Characteristics of Successful Personal Ads in a BDSM On-Line Community

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The bondage, discipline, sadism, and masochism (BDSM) community today uses online personal ads as a major way for members to meet. Such communities have designed their on-line experience around the format of the once prevalent newspaper/magazine personals ads and often feature physical descriptions, personal pictures, and special interests listings. This study examines personal profiles posted on an on-line BDSM community, which allows for the examination of the type and content of these ads that may be the impetus for them to be “successful.” As such, this approach goes beyond traditionally studied aspects of personal ads from other mainstream groups (Paul et al. 2010; Rajecki et al. 1991; Strassberg and Holty 2003). This is achieved through an experimental approach of creating profiles to see which attract the most viewers; such an approach is fairly unique, although not completely new (Goode 1996a; Sitton and Blanchard 1995; Strassberg and Holty 2003). Content-analysis is also performed on the viewers of the experimental profiles in order to gauge common characteristics/content that users have on their profiles for the purported purpose of making themselves attractive for more views.

KEY TERMS

Bondage: Sadomasochistic sexual practices involving the physical restraint of one partner (Meriam-Webster 2011).

Discipline: punishment (Meriam-Webster 2011).

Sadism: A sexual perversion in which gratification is obtained by the inflictions of physical and mental pain on others (Meriam-Webster 2011).

Masochism: A sexual perversion characterized by pleasure in being subjected to pain or humiliation especially by a love object (Meriam-Webster 2011).

INTRODUCTION

Bondage, Discipline, Sadism, and Masochism (BDSM), as an organized activity and subculture, began emerging in the 1950s and 1960s in connection with the motorcycle and leather scenes that began during the same time frame (Lenius 2001). Most notably, this activity was widely believed to be almost exclusively a homosexual activity. Although this activity did have
homosexual participants, it also involved a sizeable amount of individuals from multiple sexual orientations. However, the homosexual stereotype that was attached to this behavior continued well into the 1970s, and even exists currently—albeit in a much reduced capacity. Up until the advent of the Internet, those interested in BDSM met others primarily through BDSM-specific clubs typically located in large metropolitan areas; however, the stigmas attached to BDSM and the negative social ramifications for those associated with this activity have long served as a detriment to being active in physical BDSM communities. With the maturation of the Internet, it has become a viable environment for those interested-in and part of fringe subcultures to interact with one another for their collective/individual interests. The Internet has the ability to provide an almost safe haven where individuals—no matter their geographic location—have the ability to interact through these subculture-specific sites with options for subsequently meeting in person. Consequently, the growth and popularity of the use of on-line BDSM communities has resulted in a mass departure of participants from physical BDSM communities (Newmahr 2011). The effect that the further development of on-line BDSM will continue to have with younger generations more versed in the Internet and social networking, perhaps even being introduced to BDSM via the Internet, will undoubtedly have a significant effect on the future development of BDSM as a subculture and how its participants connect/interact with one another.

CHARACTERISTICS OF ON-LINE BDSM COMMUNITIES

The emergence of the Internet and the effects that it has had on how society functions and communicates has changed both mainstream culture and numerous (especially stigmatized) subcultures in a dramatic fashion. The Internet has not only changed how we communicate with one another, but also how we find others interested in similar hobbies/activities. This occurrence applies to members of the BDSM community as well where many have enlisted in various on-line communities that may not have access or the desire to participate in a physical BDSM community (Newmahr 2011). As a result of the drastic change in interaction(s) brought about by the Internet, individuals must alter their identities accordingly to be accepted as a part of each particular on-line community. Previously, individuals involved in physical BDSM communities may have had only a limited amount of others to interact and participate in BDSM with; however, access to on-line communities has greatly increased the overall number of potential partners. This also means that individuals must carefully construct their on-line identities in order to make them more attractive among the large number of users.

The management of individuals’ identities is drastically impacted by the format/structure, opportunities, and restriction of an on-line community when compared to a physical community. Palandri and Green (2000) discuss that there is a difference between how an individual that is active in a BDSM community presents their self in person versus how they present their self on-line. In addition, Palandri and Green (2000) found that participants in on-line BDSM communities admitted to changing their on-line identities over time to modify and/or enhance their experience if they perhaps grew tired of their former persona. The common central piece of one’s on-line identity is often their screen name/user-name. Screen names are largely used to serve as the initial element that attracts potential participants to one another, emphasizing the importance of how the screen name must represent the qualities and characteristics that one
wants to convey about themselves in order to attract desired partners (Palandri and Green 2000). Stiles and Clark (2011) found that many individuals take pleasure in the strategies that go into constructing and managing their identities over time, especially as such may be related to both attempts to attract others and enact a fantasy presentation of self.

