



Sexual Fluidity, BDSM and Gender: An Exploratory Study on Portuguese BDSM Practitioners

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Abstract

BDSM constitutes a stigmatized form of sexuality in which sexual fluidity may arise. Noting the scarcity of research on these themes in Portugal, we sought to explore and understand sexual fluidity in people who identified themselves as BDSM practitioners, both in the context of so-called ‘vanilla’ sex and BDSM practice. Using a qualitative methodology, we prepared an online questionnaire disseminated on platforms used by BDSM practitioners, having obtained 54 participants. The data were subjected to content analysis and simple statistical analysis. Three themes emerged from the analysis: the importance of gender in both forms of sexuality, the perception and knowledge about sexual fluidity, and the experience of sexual fluidity. It was found that BDSM practitioners are relatively sexually fluid and demonstrate various sexual behaviors discordant with their romantic and sexual attractions. In addition to this, there were multiple justifications regarding the importance of gender when it comes to their attractions. It was also found that men, regardless of sexual identity, are more sexually fluid than women. This study contributes to the knowledge about BDSM and the deconstruction of categories related to gender and sexual identity, and finally, to the normalization of non-normative sexual practices.

Keywords BDSM · Sexual fluidity · Sexuality · Qualitative method · Vanilla sex

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Introduction

BDSM is an acronym alluding to consensual practices, desires, communities, roles, and meanings concerning bondage and discipline, domination and submission, and/or sadism and masochism (Carlström, 2017; Simula, 2019b). BDSM is multifaceted, heterogeneous, assumes different degrees of importance for those who practice it, and is represented in different interpersonal contexts: it can be a spiritual experience, a form of leisure (Newmahr, 2010; Simula, 2019b; Sprott & Hadcock, 2018), it can serve as foreplay in a sexual context and even be associated with penis-to-vagina intercourse (Cross & Matheson, 2006). It can be a unique experience, an occasional practice, or a lifestyle (Bauer, 2014; Faccio et al., 2014, 2020; Martinez, 2018).

The acronym BDSM is divided in three pairs of practices. *Bondage* refers to the practice of physical restraint and *discipline* to the use of rules and punishment; *domination* and *submission* constitutes the set of interrelated practices connected to a power differential that is sought among the partners; and finally, *sadism* and *masochism* describes the activities related to the infliction or reception of pain and/or humiliation (Cross & Matheson, 2006; Faccio et al., 2014).

Through BDSM, some people explore their desires and boundaries, and others seek to transgress them without being restricted by social conventions (Bauer, 2008; Turley, 2016), or even deploying social conventions to subvert or question them (Cardoso, 2012; Mint, 2007). They also often do so as a challenge to the sexual identity and/or gender binary (Sprott & Hadcock, 2018) present in heteronormative societies, which is aided by the fact that some participants and some modes of BDSM play invest in degenitalizing what can be considered sexual (Holmes et al., 2017).

The view that BDSM is an experience related to sexuality and is only about sex has persisted, even though most practitioners reject this idea (Faccio et al., 2020; Newmahr, 2010). Although it can often be sexual, it is not strictly sex, nor is it reduced to it. This generalization of BDSM as an eminently sexual experience has simplified and complicated the understanding of the specific and individual meanings of BDSM activities and experiences of practitioners (Faccio et al., 2020). As Mahler (2020, p. 6) puts it, “[e]ven when the genitals are involved in kink, they are used in a way that queers normal assumptions about sex and sexuality.”

The Heteronormative Model of Sexuality

Sexuality is organized into systems of power that reward and encourage some individuals and activities while punishing and suppressing others (Rubin, 2006). Intimate and sexual relationships have a plurality of forms, yet many lie beyond the boundaries defined by the heteronormative model of sexuality (Damm et al., 2018). Heteronormativity is a concept and power structure interposed in society that functions as a worldview about sexuality by celebrating and privileging specific forms of heterosexual relationships, identities, and practices, positing the heterosexual couple as the primary social unit of society (Bauer, 2014; Diamond, 2008). Therefore, the labeling of sexual identity functions as a social, cultural, and cognitive invention that performs distinct functions in distinct environments (Diamond, 2008). In this sense, we can understand sexuality as a historically and culturally situated invention - a

schema that purports to analyze and regulate sexual activities along a positivist model centered on reproductive sex, and on a supposedly immanent ‘truth’ about subjects that is hidden behind sexual desire (Foucault, 1994).

In Western cultures, there is an expectation that heterosexual men and heterosexual women will perform, respectively, hegemonic masculinity and femininity in all aspects of their lives, including sexual behavior (Martinez, 2018). The male-female gender binarism emerges to produce social and sexual differences between men and women through the fragmentation of the body, that are ideologically affirmed as a natural fact of life, which contributes to the reinforcement of the idea of desire between men and women (Butler, 2017; Firmino & Porchat, 2017; Preciado, 2017). Therefore, the social understanding of sex is defined by the heteronormative tradition of binary thinking that depends on sexual identity categories centered on gender identity and biological sex (Better & Simula, 2015; Bauer, 2014; Simula, 2019a). Hence, this model is limiting because it fails to accurately reach each person’s experiences, preferences, and identifications, forcing them to identify as exclusively homosexual or exclusively heterosexual, which does not represent people’s life experiences (Better & Simula, 2015; Savin-Williams, 2017). Furthermore, it counterfactually considers sexual identity as the sole determinant of sexuality (Better & Simula, 2015; Diamond, 2008) eliminating the various nuances that make up a person’s sexual experience (van Anders, 2015; Diamond, 2008; Savin-Williams, 2017) such as, but not limited to, sexual attraction, romantic attraction, sexual behavior, and sexual fantasy; or the ways in which it foregrounds gender as the only, or main, framework of sexual orientation.

According to this system, and in our current Western framework, sexuality and sex that is ‘good’, ‘normal’, and ‘natural’ is between two monogamous, opposite-sex, able-bodied people of the same ‘race’, of the same generation, imagined to be egalitarian in a private setting and non-commercial (Bauer, 2008; Rubin, 2006). Any sex that violates these rules is still considered ‘bad’, ‘abnormal’ or ‘unnatural’ (Rubin, 2006). BDSM violates the ideal of harmonic sex and other related social norms such as fixed sexual preference, reproductively derived sex which centers on genital stimulation or the sexual context as private and within a monogamous romantic dyad (Bauer, 2008), and opens space for troubling the notion that some parts of the body are inherently more ‘sexual’ than others (Cardoso, 2018). As recent research shows (Sprott et al., 2021), not all of those who engage in kink connect it to the category of sex, and even those who do, do so in various ways, often connected to their gender and/or sexual identity.

Thus, although sexuality is presumed to conform to a single standard, despite variation being a central property of life (Rubin, 2006), we see, in fact, that it is dynamic, changeable, flexible, and fluid (Better & Simula, 2015; Diamond, 2008; Faccio et al., 2020). Anyone can experience desires that contradict their sexual identity, and sexual identity itself can change over one’s life course (Diamond, 2008).

