gabriel's parents found out, they expressed shame and didn't talk to her for a year, but Dov also notes a phenomenon of generational BDSM participants, leading him to believe that interest in kink may be genetic ("It gets really funny when you go to an event and the parents and kids are there.")

Another question surrounding BDSM in larger society is the implication of the initial interest. Though it's widely accepted that participation in BDSM is not indicative of any psychological problems, it's interesting that other attempts at causing ones' self pain are viewed in the psychological community as signs of emotional distress. The community seems mixed on the distinction, and on the larger reasons for participating in BDSM. Dov draws attention to the difference between hurt and harm: hurt being a sensation that may be pleasurable in some way, and harm being actual bodily impairment.

Foxx-Gonzalez has an interesting insight: "I've found that for a lot of people, not for everyone, but for a lot of people, BDSM is the avenue with which they work out their issues and problems. ... There are men and women who have been raped in real life and they negotiate a rape scene on their own terms and they reenact it, but they have all the power, they lay out the rules, they come to reclaim what happened to them where they had no control and now they have control. It's reliving what was once out of your control in a way that is in your control. ... Everyone has issues, but I wouldn't go so far to pathologize the entire community. The BDSM community is diverse. Some people have issues and some people don't. Some people just like getting hit."

And for many, the appeal is a sort of theatrical fantasy, rather than the actual pain itself. Gabriel says, "They call it scening because there's a large theatrical element. I think it's really interesting and satisfying to go to a place emotionally with someone that's farther out than what most people experience in their everyday lives, and then be able to come back with them. It reaches something that's more intimate."

Unlike other marginalized communities and movements that fight for validation and acceptance, there seem to be no major strides towards achieving widespread legitimacy. "I don't think it requires it," says Dov. "People always do what they do in their bedroom."

However many kinksters recognize the need for validating sex in general. Wolff opines, "Not being happy in your sex life is a real problem, not just a cute advice column problem and ruins a lot of relationships and make people unhappy. People who actively pursue being satisfied with their sex lives within safe-sane-consensual limits, that's nothing but a good thing."

For much of the next generation, kink is experimentation, a learning process, for some maybe just a phase, for others, the beginning of a lifestyle. Either way, they don't feel like changing any time soon. "The way younger people approach kink: it's fun, it's interesting, it's something new, we're experimenting, we're screwing around, we're trying to figure shit out," Elle says. "We're kind of adventurous, and weird, and we want to know 'Hey, is getting set on fire going to turn me on? Let's find out!'" ●