Participating in on-line BDSM communities versus physical communities has shown to produce a number of added benefits for participants. One such benefit of participating in on-line communities is that the potentially onerous barrier of gaining entrance in many public communities is removed. Consequently, on-line communities allow for ease of access to communities that may not be easily found, or for individuals who are shy, living in remote areas, or who would not participate in these activities in person (Weinberg 2006). Brown (2011) found that the Internet allows individuals to establish a seemingly safe relationship by being privy to knowledge prior to meeting one another for the first time, and that on-line relationships are less demanding than physical relationships because they allow individuals to take part in the relationship on their own time. This may be especially true with younger people (who are more likely to utilize on-line personal ads) where they may gain a more meaningful experience of having a relationship on-line than older participants (Paul et al. 2010). Although younger individuals may be more adept to interacting on the Internet, little is known about those who participate both in BDSM and in these on-line communities.

CHARACTERISTICS OF BDSM PARTICIPANTS

Relatively little is known regarding the demographic characteristics of those who commonly participate in BDSM. The primary absence in literature pertains to BDSM participant’s age, sex, and race. One of the few studies to examine demographics of participants is Tomassilli, Golub, Bimbi, and Parsons (2009) who reported that white women were more likely to participate in the bondage and domination aspect than other races and genders. Tomassilli et al. (2009) also found that the younger a female was when she began participating in same-sex relationships the more unique and experimental are her behaviors. Going beyond demographics, Newmahr (2011) discusses that many of the participants of BDSM activities are social outcasts within mainstream society. Newmahr (2011) contends their marginal lifestyle is an “...all encompassing lifestyle that represents liberation from the oppressive plight of everyman and nurtures identities of marginality” (Newmahr 2011:9). Stiles and Clark (2011) also found that this lifestyle was considered a secret subculture among participants, and that those involved embrace and value this distinctiveness.

A sizeable number of BDSM participants report being victims of verbal, physical, and some sexual assault throughout various stages of adolescence (Nordling et al. 2006; Newmahr 2011). Included in this victimization are many of the males being bullied by girls during school, especially middle school and high school. Also, many BDSM participants report being overweight during adolescence, or are currently overweight. Having a dominant physical characteristic such as being overweight overwhelmingly threatens many traditional gender roles which-in-turn sets the stage for verbal and physical victimization. Most of the identified sources of victimization depends on males being under-developed (i.e., short), females being over-developed (i.e., tall), or both sexes being overweight. These dominant characteristics of males being short, females being tall, or both being overweight challenge and block the development
of traditional gender role identities for many such individuals. More specifically, being overweight may make both males and females seem androgynous, therefore, not being easily classified as either sex as far as traditional gender roles are concerned. Although many SM participants may be physically underdeveloped, overdeveloped, and/or overweight, Newmahr (2011) found that the same levels of attractiveness applied to the BDSM subculture as they do in mainstream society. Many of the same physically desirable characteristics that are present in mainstream society also apply to those within SM subcultures. This may be one important element in the growing use of on-line BDSM communities where participants can more easily conceal potentially discrediting physical stigmas that are not conceivable in physical BDSM communities (Newmahr 2011).

One’s intelligence or perceived level-of-intelligence has also been suggested as important in why participants gravitate toward BDSM (Moser and Levitt 1987). This actual or perceived intelligence leads individuals to believe that they do not “fit in” with traditional forms of society, and often leads them to search for a social outlet where they can interact with other like-minded individuals. Newmahr (2011) found that many BDSM participants report believing that they are more intelligent than their peers both during adolescence and into adulthood, further cultivating their “outsider” mentality. This perspective subsequently served as a main focus for such individuals during the adolescent years and largely guides their reasoning well into adulthood. This is vital in that it suggests many BDSM participants do not believe traditional societal norms necessarily apply to them, leading to the further cultivation of isolation within a subculture and these subculture-specific norms being developed and embodied by an individual (Kamel and Weinberg 1995). Newmahr (2011) also emphasizes that many individuals that participate in BDSM do so because they seek to be a part of a community by which they traditionally felt they were ostracized. This lack of acceptance from mainstream society allows for the potential of subculture-specific norms having an even stronger influence and prospect for the cultivation of these norms among its participants, leading to individuals perhaps having an even stronger identity and/or devotion to these subcultures. As a result, individuals may feel an even stronger need for acceptance among this community due to the rejection from other—more mainstream—communities. As such, individuals, especially among on-line communities, must carefully select which physical characteristics and interests to share about themselves in order to make themselves more attractive to others within these on-line communities. This makes the selection of what to include in one’s personal ad an even more crucial component of self-presentation and interaction among on-line communities.