Sexual Fluidity and BDSM

Sexual fluidity is the concept that defines a broad flexibility and variability of sexuality, attitudes, and practices considered sexual with the same sex and the other sex,

depending on the context, circumstances, and the period of life in which the person is (Diamond, 2008; Savin-Williams, 2017). One of the key characteristics of human sexual nature is its ability to expand and broaden opportunities for satisfaction and pleasure throughout a lifetime, therefore, in receptive environments, fluidity can create opportunities for self-discovery and reflection (Diamond, 2008).

BDSM is associated with gender and sexual binaries through early socialization in the context of a dualistic culture (Martinez, 2018). However, the roles that are practiced in BDSM do not always dictate, nor are they dictated, by gender or sexual identity (Carlström, 2017; Meeker, 2011). In Zambelli's (2017) research, participants practiced BDSM with partners whose gender was consistent with their sexual identity, however, it should be noted that some heterosexual women engaged in BDSM or erotic interactions (e.g., kissing and fondling) with other women during activities. In Better and Simula's (2015) study, participants often overtly rejected heterosexuality as an identity category in favor of identifications beyond gender. They even found several instances where their experiences in BDSM did not fit their sexual identity. Although participants reported monosexual identities (heterosexual and homosexual), they engaged in BDSM activities with partners of any gender, as they chose them based on the role they identify with (e.g., dominant, submissive) and not based on their sexual identity (Simula, 2012, 2019a). According to the findings of Ritchie and Barker (2005), most of the people participating in their study revealed that they had had BDSM experiences with both men and women. Chaline (2010) similarly found that many of the people in her research had, in both BDSM and non-BDSM contexts, experienced homosexual, heterosexual, and bisexual behaviors that were not in line with their sexual identity. It has been found that people who practice BDSM tend and are more likely to adopt more bisexual behaviors in BDSM contexts than in other settings involving sexualized activities (Simula, 2012). Furthermore, they often only engage in these types of activities with both men and women in BDSM settings (Simula, 2012).

Unlike what the normative model of (hetero)sexuality determines, one's BDSM identity or role can be the most important aspect of engaging in kinky practices, compared to social categories such as gender and sexual identity; depending on the contexts and participants, gender might not be the most important factor and even be irrelevant to the practice and choice of partners (Better & Simula, 2015; Carlström, 2017; Newmahr, 2010; Simula, 2012, 2019a; Simula & Sumerau, 2017; Sprott & Hadcock, 2018). A disjunction is developed between the sexual identity of practitioners and their BDSM identity, thereby challenging the heterosexual and homosexual binary and the centrality of gender in sexual identities, practices, and relationships (Better & Simula, 2015; Simula, 2012). Practitioners who lessen gender importance emphasize other factors to conceptualize BDSM as a practice in which roles are the focus and to explain their experiences, play styles, desires, and roles within their communities (Simula & Sumerau, 2017). Depending on the interpersonal and situational dynamics, a person can connect to a diverse range of genders, regardless of their sexual identity (Sprott & Hadcock, 2018). It should be noted, however, that despite many practitioners decentering and resisting the reification of gender in BDSM, it continues to shape its experiences in many ways (Simula, 2019a): there are, for example, cases where the gender of the other person is a socially important

category, as some participants hold gender-essentialist perspectives that link particular gender identities to specific BDSM roles (Simula, 2012).

Conceptually, “having sex” and “sexual” are different concepts. “Sexual” is a term that covers a series of acts performed alone, between two or several people of different genders that entail a visible use of the body (e.g., masturbation, copulation, sodomy, genital contact either oral or manual, signs like suggestive glances or smiles) but that can also occur in the imaginary and the symbolic with no visible bodily manifestations (Godelier, 2003). When it comes to the meaning of sex and what people define as “having sex” there is a significant disparity (Simula, 2019a). Nonetheless, there is a prevailing systematization of sexual behaviors considered to be more constituent of sex: penile-vaginal intercourse, subsequently penile-anal intercourse, and, to a lesser extent, oral-genital contact (there is however significant disagreement about the status of oral-genital contact) (Barnett et al., 2017; Bogart et al., 2000; Gute et al., 2008; Horowitz & Spicer, 2013; Sanders & Reinisch, 1999; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007; Trotter & Alderson, 2007). On the other hand, individuals’ definitions of sex can be inconsistent and influenced by personal motives (Gute et al., 2008; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007) and it can vary by gender (Gute et al., 2008; Sanders & Reinisch, 1999) and sexual identity (Hill et al., 2010; Horowitz & Spicer, 2013; Sewell et al., 2017). These processes of meaning-making do not, however, occur in a social and historical void - Preciado (2017) talks about how the normative and widely-shared definition of what counts as “having sex” is, in itself, a form of heterosexual domination, aimed at creating a perception of difference (between ‘male’ and ‘female’) which normalizes gendered power imbalances. Therefore, what is construed as the opposite of kink is ‘vanilla sex’, which tends to be centered and constructed around genitally based activities; this term is often used by BDSM practitioners to refer to non-BDSM sex (Simula, 2019a). Such a dichotomous logic can be seen as a product of stigma, whereby discriminated-against groups challenge the terms of their own supposed deviance by claiming some form of superiority over the hegemonic group (Mustanski et al., 2014).

Each individual has their own delineation of boundaries between sexual and non-sexual experiences and behaviors, influenced by a range of factors such as culture, age, gender and sexual identity (Simula, 2019a), therefore what constitutes a sexual act or sex will depend on each individual (Bauer, 2008). BDSM practitioners who engage in non-BDSM sexual activities according to their sexual identity, but who, in BDSM activities, choose partners of a variety of genders, often differentiate between sex and sexual (Simula, 2012, 2019a), giving different meanings and purposes to both experiences (Simula, 2019a).

BDSM, when constructed as sexual by practitioners, consists of activities and experiences not associated with normative sexual pleasure, that is, activities that do not involve physical and/or sexual arousal centered on genitality (Simula, 2019a), nor on appearance as a source of sexual desire (Bauer, 2008; Monteiro Pascoal et al., 2015), but which can nevertheless be experienced as sexual (Simula, 2012).

BDSM is considered by those who engage in it as unique and satisfying because it precisely provides methods of sexual arousal and fulfillment that do not necessarily require sexual intercourse, genital contact, or orgasms (Simula, 2019a) but which

allow the realization of fantasies that, while on the surface might not be considered sexual, have deep erotic connections for those involved (Turley, 2016).

There is no single BDSM sexuality and identity, but rather multiple fluid sexualities that constantly transform, shape, and reposition themselves (Chaline, 2010): sexual identifications and identities are fluid over the course of life, as they vary depending on the types of activities performed and the contexts in which people find themselves (Simula, 2012; van Anders, 2015). Thus, it is found that BDSM can provide the exploration of boundaries, limits, and taboos (Carlström, 2017) and offer space for non-dualistic presentations of the Self (Martinez, 2018). This exploration can, in turn, be seen as fertile grounds for sexually fluid behaviors and identities - which is what this article will now focus on.¹

Current Study

Although growth has been verified in BDSM and sexual fluidity studies, in Portugal, studies on this theme are still scarce. Furthermore, this scarcity is even greater at the national and international level when both constructs are associated. To address the lack of research about BDSM and sexual fluidity, the current study seeks to contribute to deconstructing a limiting model of sexuality and the scientific literature on BDSM. This study aims to describe and understand the sexual fluidity of BDSM practitioners, recruited in Portugal, both in a BDSM context and in a vanilla context, to verify if this sexual fluidity is only provided by BDSM or if it is a transversal characteristic of the way the practitioner experiences sexuality. Specifically, we intend to (1) analyze the importance of gender in romantic attraction, sexual attraction, and the practice of BDSM; (2) understand practitioners' experience of sexual fluidity; and (3) understand practitioners' knowledge of sexual fluidity.