FUNCTION OF ON-LINE PERSONAL ADS

The importance of including certain characteristics in one’s personal ad as previously discussed cannot fully be understood without first understanding how on-line personal ads function within on-line communities. There have been several studies that have examined the benefits and functions of on-line personal ads versus traditional personal print ads commonly found in newspapers and/or magazines. One such study is Strassberg and Holty (2003) who argue that on-line personal ads have the potential for reaching a larger and more diverse audience, are typically free of charge, provide anonymity, and provide the ability to include a picture in an ad. So too are such ads cited as easy to use, provide ease in discontinuing contact with ad respondents, and
posters may easily construct a wide variety of personalities and images for themselves (Paul et al., 2010). On-line personal ads may be more common among younger adults; however, this may be more of a function of generational differences in exposure, comfort, and skills with on-line activities (Paul et al. 2010). In addition, Paul et al. (2010) report that individuals use various combinations of personal characteristics in order to create a ‘‘product’’ that they sell via on-line personal ads, thus highlighting the importance of one’s image presentation and management. Therefore, on-line personal ads are crucial in ‘‘success’’ within an on-line community due to it being among the only opportunities to be noticed and stating one’s case for why they should be viewed and/or contacted among the numerous other candidates within these on-line communities.

SIMILAR STUDIES EXAMINING ON-LINE COMMUNITIES

There have been a number of studies that have examined on-line communities dealing with alternative lifestyles, especially through the use of personal ads (Bartholome et al., 2000; Grov, 2004; Gauthier & Forsyth, 1999; Tewksbury, 2003). Included in these studies have been assessments of participants’ constructed identities. Key findings suggest that these ads are generally used by the same demographic of users of traditional personal ads, and that they are more sexually explicit than traditional personal ads. Liau and colleagues (2006) in their meta-analysis of 22 studies examining men seeking others for sexual partners via the Internet found that 40% of men among the samples of the 22 studies used the Internet for this purpose. In addition, other studies have found that those who use the Internet for the purposes of locating sexual partners report having more partners than those who do not use such methods (Benotsch et al., 2002; McFarlane et al., 2000).

A number of studies have highlighted the importance of how one portrays oneself to others as central in personal ad use (Bartholome et al. 2000; Gonzales and Meyers 1993; Goode 1996a, 1996b). These findings stress the importance of the need to study on-line BDSM communities and how individuals portray themselves to others due to this being sparsely available in literature.

There have also been a sizeable amount of individuals documented who use on-line personal ads to seek out others for personal desires. One of the first examples of the large size documented for websites hosting personal ads is Tewksbury (2003) where he found that 880 new on-line personal ads were posted on a website geared to men who have sex with men featured in his study in one week with a total of 180,000 ads altogether on the website. Another example is Tewksbury (2006) where he discusses that 35,500 personal ads were posted on a website geared toward men seeking HIV+ male sex partners. Although studies have shown that there exists a sizeable amount of individuals who post personal ads on the Internet, there have been a small amount of studies that look at the success that these individuals have after posting their profiles (Tewksbury 2010). Therefore, the sheer overall size of those using the Internet for personal ads, and those that report engaging in this behavior demonstrates that individuals have found success in finding sexual partners through the use of on-line personal ads or are having some degree of satisfaction resulting from their communications with likeminded people, furthering the need for continued study.

Perhaps the largest gap in literature pertaining to on-line communities is regarding those who use and actually follow through with initiated contacts and physically meet with individuals for
sexual purposes. Benotsch and colleagues (2001) found that approximately one-third of their sample of 609 gay males had actually met an individual through an on-line community for the sole purpose of sex. Grov and colleagues (2007) found that 53% of their study involving gay and bisexual males from New York City and Los Angeles had used the Internet to meet with at least one sexual partner. Tewksbury (2010), however, found that only a few men that use personal ads ever actually meet in person. The findings from these studies suggest that there is not a clear understanding of the true numbers of individuals that physically meet after first meeting in an on-line sexual community; however, findings suggest that the numbers lie between one-third and one-half of all individuals that use the Internet for sexual purposes. Therefore, the majority of users may just be using on-line communities to satisfy temporary sexual needs and/or curiosities and may not be engaging these on-line communities for real-time sexual encounters. Even though the current study does not examine those that may eventually meet as a result of their initial contact from this on-line community, this study does examine the first crucial step of being “noticed” by other users in this process of personal contact that has rarely been examined in prior research.