For this research, we considered it pertinent to use a qualitative approach, with the study being descriptive and exploratory. This option will allow us to unravel the meanings attributed to sexual fluidity and the experimentation that occurs during one's life concerning one's sexuality and to explore them in a population that has been little studied.

In order to reach potential participants, the study was disclosed in two Discord servers, in two Portuguese groups in the social network Fetlife and on the Instagram page of the podcast *Rambóia com Moderação*. We used a structured online questionnaire specifically prepared for this research, with open and closed questions. The questionnaire is composed of several characterization questions, both sociodemographic (six questions) and related to BDSM (six questions), and specific questions that seek to answer the three research questions (twenty-five questions). The latter group of questions asked the participants their knowledge about sexual fluidity; under what circumstances did sexual fluidity occur, what were their motives for it, and whether that experience raised any questions regarding their sexual identity; it was also asked whether or not gender is important in feeling both sexual and romantic attraction to

¹The first author's master's thesis (Marujo & Oliveira, 2022), which is available at the University of Porto's Open Repository, served as the basis for this paper.

someone, in both ‘vanilla sex’ and BDSM context, and why; and lastly, whether or not gender is considered important specifically in BDSM *plays* and why. A pre-test of the questionnaire was administered to two BDSM practitioners to receive their feedback and increase the effectiveness of the data collection instrument.

Lastly, for this study, we do not associate the “sexual” on sexual fluidity with only sex, but with practices that belong to one of the multiple gradients that compose sexuality, in this case: kink-identification (people who engage in BDSM both within a framework of identity or orientation); as research shows, kink can be a sexuality parameter by which a person chooses their partners (van Anders, 2015). Each individual can determine the centrality that BDSM *as a* sexual practice holds for them, depending or not on specific practices. Regardless, we do not eliminate data of people who experience BDSM solely as a non-sexual act. Diamond’s (2008) definition, on the other hand, focuses on the same sex and other sex, but in the present study, we will focus on gender (e.g., attracted to the same gender or the other[s] gender[s]). Sexual behavior does not limit itself to sex or genital contact only.

Participants

The participants were selected based on three inclusion criteria (Patton, 2002): they had to auto-identify as BDSM practitioners, be 18 years old or older, and be able to read and write in Portuguese. Through a convenience sampling technique (Patton, 2002), we obtained 54 participants.

The participants were aged between 18 and 56 ($M=33,1$; $SD=9,4$). As for nationality, 93% are Portuguese, two people from Brazil, one from Spain, and another from France. Regarding gender identity, 43% are cisgender women, and another 43% are cisgender men, 9% are non-binary people, and 2% are trans women. Finally, regarding their sexual identity, 48% of the sample is heterosexual, 26% is bisexual, and 20% is pansexual; the remaining 6% are evenly divided into the categories gynosexual, questioning, and unlabeled. More than half (68.5%) of the respondents have a higher education degree, 30% have a secondary education, and the remaining 1.5% of the sample has a third-level education. Comparatively with the Portuguese population, this sample is privileged: only 21.20% of the Portuguese population has a higher education degree (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2022) which may influence the collected data.

Analyses Strategies

To examine the data, we used Bardin’s categorical content analysis (2011). This technique allows, through systematic and objective procedures, the production of inferences about the content of documents, interviews, and surveys (Mutti & Caregnato, 2006).

Content analysis is composed of three key stages: pre-analysis, material exploration, and, finally, data processing and interpretation. In the first stage, we performed a floating reading of the data corpus to establish first contact with the content. In the second phase, the objective is to write down the units of register and, through a second reading, possible units of register were underlined, ideas, patterns were written

down and categories were sketched. Subsequently, in the third phase, the registration units were reorganized, and the categorization of the data was performed, forming the final categories. Finally, a description of the categories and themes was carried out. Three themes emerged from the analysis: (1) The importance of gender in both forms of sexuality; (2) The perception and knowledge about sexual fluidity; and (3) The experience of sexual fluidity.

Lastly, the sociodemographic data and the dichotomous closed answers (yes or no) were subjected to a simple statistical analysis (percentages) through Microsoft Excel.

Results

BDSM Identity Characterization

Most of the participants in this study (67%) framed BDSM as a sexual practice. About 54% of the people considered BDSM a lifestyle. Approximately 22% defined it as being both a non-sexual and sexual practice. In fact, none of the participants defined BDSM as solely non-sexual for them. Lastly, 17% selected BDSM as being simultaneously (1) a sexual practice, (2) a non-sexual practice, and (3) a lifestyle, showing the plurality of meanings and experiences that people connect with BDSM. Some noted that BDSM serves as an “extra to spice up the relationship” (P20), or that it is a “relational component, namely through the practice of Shibari in a non-sexual context, for example” (P51).

As for the role they identify themselves with in BDSM at the time they filled out the questionnaire, 39% identify themselves with roles in the submission spectrum (e.g., submissive, bottom, slave, brat, rope bunny, prey, degradee), 24% identify with roles in the domination spectrum (e.g., Dominant, sadist, Top, Master, brat tamer, rigger, hunter, degrader), and finally, 37% identify as switchers. Of the 54 people who answered the questionnaire, 63% have always identified with that role. Six people (11%) had previously identified with the switcher role and were currently exclusively Dominant or exclusively submissive. Four people (7%) had already identified with roles in the submissive spectrum and are currently switchers.

Three respondents showed a certain fluidity with their role in BDSM: one person mentioned that her role changes depending on the gender of the person she practices with (“Submissive with men, dominant with women” [P37]) and another mentioned that although she identified with a role in the submission spectrum, she “occasionally managed to be dominant” (P43); there was also an opposite experience, where the participant “tend[s] to be a Dom 90% of the time however there are cases where [he’s] a sub” (P47).

When asked how long they had been practicing BDSM, the answers ranged from one to 34 years ($M=9.3$; $SD=7.7$). In this study, 49% of the people had been practicing BDSM continuously, and the rest had periods when they stopped practicing. Some reported stopping when they had children (P38), due to having a “vanilla partner” (P16) or depending on whether they had partners or if those partners enjoyed the same type of BDSM engagement: “It depends on the relationships I have, some part-

ners wouldn't venture that way. I would say that there are 'calmer' periods" (P47). Furthermore, 68.5% of the people consider themselves part of a BDSM community.

Importance of Gender in 'Vanilla' Sex and BDSM

This topic will analyze the importance of gender in 'vanilla' sex and BDSM, in different dimensions. In 'vanilla' sex we look at the importance of gender for sexual attraction and romantic attraction. On the other hand, in BDSM it is analyzed in relation to sexual attraction, romantic attraction and, lastly, in *plays/practices*.

Table 1 shows the results of the dichotomous [yes/no] questions regarding whether gender is important in the three mentioned dimensions. These values will be analyzed in the following subtopics along with the categorical analysis carried out on the questions about why gender is or is not important to the participants.