THE PRESENT STUDY

In order to address the gaps in literature highlighted throughout the literature review, the present study involves assessing what characteristics present within a BDSM profile make an individual more successful in attracting viewers to their ads. More specifically, this study looks at what characteristics present in an on-line BDSM community profile get the individual noticed, and the characteristics present within those viewers’ profiles. By analyzing profiles on a BDSM-specific on-line community, this allows for the analysis of characteristics beyond traditionally studied personal ad characteristics (i.e., physical attributes, occupation, financial well-being, etc.). This is a research question that has not been examined in any prior study among this particular population. Additionally, a content-analysis identifying common themes among viewers of the experimental profiles also highlights the types of viewers various experimental ads attract.

METHODS

The methods of this study involve creating and posting four separate and unique experimental profiles and identifying those who viewed each profile and the common characteristics of individuals who viewed each of the experimental profiles. This is an experimental method that has only been used several times in other studies focusing on content and success of personal ads (Goode 1996a; Sitton and Blanchard 1995; Strassberg and Holty 2003). Success for the purposes of this study is defined as receiving viewers to one’s posted profile. When an individual clicked on one of the experimental profiles a link was automatically provided and allowed the researchers to identify all other members of the on-line community who viewed the experimental profile(s). Once identified as a viewer of one of the experimental profiles, the viewer’s posted information was reviewed and provided the data for analysis. Information was collected for all viewers for a 30-day period. Characteristics of viewers of each of the experimental profiles were analyzed via content-analysis and basic demographic information, interests, and desires were collected by information available on each viewer’s profile.
Profiles

Each experimental profile was based in the same mid-south city of the United States, and all were presented as Caucasian males. The experimental profiles varied in basic demographic characteristics (height, age, weight) and BDSM role (dominant or submissive) so as to allow for comparisons of viewers’ characteristics across the four experimental profiles. The first profile consisted of a face picture of one researcher that was slightly digitally distorted to conceal the identity of the researcher. The individual in the profile was listed as 5’9,” 23 years of age, new to the scene, and included that he was interested in being a submissive. The second profile consisted of a different face picture that was also distorted with photo editing software. The demographic information on the second profile stated that he was 6’2,” 25 years of age, new to the scene, and interested in being a dominant. The third profile consisted of a public domain picture of a male torso and genitals with the individual reclined on a bed. This profile stated that the individual was 6’2,” 25 years of age, new to the scene, and interested in being a submissive. The fourth profile consisted of a different male torso and genitals public domain picture featuring a mid-thigh to chin view of a moderately hairy man displaying a large, erect penis. This profile stated that the individual was 5’9,” 23 years of age, new to the scene, and interested in being a dominant.

Sample

The sample is comprised of viewers to the four experimental profiles. Across all viewers of all four experimental profiles, there were a total of 1,490 views over a 30-day period completed by 423 unique individuals. The average age was 37.5; male viewers have an average age of 44.5 and females 30.5. The sex of viewers among all profiles skewed largely male with 78.4% of viewers being male, 13.7% being female, and 5.4% being transsexual/transgendered/transvestite. The reported race of users was not viewable due to website restrictions.

Data Analysis

The data for analysis consists of the total number of views per experimental profile during the one month period that each profile was available on-line. For the content-analysis of viewers’ information, the following information was collected from their posted profile: user-name, sex, age, location, subject title, and content displayed in the profile picture. A content-analysis was performed on the user-names, subject titles, and profile pictures of the viewers of each profile.

FINDINGS

The goal of this study was to examine what characteristics (beyond traditionally studied characteristics such as demographics, claims/requests of attractiveness, financial stability) specific to BDSM of personal ads facilitate success in receiving more views, and to see what characteristics/content are also present in viewers of the experimental profiles’ ads. All profile views for each experimental profile (i.e., subordinate face, dominant face, subordinate
genital/torso, dominant genital/torso) were examined via user-name, subject title, and profile picture to create a typology of content present in viewer’s profiles.

Demographic Characteristics of Viewer Profiles

Demographic characteristics, the main attributes that were available pertaining to each viewer, are important because these characteristics function as the initial information that users receive about one another and users are able to search for others based on specific demographic characteristics. The self-identified personal attributes are sex, age, and in what city, state, and/or country they reside. The numbers and sex of initial viewers includes what was represented on the profile (e.g., 1 male/female couple counts distinctly as 1 male and 1 female as well as being recorded as a couple) due to the availability of the ages of all users for each profile. In addition, the total view count includes initial visits and return visitors (i.e., those that viewed each profile more than once) due to no ability to distinguish if a user viewed a profile more than once during a 24-hour period.

The profiles featuring face only profile pictures received a lower number of initial viewers and total return viewers when compared to the experimental profiles featuring nudity. It is also important to note that the profile picture with a genital/torso picture that featured a notably large penis in a close-up photograph received more total initial views and return viewers. This key characteristic could explain the larger number of total views and the higher amount of return visitors. Thus, nudity featuring large male genitalia in a profile picture seems to be a key component to what is generating the most views for any of the experimental profiles.

Table 1 shows basic demographic characteristics of viewers to each experimental profile. The average age for males held steady throughout viewers to all experimental profiles at approximately 45. However, the average female age varied between profile types. Women who viewed the subordinate experimental profiles have an average age of 28.5 and those viewing dominant profiles average of approximately 32.

User-Nomes

User-names are used as the initial “bait” for many involved in both on-line BDSM and on-line communities in general, and their importance in what they say about users cannot be
underestimated (Palandri and Green 2000). This is due to the user-name serving as the first representation of one’s identity in an on-line community that can summarize their looks, personality, and/or desires/requests in one succinct word. Also, having the right user-name is essential for success as measured in gaining more views and/or communication because of what it says about what the user offers, their desires, and what role they are willing to play throughout the enactment of BDSM. Analysis of user-names for those who viewed the experimental profiles reveals nine varieties of types of user-names. The user name categories that were found to be the most common among viewers were: an apparent/real name, gender-based identity, location-based identity, dominant role, subordinate role, genital reference, level-of-experience, non-sexual physical appearance, and elements of fantasy. Additionally, a tenth category, personalized user-names, represents those names lacking an apparent meaning and suggesting users have drawn on some personal issue in selecting a user-name.

The most common user identities that viewed the subordinate face experimental profile were user-names that were relating to the personalized category at 16%. Examples of personalized user-names names for this profile included cosmo17, nerfie, gfunk999, and conjuntrius10013. The second most common type of user-name that visited the first profile was one that represented a perceived apparent/real name or other personal identifier (i.e., initials, nickname, date of birth, etc.) with a total of 15%. These user-names included: MrEddieB, franko2910, dean7219, and libby765. The third most common user-name that viewed the first profile was one that indicated a subordinate role being a total of 13%. Subordinate user-names included: 4uruse2011, your1slave2, 2bpaddled, and petite4u2beat. The remaining results were: dominant role (10%), experience (e.g., top_visitor, man4sexnew, curious80; 10%), location (e.g., nsa_nashville, tucson1a; 9%), gender (dude57153, lwmlwm; 9%), genital reference (e.g., Bignuts3000, ezginny; 5%), and physical appearance (e.g., carrottop2, blondekittycat; 5%).

The most common user name type among viewers represented among viewers of the dominant-face experimental profile was those with subordinate names with a total of 22% of the viewership. The next most common category was user names that reflected actual names at 16%. The third most represented category was personalized at 11%. The following distribution of represented user names are: dominant role (11%), fantasy (9%), gender (8%), location (5%), non-sexual physical appearance (5%), experience-level (4%), and genitals (1%).

The subordinate genital/torso experimental profile’s most common viewer user-names fell into the category of dominant role with 24% of the viewers having such a user-name. Examples of user-names emphasizing the dominant role are dick4kinkbtms, phukmaster73, and OneTopMan. The second most common user-name represented was a tie between those that represented an actual name and those in the personalized category at 14% each. The third most common user-names fell into the category of the subordinate role at 13%. The remaining representation of categories were: elements of fantasy (10%), non-sexual physical appearance (4%), experience-level (4%), gender (3%), location (3%), and genitals (2%).

The category of subordinate role was the most prevalent user-name among the viewers of the dominant genital/torso experimental profile with a total of 25% of the viewers. The second most common category of user-names was those that represented a perceived legal name at 19%. The third most common category was those that were personalized at 12%. The remaining categories are: dominant role (11%), experience-level (9%), elements of fantasy (8%), non-sexual physical appearance (5%), genitals (2%), gender (2%), and location (2%).
Subject Titles

The subject title on each user profile serves as the initial point where users can advertise their self, interests, and any requests/desires that they may have. The initial attractor and piece of information offered by a poster, the title on one’s ad, is crucial in gaining the attention of others and subsequently attracting viewers, and potentially subsequently in-person connections and activities. A total of four themes of subject titles are present: offering services (i.e., sexual or fantasy-related), seeking services (i.e., sexual or fantasy-related), seeking a relationship (i.e., friendship or romantic), and providing information about oneself with no hook (i.e., not stating a service desired or offered).