'Vanilla' Sex

About 83% of the people surveyed engage in so-called 'vanilla'² sex. Of that percentage, 64% consider the gender of the person as an essential factor in feeling romantically attracted, while 36% said that it is not important. When it comes to sexual attraction, 55% consider that the gender of the other person is important and 45% say it is not. Therefore, we verify lower values for the importance of gender in romantic attraction and higher values for the irrelevance of gender in sexual attraction.

Generally, we found more categories for romantic attraction than for sexual attraction. When gender is essential to the romantic attraction experienced, not only «attraction» (e.g., "I have never been attracted to a gender other than female to the point of romantic involvement" [P25]) and «heterosexual sexual identity» (e.g., "For the fact that I'm straight" [P2]) were indicated as the reason, but also the «personality characteristics» of the other person (e.g., "Different individuals arouse different levels of intimacy in me (...) depending on the circumstances of my life I may prefer to be more with women, men or non-binary people" [P21]); the «connection between romantic attraction and gender», not separating the two types of attraction from behavior (e.g., "Because vanilla sex occurs with those I love" [P29]); «reproduction» (P5), that is, when one is romantically attracted only to a sex with which

Table 1 Comparison between 'Vanilla' Sex and BDSM in terms of gender importance

	'Vanilla' Sex		BDSM		
	Romantic Attraction	Sexual Attraction	Romantic Attraction	Sexual Attraction	Plays/ Practices
Gender is Important	64%	55%	67%	56%	54%
Gender is not Important	36%	45%	33%	44%	46%

Note. This table demonstrates the percentage values for the importance of gender in romantic and sexual attraction in 'vanilla' sex; and for the importance of gender in romantic and sexual attractions and BDSM *plays/practices* in the BDSM context

² As previously noted, we deploy here the term "vanilla sex" not to reference a specific set of sexual acts which are immanently not-kinky, but to denote how the BDSM community often talks about sexual acts which are *perceived* as not being part of the BDSM spectrum.

one can reproduce; and, finally, the respondent's «own gender identity» as a definer of the gender to which one would be attracted (e.g., “Because of the gender I identify with” [P26]), denoting gender roles and heterosexuality imposed by a heteronormative society. When gender is considered irrelevant, more than half of the respondents answered «people and their personality traits» (e.g., “My life experience has allowed me to adopt a vision that goes beyond the physical. Each person is a universe contained in a body and it is not social norms and expectations that determine my attraction.” [P43]; “What attracts me in another partner is not their gender but the person (...), their mannerism, their emotional and psychological intelligence as well as their ideals” [P1]), followed by the «interactions and affection» exchanged during the relationship as more essential than gender (e.g., “The person I love will always be the person I love, I have romantic attraction to our interactions over time” [P39]; “I am attracted by affection, by what we do together, by words, bodies matter, because nudity is beautiful, bodies are beautiful, but gender or sexual organ no, I like everything” [P35]); one person mentioned his «attraction» (e.g., “I am attracted to both genders, both cis and trans” [P16]), and another emphasized the «irrelevance of physical appearance» to feel romantically attracted to someone (e.g., “Attraction may not be visual” [P24]).

Finally, regarding sexual attraction, when gender is important, the only categories emerging from the data were «attraction» (e.g., “Because I am only attracted to women” [P27]; “I’m only attracted to men” [P44]) and «heterosexual sexual identity» (e.g., “My sexual orientation (hetero) guides my interactions. (...)” [P49]). However, when gender is unimportant, «attraction» (e.g., “Despite having a preference for one gender, (...) does not imply that gender is important” [P16]; “I can’t imagine having a romantic relationship with someone other than a man but on a sexual level I am attracted to other women” [P6]), «people and their personality traits» (e.g., “(...) the idea that I still carry intrinsic to each body type (more femme or masculine) makes me feel different things and, that makes me want to do different things, but I don’t feel that there is more or less attraction (...)” [P35]; “I fall in love with personalities” [P38]) and «pansexual sexual identity» (e.g., “I am pansexual. The human body is fun to explore, whatever the sex and gender” [P43]) were the answers.

When gender is considered important, in both sexual and romantic attraction, approximately half of the respondents reported their own attraction to a specific gender as the reason, which explains gender as the determining factor. It should be noted, however, that when gender is irrelevant to feeling sexual attraction to another person, attraction remains the answer of half of the respondents. This happens because they feel attraction for several genders or because practitioners consider sexual attraction “more neutral than romantic” (P32) and show greater flexibility in sexual attraction than romantic attraction: “I can’t imagine having a romantic relationship with someone who wasn’t a man but, on a sexual level, I am attracted to other women” (P6). Secondly, also for both types of attraction, sexual identity, in this case heterosexual, emerges as a guide to the interactions and attractions they feel toward others.

BDSM

Regarding BDSM, experienced by the totality of the sample studied, 67% of the participants refer that the gender of the person is important to feel romantically attracted, and 33% refer that it is not. As for sexual attraction, 56% consider gender is important and the remaining 44% consider it not important. Finally, in what concerns BDSM *plays/practices*, 54% states that gender is important and 46% states that gender is not important to perform BDSM activities, which is close to the values of sexual attraction.

In general, more categories were found for BDSM than for 'vanilla' sex. In this subtheme, the importance of gender in BDSM *plays/practices* was also ascertained.

When gender is considered crucial for the romantic attraction experienced, categories such as «attraction» (e.g., “I feel sentimental attraction only for the opposite sex” [P23] and “My attraction leans towards people with vulva” [P49] and “Because I am heteroromantic” [P13]), «BDSM role/practice» (e.g., “Today I am only interested in dominating women” [P50], “the characteristics typically associated with a person’s gender fulfill different needs in me and this affects my perception of people. In bdsm I tend to prefer men to women. Mainly because I more easily feel submissive with men” [P21], “My owner has to be a man [P44]), «connection between sex and attraction» (e.g., “I can’t see myself performing sexual or similar acts with someone of the same gender” [P26]), «heterosexual sexual identity» (e.g., “I am heterosexual, so the gender of the other person is fundamental” [P45]), «intensity of the BDSM experience» (e.g., “Promotes the intensity of the experience” [P10]), «people and their characteristics» (e.g., “Although bisexual, my attraction to men, women and non-binary people varies with the person’s presentation” [P32]), and «flexibility» in the level of romantic attraction they might feel toward other genders (e.g., “I have no attraction for the opposite sex, the only exception is if the person presents very, very well with a feminine appearance, otherwise there will be no attraction” [P5]), emerge from the data. When gender is not important, the categories «people and their characteristics» (e.g., “(...) intelligence, humour are factors of attraction that I consider in the face of not considering gender” [P15]) and the «BDSM role/practice» (e.g., “Men or women can be both submissive and dominant, and that always excites” [P36] and “The emotion and sensations I associate with BDSM are not based on the characteristics of the individual but on the activities I perform.” [P11]) emerge as the equally pointed reason, followed by the «feeling of trust in the person» (e.g., “In BDSM you need trust above all.” [P39]), the «compatibility and emotional connection» (e.g., “I don’t tie myself to the concept of the person’s gender being determinant of my romantic attraction. What matters is the connection with the person” [P31]), the «intimate relationship» (e.g., “The important thing in bdsm is the intimate relationship and not whether the person has a specific gender or not. Factors like affection, concern, (...) are much more important” [P16]) and, finally, the «bisexual sexual identity» (e.g., “I’m bisexual” [P30]).