The most common (60.8%) subject titles of profiles from viewers for the subordinate face experimental profile are those seeking services. Some examples of subject titles seeking services of various types include: “Looking for The Alternative Lifestyle,” “Looking for someone totally obedient to dominate,” and “looking for sex, sex, and more sex.” There was a tie for the second most common subject title between those offering services and those discussing themselves without a hook at 17.3%, respectively. Some examples of those offering services are: “Older guy to mentor you or be your dom? Standard members can contact,” “Visiting [City Name] on 11/1- Do you need a good spanking?,” and “New to this site, here to prove my devotion to MasterTopCock.” Examples of those discussing themselves without a hook are: “Country Guy,” “Just your average joe (Eddie) with a twist ;),” and “Curious, horny, versatile male.” The final category represented was those seeking a relationship, but these profile titles accounted for only 4.3% of all viewers of the subordinate face experimental profile. Some examples of those seeking relationships are “Athletic Man looking for special connections with Young Athletic Men,” and “I am looking for a boyfriend a serious relationship.”

The most common subject titles represented in the viewers from the dominant face experimental profile include those seeking services at 46.1% of the total viewership. The second most common category of subject titles represented were those offering services at 30.7%. The third most common category represented were those providing information about them with no hook at 23%. The remaining category of those seeking a relationship was not represented at 0%.

The most prevalent subject title represented for the subordinate genital/torso experimental profile was those offering services at 45.3%. Some examples of subject titles that are offering services are “need to be trained,” “Minneapolis Topman looking for his bottom boy,” and “Middle aged horny guy loves to have cock suck & cum swallowed, squirterxx at the Y for chat . . . .” The second most common category of subject titles for the subordinate genital/torso profile was those seeking services at 37.3% of the total viewership. The third most common category was those that described themselves without a hook at 12%. The remaining category was those seeking a relationship at 5.3%.

The most common category of subject titles for the dominant genital/torso experimental profile was those offering services at 40.4%. The second most common category of subject titles for the dominant genital/torso profile was those describing themselves with “no hook” at 32.3%. The third most common category was those seeking services at 25.3%. The remaining category was those seeking a relationship at 2%.
Profile Pictures

Profile pictures of the users that viewed each profile were generally not sexually explicit; the most common pictures of viewers range from non-sexually suggestive nudity to everyday pictures that individuals have taken in public. Other common photographs were not highly sexually explicit and tend toward being non-sexually suggestive nudity and individuals wearing sexualized clothing. Profile pictures are important within this community because they occupy the space immediately to the left of the demographic information that free users can access. Additionally, they are the same size as the demographic information and take a center role when an individual has a posted profile picture. There were a total of seven different categories found to be prevalent among profile pictures of viewers. The categories for the pictures were based on sexual explicitness and other common content with the following themes identified: sexual penetration (i.e., involving penis, vagina, mouth, and/or anus), sex toys along with nudity, sexually suggestive nudity (i.e., erect penis, emphasis on genitals, semen on or around penis), non-sexually suggestive nudity (i.e., nudity that does not feature poses, an erect penis, emphasis on a particular body part), sexualized clothing (i.e., leather, rubber, latex, and other erotic clothing), traditional personal picture (i.e., no nudity or sexual innuendos), and no picture.

For all four experimental profiles “no picture” was the most commonly represented category among users’ profile pictures. For the subordinate face profile, 34% of viewers’ profiles did not include a picture. The second most common category is a tie between nudity that is sexually suggestive and sexualized clothing at 14%, respectively. Some examples of nudity that is sexually suggestive is a picture that includes a close-up photograph of a male’s buttocks wearing pink panties, or a close-up photo of a hand holding an erect penis. Examples of sexual clothing include a picture of a man wearing a blonde curly wig while wearing a leather jacket, and a man lying down on a bed while wearing a mask with all limbs tied to the bed posts. The third most common category represented is those with a traditional personal picture at 11%. Some examples of traditional personal pictures are a fully clothed male standing in the driveway smiling in a suburban neighborhood and a fully clothed male standing next to a truck in a parking lot. The fourth most common category was a tie between sexually explicit penetration and non-sexually suggestive nudity at 8% each. Sexually explicit penetration pictures included a female with her own fingers penetrating her vagina and a male performing oral sex on another male. Examples of non-sexually suggestive nudity include a male with a non-erect penis standing in his bathroom, and a male with his pants pulled down showing his non-erect penis. The least common category was toys along with non-sexually explicit nudity at 5%.