On the other hand, when it comes to sexual attraction, gender is important due to the «attraction» felt towards a certain gender (e.g., “Greater development of sexual attraction in BDSM with cisgender men” [P28]), the «BDSM role/practice» (e.g., “I only do with men, bdsm I do not accept with women” [P42] and “I don’t like

power play with people of the same gender” [P18]), as the «heterosexual sexual identity» (e.g., “Sexual preference” [P51]), the «compatibility and emotional connection» established only with a certain gender (e.g., “It has to fit perfectly (...)” [P24]), the «trust» needed in BDSM (e.g., “(...) have 100% confidence in both directions” [P24]) and «flexibility» in the level of sexual attraction they might feel toward other genders [P5].

In contrast, when gender is not crucial, «people and their characteristics» (e.g., “I value, as a priority, a dominating personality, regardless of gender, sexual orientation or physical appearance” [P48]), the «quality and willingness to practice BDSM» (e.g., “The attraction in these circumstances starts from the availability of the person to participate in BDSM activities and how much the person knows about them (...)” [P11] and “The physicality of the person does not imply that the type of role they play ‘is poorly practiced’ or whether or not they are good practitioners” [P39]), the «compatibility and emotional connection» (e.g., “(...) I am not tied to the concept of gender (...) What matters is the connection with the person” [P31]), the «partner’s physiognomy» (e.g., “Gender doesn’t interfere with the attraction I feel for the person, but their physiognomy does. I have a more or totally submissive tendency (...) and this leads me to feel more in the space of submission when I am with at least one person who is bigger and stronger than me, who can grab me and do whatever they want with me. However, someone weaker and smaller has already dominated me, it’s the attitude that matters, but there was a ‘big’ person present, so I don’t know how I would feel being with just the ‘small’ person.” [P35]) the «attraction» (e.g., “Because I am attracted to people of all genders” [P13]) and the «bisexual sexual identity» (e.g., “As a bisexual on a sexual level I like both genders” [P16]) were the answers.

Finally, when gender is essential for BDSM *plays/practices*, it is not only because of the «attraction» (e.g., “It has a big impact for me, for reasons of attraction and experience with both sexes, my preference is much more in favour of the female sex than for the male” [P5] and “I need to feel desire.” [P23]) and the «BDSM role/practice» (e.g., “I don’t like power plays with people of the same gender. If they are present, the plays are neutral towards me (but may be top or bottom towards someone else I am interacting with)” [P18]; “Different genders induce different dominant or submissive responses” [P32]; “Although I have practiced BDSM with several different people of different genders and orientations, I feel that when I practice it with men I feel better. I feel more sub than if I were with a woman for example” [P21]; and “Bdsm only gives me pleasure with men (...)” [P42]), but also because of the «heterosexual sexual identity» of the respondents (e.g., “Personal sexual orientation” [P46]), as the «connection between sex and sexual», associating BDSM with sexual activities and thus associating it with sexual identity (e.g., “I can’t see myself performing sexual or similar acts with someone of the same gender.” [P26]).

Additionally, when gender is not fundamental, «compatibility and emotional connection» (e.g., “The important thing is to have a connection with the person, whether this is a friendship or something more” [P6]), «people and their personality characteristics» (e.g., “Confidence, intelligence, humour are attraction factors that I consider in the face of not considering gender” [P15]), the fact that they don’t consider «BDSM as sex» (e.g., “For me play has nothing to do with sex and is independent” [P10]) and an activity that they «do not associate with romance» (e.g., “Lack of

romanticism associated” [P22]), as well as the «quality of the practice», are presented as reasons, together with the «BDSM role/practice» (e.g., “What is in vogue at the moment is not sexuality but practice. The practice is pleasurable with either gender.” [P2]; “Because it’s the activity itself that turns me on. Although sometimes I may prefer men or women, but that depends on the type of activity itself” [P11]; and “What matters is the role it plays in the dynamic, gender does not determine it” [P35]).

When gender is important, «attraction» again emerges as the justification for close to half of the people for both sexual attraction, romantic attraction, and BDSM *plays/practices*. When not essential, «people and their personality traits» are key for sexual and romantic attractions. For plays the BDSM role/practice will be the most important over gender.

Sexual Fluidity

Knowledge About Sexual Fluidity

Most of the participants, 74%, reported that they knew the definition of sexual fluidity. However, only one person was able to provide the full definition. Respondents focused on different aspects of sexual fluidity, still demonstrating a good knowledge of what it is. A quarter of the respondents focused on the «contextual and time-related nature» of sexual fluidity (e.g., “It denies the idea that sexual orientation is a static phenomenon, opting for the conceptualization of sexuality as a ‘liquid’ process, assuming as possible and legitimate the processes of variation in sexual interest.” [P12]), they also focused on «experimentation» with genders other than the one dictated by their sexual identity (e.g., “Someone willing to have acts with people whose gender/sex is not preferred.” [P9]), «flexibility» in terms of the gender they are attracted to regardless of sexual identity (e.g., “It is based on the flexibility of attraction, a person can identify as straight and yet have sexual tendencies with the same gender/sex. It does not mean that there is a fixed level of attraction, it can be momentary/temporary” [P47]), as well as «long-term change in sexual identity» (e.g., “The change of a person’s sexual identity” [P3]). On the other hand, there were participants who wrote definitions that did not come close to any point of sexual fluidity: a quarter of them responded with the definition of pansexuality (e.g., “Sexual attraction independent of gender” [P7]), and some people wrote the definition of unlabeled (e.g., “Absence of watertight and permanent/definitive/taxative categorizations of sexual orientation” [P28]), genderfluid (e.g., “Identification with more than one gender on a personal level” [P46]) or focused on the difference between sexual attraction and romantic attraction (e.g., “When it comes to sexual matters you can like a lot of things in that field, it doesn’t mean that it is on a romantic or relational level” [P38]).

As for identifying with the concept, 44% of the people said that they identified with the definition presented. According to the respondents, this was due to their sexual identity (i.e., pansexual, bisexual, sapiosexual)³ (e.g., “I feel I am covered by

³ It is noteworthy that the respondents were the ones who mentioned that their experience of sexual fluidity was based on their non-monosexual sexual identity. Being pansexual or bisexual is not equivalent to being

the above definition so I do not attach myself to any label. I choose the label pansexual to identify myself” [P15]), the oscillation felt in sexual attraction in relation to people’s genders (e.g., “I’ve never been tied down to what a person is supposed to be attracted to, it’s more a question that oscillates with the stages of life and the people around you” [P31]; “Sexuality is a changeable thing, with different stages throughout life and therefore interests that can change.” (P34); and “Depending on different moments or contexts in life we may end up having sexual relations different from our orientation” [P25]) and their BDSM role. Another two respondents reported identifying with the definition even though they had never had the opportunity to realize it (e.g., “For example, in an MMF threesome, in a high state of arousal, it would be possible to kiss another man. It hasn’t happened yet, but I understand and don’t rule out this possibility” [P49]).