The most common category for pictures represented among the viewers of the dominant face experimental profile was those with no picture at a total of 36%. The second most common category present was non-sexually explicit nudity at 15%. The third most represented category was sexually explicit nudity at 14%. The remaining categories were: typical personal pictures (12%), sexualized clothing (11%), toys with nudity (4%), and sexual penetration (2%).

The category of no picture was also the most common among viewers for the subordinate genital/torso experimental picture at 32% of total views. The second most commonly represented category was sexually suggestive nudity at 20%. The third most commonly represented category was sexualized clothing at 16%. The remaining categories of pictures for the subordinate genital/torso profile are: full penetration (7%), toys with nudity (4%), and typical personal picture (4%).
The most common category represented with the dominant genital/torso experimental profile, as with all other profiles, is that of no picture (37%), the second most common category is sexually explicit nudity at 19%. The third most common category was those wearing sexualized clothing at 12%. The remaining categories are: typical personal picture (11%), toys with nudity (6%), sexual penetration (2%).

DISCUSSION

This study has revealed a number of interesting findings in regards to the characteristics and types of content that need to be present in order to make a BDSM personal ad more successful. Primary among the characteristics found with the experimental profiles were that a successful profile would need to include that they are dominant and includes—a sexually explicit picture of male genitalia—especially a large erect penis. More-so, however, this study has revealed through content-analysis the types and frequency of content present in viewer’s profiles. These findings also reveal differences between male and female viewers’ ages in what characteristics they are attracted to and how female users can potentially age-out of on-line BDSM communities. Additionally, this study suggests that the characteristic of user-names tend to emphasize one’s role within the BDSM subculture, serving as a way of clearly and at the very outset of contact establishing one’s interests and role within the subculture. Interestingly, most users are not seeking a relationship, but only seeking or offering sexual and/or fetish-based services. One somewhat surprising finding is that most viewers of the experimental profiles did not themselves include a photograph in their posted profile. These findings suggest that on-line BDSM communities emphasize a sexual component, and do not represent a tight-knit community that others (Lenius 2001; Newmhar 2011) have reported existing in physical BDSM communities.

There are a number of primary themes that have emerged for the demographic characteristics of users in this study. One of the first is regarding the average age of sexes that viewed each profile. The average age of males that viewed each profile was approximately 15 years older on the subordinate face, dominant face, and subordinate genital/torso profiles compared to the 10-year age gap present on the dominant genital/torso profile. The average age of males ranged from 43 to 46 whereas the average age of females ranged from 28 to 33. This suggests that females may age-out of on-line BDSM communities where males are more likely to participate at an older age or continue to participate regardless of their age. This finding coincides with the finding of Cooper and colleagues (2003) where they found that females are less likely to seek erotic materials on-line as they increase in age. In addition, Leung (2004) suggests that younger females are more likely to be addicted to chatting on the Internet in chatrooms or other on-line communities compared to males of the same age. Another theme that emerged dealt with differences in the average age of female viewers pertaining to subordinate profiles and dominant profiles. Whereas males remained near the same average age on all profiles (i.e., approximately 45 years of age). Females viewing submissive profiles were an average of 28 years old compared to females that viewed dominant males being an average age of 33. This is an interesting finding that suggests that perhaps younger females are more likely to be interested in finding a submissive partner and that older females are more likely to seek a dominant male partner, a research topic that should be further explored in the future.

The findings from most common user-names that viewed the experimental profiles have produced a number of typologies of what characteristics and content is present that can be used
in future studies of on-line BDSM communities. One theme is that users are mostly seeking out others that can seemingly fulfill their fantasy roles; in simple and expected terms, subordinates tend to seek dominants and dominants are more likely to view profiles of subordinates. Therefore, having one’s needs in the subject line provides the most opportunity for success because it allows the viewer to see what the individual wants and has to offer immediately without having to communicate with them directly or even open a posted profile. This is not to say that dominants exclusively view only subordinates and subordinates only view dominants. The same is true for subordinate viewers viewing other subordinates. This could possibly show what was previously suggested by Palanadri and Green (2000) where they found that individuals are more likely to switch roles/interests (i.e., subordinate and dominant) while being in an on-line environment due to the fact that their identities are not as firmly attached to their actual identity as they are in a physical setting. This has also been shown as being a reported benefit of Internet sex ads as discussed by Paul et al. (2010). Another possible explanation for this is that individuals tend to seek out other same-role profiles as a manner of assessing what competition that they may have for the attention of those they desire to meet.