Sexual Fluidity Experience in ‘Vanilla’ Sex and BDSM

‘Vanilla’ Sex

In so-called ‘vanilla’ sex, regardless of whether gender is important or not, 20% reported the practice of sexual behaviors with people whose gender does not agree with their sexual identity. Of these, 64% are heterosexual and cisgender people, 72% are men and 28% are women. Of the remaining 36%, corresponding to people from sexual minorities (i.e., respondents who are not cisgender and/or heterosexual), exactly half are men and half are women. None of the non-binary people experienced sexual fluidity.

Although fetish conceptually is not considered ‘vanilla’ sex, it was indicated by the respondents as one of the reasons for experiencing sexual fluidity, further demonstrating the constructed nature of these categories. On the other hand, pleasure-seeking (e.g., “Pleasure-seeking does not have to have a defined gender, even though I am mostly attracted to women” [P24]), “experimentation” (P5), «attraction» felt (e.g., “I am attracted sexually, but never romantically. Sexual and emotional are distinct in this case” [P18]), and context (e.g., “Depending on the moment, desire may arise.” [P23]) were the other answers given for experiencing sexual fluidity. This fluidity is provided by social contexts, such as “parties and events” (P7), or in group sex, which again, because it is non-monogamous activity, it’s not scientifically considered ‘vanilla’ sex. Only two out of ten responded that this sexual fluidity triggered questioning about their sexual identity.

BDSM

In BDSM, regardless of whether gender is important, 31% reported practicing sexual behaviors with people whose gender does not agree with their sexual identity. Of these, 77% are heterosexual and cisgender people, 54% are men and 46% are women. Of the remaining 23%, corresponding to people from sexual minorities, 75% are men and 25% are women. None of the non-binary people experienced sexual fluidity.

sexually fluid as defined in this paper. This is further debated in the Discussion.

The reasons given by half of the respondents were the BDSM role or practice itself (e.g., “Sadistic practices, bondage and domination” [P7]; “Because I obey the Master and I feel good about it.” [P23]; and “Because I like the Bull/Cuck interaction.” [P41]), pleasure-seeking (e.g., “(...) pleasure-seeking has nothing to do [with gender]” [P24] and “For the pleasure of the practice” [P50]), experimentation (e.g., “To experiment” [P18]), and compatibility, both on a sexual and emotional level (e.g., “I take sexual and emotional compatibility as a priority” [P1]).

This fluidity derives from several circumstances: one-third of the respondents mentioned the BDSM context as an inciter of sexual fluidity (e.g., “(...) Tying people” [P10]; “Domestic service and forced feminisation” [P14]; “shibari” [P50]), and the rest mentioned group sex, social context [e.g., “Meetings with couples with different sexual orientations” [P48]], workshops about BDSM and certain practices or kinks, invitations from others, romantic relationships and the online context itself. Others mentioned that it happens occasionally (e.g., “On subsequent occasions it was on more casual terms in a playful context (...)” [P5]).

Of the twelve respondents who claimed to have experienced sexual fluidity in a BDSM context, only one mentioned that the sexual fluidity experienced led to questioning their sexuality. This respondent had already responded in the same way when asked about ‘vanilla’ sex. For another person, the sexual fluidity experience helped “confirm that I am straight” (P17). Approximately half of the respondents who experienced sexual fluidity in BDSM mentioned that it occurred in certain practices only (e.g., “To all without a sexual component” [P14]; “In a group context or rope bondage (...)” [P49]) and the rest mentioned that it happened in all practices.

Discussion

In this paper, we aimed to explore and understand sexual fluidity in people who identified themselves as BDSM practitioners, both in the context of so-called ‘vanilla’ sex and BDSM practice.

BDSM practitioners considered BDSM to be both a sexual activity and a non-sexual activity. For many, it was majorly part of what they saw as sexual or a lifestyle, even. Airaksinen (2017) states in his research that, depending on the experiences and meanings that each participant attaches to BDSM, it is possible to view it as an experience that can range from non-sexual to fully sexual. Thus, each person has their own delineation of boundaries between sexual and non-sexual experiences and behaviors (Simula, 2019a). However, this contradicts some studies (Faccio et al., 2020; Newmahr, 2010) that refer that there is a division among practitioners regarding the way they characterize BDSM: on one side, practitioners who exclude any activity with a sexual nature and, on the other side, practitioners who see BDSM as potentially sexual, but do not consider this sexual nature as a fundamental aspect of the experience.

While almost no one could give the full definition of sexual fluidity, most respondents had an idea about this construct and almost half identified with its definition. This data is important because, although people do not have complete theoretical knowledge about this construct, they recognize it in their lives and experience it,

thereby troubling the heteronormative model concerning the way to experience sexuality. That is, despite their experience, they do not necessarily seek a conceptual meaning for it. These results corroborate the findings of Katz-Wise and colleagues (2019) who state that people who experience sexual fluidity usually have specific beliefs and attitudes related to sexual fluidity or sets of ideas that are closely related to sexual fluidity but do not define it (e.g., choice regarding sexual identity, uncertainty regarding future sexual identity). Thus, although the respondents in our study are not fully aware of the definition, they have several beliefs and attitudes related to sexual fluidity that may contribute to their experience and identification with it. As one participant said: “The freedom to live sexuality in whatever way makes the most sense at that moment without being bound by labels” (P15) or, as another participant commented, “I like to believe that we are all a spectrum, and like a scale, we can all balance along the spectrum.” (P39). These data is significant as it contrasts with the lack of studies on people’s knowledge of the concept of sexual fluidity.

It is noteworthy that although some participants refer to their sexual identity as a way of experiencing sexual fluidity, categories such as bisexuality, sapiosexuality, and pansexuality denote stable sexual identities that do not depend on context or time frame. Therefore, that is not considered sexual fluidity, since sexual fluidity is a characteristic that leads a person to experience attraction to a gender that does not correspond to their sexual identity, in certain contexts and periods (Diamond, 2016) and not a stable sexual identity.

Regarding sexual fluidity, more studies are conducted in a ‘vanilla’ sex context than in a BDSM context. In this study, a more significant presence of sexual fluidity was found in BDSM than in ‘vanilla’ sex. For example, the experience of participant 11 when stating: “I feel that, being bi, I have always paid little attention to the sexual orientation and gender of the partners I have had. I feel good in BDSM scenarios independently of the sexual characteristics of the people I’m with”, although afterward he says that this sexual fluidity happens “mainly in BDSM because I am a little bit more biased in vanilla sex”.

At the same time, it was found that, in our sample, not only heterosexual people demonstrate greater sexual fluidity than non-heterosexual people, but within the group of heterosexual people, cisgender men demonstrated more sexual fluidity than cisgender women. The differences between cisgender men and cisgender women were smaller in the BDSM context compared to the vanilla context. Regarding people of sexual minorities, in the vanilla context, men and women are equally fluid, but on the contrary, in the BDSM context, men are more sexually fluid than women. The data from our study are in line with the results found by Chaline (2010) in her research: in both contexts, practitioners of both genders performed sexual behaviors that were not in line with their sexual identity, while in Simula’s (2012) study it only occurred in BDSM context.

A possible explanation for why heterosexual men have experienced more sexual fluidity than heterosexual women in ‘vanilla’ sex may be related to the connotation given to it: several people referred to group sex and fetish as ways of experiencing sexual fluidity in ‘vanilla’ practices, yet conceptually, these are considered non-normative or non-vanilla forms of sexuality. Or, maybe, they construct group sex and fetish as a normative sexual behavior hence equalizing it to ‘vanilla’ sex. That said,

there is conflicting data in the literature. We found studies reporting the presence of sexual fluidity equally in men and women (Savin-Williams et al., 2017; Cohen et al., 2020), yet several other studies report that women experience more sexual fluidity than men, whether heterosexual or not (Katz-Wise et al., 2019; Currin et al., 2016; Diamond, 2016; Lund et al., 2016; Berona et al., 2018). Katz-Wise and colleagues (2019) report that non-heterosexual people are more likely than heterosexual people to experience sexual fluidity in attractions, while Currin and colleagues (2016) observed greater sexual fluidity in the sexual behaviors of heterosexual people. It is believed that there is greater sexual fluidity in women, because women's same-sex/gender attraction is perceived as more normative and because there is more homophobia directed at male same-sex/gender sexuality than female same-sex/gender sexuality (Currin et al., 2016; Diamond, 2016). The extent and cause of these possible gender differences remain, however, unclear and appear to be inconsistent (Cohen et al., 2020; Diamond, 2016).

On the other hand, in BDSM, as was explained by most people in our research, it is the context itself that fosters the experience of sexual fluidity, due to its practices and plays (e.g., bondage, domination). As previously mentioned, many people perform BDSM with those whose gender does not correspond to the gender related to their sexual identity (Better & Simula, 2015; Ritchie & Barker, 2005; Simula, 2012, 2019a; Zambelli, 2017). Practitioners also mentioned their fetishes as a way of experiencing sexual fluidity or even due to the non-sexual character attributed to certain practices. Nevertheless, if certain practices are constructed as non-sexual, then it is not sexual fluidity: those practices are not conflicting with their sexual identity, there is not a deconstruction of gender when it comes to practicing those certain activities with genders that do not go with the sexual identity of the practitioner. BDSM and sexuality overlap but they are not entirely coincident.

As for sexual minorities' experience with sexual fluidity, they interact with genders that usually they are not attracted to at all or not attracted to at certain times and in specific contexts. It should be noted that a pansexual or bisexual person will not necessarily feel the same level of attraction to all the genders they are attracted to, as, for example, heteroromantic people, like participant 13 said: "Because I am heteroromantic (bisexual only when it comes to sexual attraction)". Or that attraction can happen only in certain contexts, which is verified in the discourse of participant 42 when he states "Bdsm only gives me pleasure with men, love only gives me pleasure with women" and of participant 48 when he states that "My pleasure consists [in] occupying the space of submission and realizing that the one who is dominating takes pleasure in their activity." Thus, if on one hand, gender defines the BDSM practice, on the other hand, what matters is the BDSM practice and not the gender.

Finally, in both contexts, experimentation and pleasure-seeking emerge as motives, which apply to both cisgender men and women, that is to say, the curiosity to experiment and enjoy their sexuality freely. As participant 2 states, "It is not the sexuality that is the focus, but the practice".

Another point that we analyzed – and considered central – was the importance of gender in sexual attraction and romantic attraction, in both 'vanilla' sex and in BDSM. We also analyzed the importance of gender in BDSM *plays/practices*, as these do not necessarily involve romantic and/or sexual attraction. The heteronorma-

tive model wrongly assumes that someone who is romantically attracted to only the opposite sex will similarly be sexually attracted to only that sex, just as it is assumed that people who are romantically attracted to both sexes will similarly be sexually attracted to both sexes (Lund et al., 2016). Although it is usually assumed that sexual identity directs people's romantic feelings in the same way as their sexual desires, that's not the reality of people's life experiences (Diamond, 2008; Lund et al., 2016; Savin-Williams et al., 2017). Sexual and romantic attraction have strong cultural, psychological, and neurobiological connections, yet one can desire a sexual union with a certain gender and not want a romantic relationship with that gender (Diamond, 2008; Savin-Williams, 2017). Sometimes this can be framed as sexual fluidity, such as when they feel romantic attraction and/or sexual attraction and/or perform plays with genders that do not coincide with their sexual identity, demonstrating the ability to be attracted to someone while disregarding their gender (Diamond, 2008).

In our study, the importance of gender was lower in the case of sexual attraction as compared to romantic attraction, in both 'vanilla' sex and BDSM. This decrease was also observed in BDSM *play*/practices when compared to romantic attraction in BDSM. This is due to sexual fluidity in activities that are considered sexual, especially regarding sexual attraction, and sexual BDSM *plays*/practices, but also to the preference for one gender in romantic attraction and another in sexual attraction, which does not constitute sexual fluidity.

For both BDSM and 'vanilla' sex, we found similar justifications regarding the importance of gender in romantic attraction. Thus, several participants mentioned people and their characteristics, interactions and affection, emotional compatibility, and intimate relationship as reasons why they are attracted to a specific gender or person. Like participant 1 says: "Within BDSM, I take sexual and emotional compatibility as a priority to avoid uncomfortable situations. So gender is not an issue". Likewise, participant 15 states: "Confidence, intelligence, humor are attraction factors that I consider since I do not consider gender [as an attraction factor]". Personality traits (e.g., supportiveness, affection, kindness, trust, communication, honesty, sensitivity), as well as intelligence, have been referred to in the literature as among the most desirable traits for someone to be attracted to a person romantically (Fletcher et al., 1999, 2004; Malach Pines, 2001; South Palomares & Young, 2019).

It is noteworthy that people and their personality traits emerge both when gender is important and when it is not. This is because, as P21 states, "different individuals elicit different levels of intimacy in me (...) depending on the circumstances of my life I may prefer to be more with women or men or non-binary people." Also, P11 makes a statement in the same sense when he states that "different genders arouse different perspectives on sex. Although I am bi, I see men and women in different ways". So, even though gender is important, people's characteristics are equally important and there is a different perception of what each gender awakens in people, which is particularly true for people whose sexual identities are non-monosexual. Thus, there are several factors that contribute to the choice of a romantic partner other than gender alone.

For other participants, romantic attraction is based on their attraction to only certain genders or was even governed by their sexual identity, with some people associating sex and romance. This is to be expected considering that within normative

sexuality, romantic attraction and sexual attraction are supposed to coincide. However, BDSM participants emphasized the need for mutual trust due to the risk inherent to certain practices and to the very intimacy that might arise from the practices - for them, feeling safe is a necessary condition for romantic attraction. This emphasis on kink as especially risky raises questions regarding the normativity of genital sex where risks, such as sexually transmitted diseases and infections, might not be accounted for or thought about. For example, in Portugal, there was a decrease in the use of condoms in the past ten years, with the main concern when using them being avoiding pregnancy (Marques, 2022).