The vast majority of user-names for viewers to all four experimental profiles convey the importance of clearly and immediately developing a subordinate or dominant identity. One’s role (i.e., dominant or subordinate) in the on-line BDSM world seems to be the overarching focus of user-names on this on-line BDSM community. Users seem to be actively aware that they must explicitly define their on-line identity as either being a dominant or subordinate as being the primary characteristic with all other characteristics coming secondary. Since the role of dominant or subordinate serves as a master status among the BDSM community, having this role present in one’s user-name is seen as an essential component.

The subject titles of each viewer across all experimental profiles also revealed a number of themes that viewers see as being essential to be present on their profiles. The top two categories for viewers of all experimental profiles were those seeking services and those offering services. This underscores the idea that on-line BDSM communities are primarily about providing a means to find sexual/fetish partners rather than relationship partners. More specifically, most of the profiles are also seeking specific sexual or fantasy-based services with the second most common offering others to contact them for specific sexual or fantasy-based services. At first glance, this may seem like individuals are hoping to build a relationship with other users; however, very few subject titles suggested that users were actively seeking any type of relationship. This suggests that users are primarily or exclusively present in the on-line BDSM communities for sexual purposes. This could mean that users are only wanting to facilitate the website’s use for messaging others about sexual elements, or that they are using the on-line BDSM community as a place to meet potential sexual partners for in-person meetings. Therefore, by including sexualized content, individuals appear to be more likely to be viewed and contacted by other users. As the results of the present study indicate, when the content of subject lines are sexually suggestive they garner more views (and presumably also more communication/contacts) from other users.

Several themes emerge in comparisons of viewers’ profile pictures across all four profiles. The lack of a picture as being the most common of all users that viewed each profile may be explained in several ways. First, this may be an indication of a concern about being identified (and stigmatized) by others viewing the website. Or, the lack of most members’ profiles having included photographs may suggest that they are only creating profiles in order to browse other’s
profile pictures, and that they are not genuinely interested in being an active part of the on-line community. Consequently, they are not interested in engaging with others, but only voyeuristically participating in the BDSM community. Therefore, a picture is essential for those wishing to receive views and contacts from other users, but not for those simply wishing to lurk and view others.

Above all else, it was found that the experimental profiles featuring pictures containing nudity averaged a significantly larger number of total views, as well as more repeated viewers. Therefore, it is safe to assume that having a profile picture featuring nudity is the chief component that makes a profile the most successful in reaching increased viewership. In addition, the fourth profile containing the large and erect penis, as well as having the individual identified as dominant, received substantially more views as well as repeated viewers than the other three profiles. Rather clearly, viewers are more interested in sexually explicit nude photographs and dominant individuals. As a result, photographs featuring nudity and dominant characteristics are the profiles that achieve the most success for increased viewership from other users in this on-line BDSM community. Although these findings are potentially important, the most interesting finding is the large number of individuals who do not have posted profile pictures and are (explicitly) not actively seeking relationships. This finding again suggests that individuals are not participating in the BDSM community for reasons similar to those who attend BDSM clubs where they seek to build personal friendships and relationships with others that share their interests (see Newmahr 2011), but that the fantasy and/or sexual component is the primary reason for individuals partaking in this on-line activity.

Although some interesting insights have been gained regarding what characteristics/content must be present in on-line BDSM personal ads to be successful, there still remains the need for more study. As on-line communities continue to proliferate, and physical clubs seem to be diminishing in popularity (Newmahr 2011), the future of BDSM communities may be primarily in on-line forms. The results of the present study also seemingly contradict Newmahr (2011) that the, “...internet facilities the cultivation and perpetuation of SM communities” (Newmahr 2011:5). This study did not find that on-line BDSM communities are promoting many of the characteristics of physical BDSM communities. What was found in this study could possibly be evidence that the on-line BDSM communities are evolving into something entirely different, which is an impersonal network that revolves solely around the sexualized component of BDSM that is largely absent from physical BDSM communities. In this way, the on-line BDSM community may actually be reinforcing many stereotypes about BDSM, while also addressing the difficulties that those interested in BDSM have locating one another (Lawrence and Love-Crowell 2008).

This study has added to the sparse literature available on BDSM (especially on-line) communities, as well as what content on an individual’s profile is important in successfully attracting viewers to one’s posted profiles. All information points to the continued movement of BDSM participants from the physical settings to the on-line setting due to a greater ease of access, ability to control when relationships occur, and the ability to conceal, construct, and manage one’s identity. The popularity of on-line BDSM is likely to only increase in coming years due to the continued popularity of the Internet. As a result, it is even more important to continue to study what personal ad characteristics and content makes individuals more successful in receiving more viewers and contacts along with the content present in other individuals’ profiles.
REFERENCES


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