In relation to sexual attraction, Buss and Schmitt (2019) found that personality traits were equally important. Also, Meeker (2011) noted that some people's sexual attraction and sexual behavior may be more related to characteristics of the partner than their gender. However, as might be expected, more than half of the people reported their perceived attraction to a particular gender or their sexual identity as a justification for gender being both important and not important. In the BDSM plays, as has been mentioned, personal characteristics, interpersonal relationships, and the quality of the practice are also more important than gender: "I value as a priority the dominating personality, regardless of gender, sexual identity or physical appearance" (P48) and "I prioritize sexual and emotional compatibility to avoid uncomfortable situations" (P1). Gender is also sometimes considered irrelevant due to the non-sexual nature attributed to BDSM: "BDSM can have a non-sexual aspect" (P14). On the other hand, it is important due to the sexual character they associate with certain practices, thus demonstrating what was previously mentioned about the multitude of meanings that practices and BDSM can have for people.

The role/practice is a category that gains prominence in BDSM. A third of the participants who refer to gender as essential to the plays mention the role as a determinant of the gender with which they perform the plays: "It depends on the practice: for D/s practices yes, because my D/s experience is very much associated with gender roleplays and so it only makes sense for me to submit to a man." (P13) or "I only consider gender as important in BDSM because of a greater attraction to the Femdom universe." (P43) or "My Owner has to be a man" (P44). Though this does not always apply: "I have no problem having a play with a man but as I am a switcher this man has to be in a submissive position" (P2).

As it can also be a matter of personal taste or when gender itself produces different responses to the person practicing. As one participant said: "Different genders can induce different dom or sub responses" (P32); and yet another: "I feel that when I practice it with men I feel better. I feel more sub than if I were with a woman, for example." (P21). However, nearly half of the people surveyed who state that gender is not essential in plays report that it is the practice, or the role they practice with that is most crucial. One participant commented: "What attracts me is to assume a submissive role." (P48). This is in line with the earlier findings in this paper related to sexual fluidity in BDSM.

Regardless of the importance of gender to respondents, when it comes to romantic attraction, the BDSM role/practice is the second most mentioned category. Only when gender is considered unimportant to the experience of sexual attraction does the BDSM role/practice category not arise. These data are in line with the literature (Bet-

ter & Simula, 2015; Carlström, 2017; Newmahr, 2010; Simula, 2012, 2019a; Simula & Sumerau, 2017; Sprott & Hadcock, 2018) which stresses that role in BDSM is the most important category in a BDSM context, compared to gender and sexual identity, and where the emphasis is more placed on personality or individual style. Despite this, the attraction experienced, and associated with sexual identity, still plays an important role, being mentioned by more than half of the participants who consider gender important in romantic attraction, sexual attraction, and plays/practice: that is, gender continues to frame and shape BDSM experiences (Simula, 2012, 2019a).

Finally, we should consider that only one person questioned their sexual identity after experiencing sexual fluidity in both ‘vanilla’ sex and BDSM, and another questioned themselves after experiencing sexual fluidity in ‘vanilla’ sex. This further demonstrates that sexuality is a gradient, not a rigid social or immanent category. Despite being applied and deployed, these categories do not express the full breadth of a person’s behaviors and attractions nor do they often fully encompass people’s experiences. Participants demonstrated a clear understanding of the different dimensions and gradients of sexuality and the existence of different sexual parameters. Sexuality is multifaceted, socially situated, and dynamic: a configuration with many components where one arrangement out of many possible arrangements without denoting value or permanence, can shift over age, context and/or life phase (van Anders, 2015).

It is of paramount importance that we create the social conditions in which people can live and enjoy sexuality in its various facets, complexities, and dimensions and freely question their attractions and behaviors without feeling the need to categorize themselves. In line with this, BDSM can be considered a reflexive mechanism to expand the horizons of sexual and erotic possibilities, above and beyond the constructs of gender and sexual orientation.

Conversely, it is also important for individuals to refuse the crystallization of social norms in themselves and to feel free to pursue satisfaction in multiple forms, known and unknown to them. Furthermore, it is (also) through BDSM that they find the safety to do it, framing it as a safe port in their socialization and erotic literacy. As participant 35 states:

“Nothing is closed in little boxes. The human being is in constant development and sexuality is no exception. Just like you taste an apple you don’t like and admit you don’t like apples until you decide to taste another kind or even the same kind and you already like it, the same happens with people. The me of a week ago is not the same me of today and this makes us look and feel the world differently (...) This is even more complex when it comes to people, because I change but so does the other person. Maybe the first apple was already rotting or was still very green and after a week it was already a totally different apple, even though it was the same one. I think that little boxes are necessary for those who are discovering their way around, but they shouldn’t be little boxes. They should be different doors that all lead to the same room.”

Conclusion

To conclude, we may say that BDSM and its practitioners resist social categorizations, such as sexual identity and gender, since they show greater flexibility and fluidity in their sexuality, practicing BDSM, as well as ‘vanilla’ sex, with people from a wide range of genders despite, in most cases, reporting monosexual sexual identities. Furthermore, greater sexual fluidity was verified in men, compared to women, regardless of sexual identity, which is innovative in studies in this area. This research also made it possible to study the nuances of the sexuality of people from sexual minorities. Also, several explanations for the importance of gender emerged, denoting the complex and multifaceted nature of this theme, as well as gender not being the sole determinant in attraction.

This paper also adds to the literature on sexual fluidity by serving as a basis for including BDSM, fetishism, and kink in general as another variable that can be fluid, and therefore be a part of the broader umbrella of sexual fluidity. By doing so, we propose that sexual fluidity should be considered to be happening whenever something that is experienced as sexual is fluid, even when it does not pertain to gender or sexual orientation. Therefore, sexual fluidity can, for instance, encompass fluidity in kink roles and/or practices, fluidity in terms of divergence between the gender of one’s partners and one’s sexual orientation, and more.

All these new concepts about sexual identity and its fluctuations need to be considered when thinking about sex education and policies preventing stigma and discrimination. In practice, our exploration contributes to the development of interventions, approaches and social policies that are not confined to the binary of sexual identity and gender, as it does not use the latter two as defining sexual behaviors, resulting in a greater understanding of people and their experiences. These results denote the importance of educating people in general about the development of sexual identity, as well as people working in mental health care, so as not to force traditional labels of sexual identity and sexual practices.

In future studies, it would be interesting to further verify and comprehend the differences of gender and sexual identity regarding sexual fluidity, especially in Portuguese samples, since some of the results of the study are contradictory to the existing scientific literature.

This study has a few limitations associated with the instrument and the study population. The first limitation is the fact that the instrument was distributed online, limiting the sample achieved to people who have access to the specific social media where the instrument was disclosed. Likewise, it was not possible to reach data saturation. Moreover, as this is a convenience sample, the conclusions drawn in this study are not generalizable to all the practitioners of BDSM. Then, since the collection instrument was an online questionnaire, the possible incomprehensibility of questions and the impossibility of clarifying questions while filling it out might have compromised the answers. Additionally, it did not allow the verification of more complete answers in terms of content as an interview allows.

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Data Availability The datasets analyzed for the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Code Availability The codebook used for the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethics Approval This research was approved by the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the University of Porto Ethics Committee. This is an original work that has not been previously published and is not under consideration at another journal.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all the participants.

Research Involving Human Participants This research was approved by the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the University of Porto Ethics Committee. The research did not involve non-human animals.

Conflict of Interest The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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