

Kinky Sex: When Did BDSM Become So Wildly Popular?

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It's just another day at The Armory in San Francisco: A bound and naked woman is laid out on a stylish serving table. Elegantly-dressed people of both sexes gather around—enjoying the view, apparently—and take turns having their way with her. Various devices are deployed—dildos, floggers, electrical stimulators. She says “Thank you, sir” and “Thank you, madam” frequently.

Welcome to "The Upper Floor," a high-definition Internet reality show where, website copy states, “real submissive women and real submissive men become house slaves to be dominated, trained, punished, spanked, whipped, and fucked ... Inspired by the legendary French BDSM erotic novel *The Story of O*, The Upper Floor illustrates real lifestyle BDSM as it is lived by 24/7 slaves and Masters, complete with ... explicit sex in bondage, punishment, erotic humiliation, and more.”

The Upper Floor is a project of Kink.com, a thriving pornography business that was founded by Peter Acworth, a British-born entrepreneur and lifelong aficionado of BDSM (for Bondage, Domination, Submission—or Sadism—and Masochism). Kink.com sells subscriptions to websites with names like Hogtied.com, SexandSubmission.com and, yes,

TheUpperFloor.com. Acworth often attends these, er, corporate events. "He's the master of the house," says colleague John Sander.

Only in Satan's City by the Bay, right? Not exactly. Acworth was recently invited to speak at a summit on innovation convened by the ever-so-respectable The Economist. That's right—the king of kink was given a place on the dais alongside a Harvard Business School professor, an Intuit business executive and other decent folk. Whether you view this as the end of civilization or a sign of progress, one thing is sure: a barrier has come down.

BDSM is all over our entertainment media, too. In her latest music video, Christina Aguilera slaps a riding crop against her palm, laps from a cat dish, and sports a rhinestone-studded ball gag. In movies like the 2005 comedy hit *The Wedding Crashers* and television shows like the self-consciously low-brow mockumentary *RENO 911!*, kinky scenes are played for laughs.

The lesson, kiddies? BDSM, once viewed as the exclusive fiefdom of really creepy perverts, has crossed over and become quasi-respectable, stylish and safe. Comical, even!

The shifting public perception of BDSM is one of those seeming overnight changes that was centuries in the making. In the late 18th Century, the Marquis de Sade put his profoundly sick-puppy stamp on kink, firmly establishing it as sex play (sex pain, really) between non-consenting adults. A hundred years later, when psychologists started studying this behavior, they found their subjects in insane asylums. "Criminals were their point of reference," says Denver-based sex therapist Neil Cannon. No wonder, then,

that BDSM meant a brute in a basement with an unwilling woman and a whip.

That's not what healthy kink is about—not by a long shot. "Safe, sane and consensual" is the prevailing community standard. Although Ernest Greene, the executive editor of Larry Flynt's Taboo magazine and a long-time leader in the BDSM community, has a "quibble" about the phrase—"Is it really sane to wear latex in July?"—the basic point remains. Kink done right is about sexual power games played out in circumstances that make it safe for everyone. And it's done right by almost all practitioners.

The public perception of kink is shifting to match the reality. More and more people are coming to see your typical BDSM practitioner as the man or woman next door who enjoys consensual role-play along with, maybe, a dollop of pain on the side (or elsewhere).

It's the more accurate view, according to sex therapist Cannon. "While every group has its outliers, kinky people tend to be well-adjusted and emotionally stable," he says. "These are healthy, high-functioning people."

Taboo's Ernest Greene agrees. "Most of the people who are into kink use it as a way to enhance conventional sexual practices," he says. "It's not all that different from what other people do. There's a little bit of bondage, a little bit of spanking, and then fucking."

Our entertainment culture's fascination with BDSM isn't new. Early references tended to be very indirect, though. "Emma Peel's catsuit in the television show *The Avengers*, back in the 1960s, is a perfect example of what would now be

viewed as fetish garb," says Carol Queen, staff sexologist and chief cultural officer for Good Vibrations, a chain of sexuality boutiques. Other benchmarks along the way include Sex, Madonna's 1992 made-to-shock coffee-table book, the 1994 bomb Exit to Eden, in which Rosie O'Donnell garnered a RAZZIE nomination for her role as a dominatrix, and the 2002 BDSM-themed indie movie Secretary with Maggie Gyllenhaal and James Spader. "Secretary had an impact because sweet Maggie Gyllenhaal was in it," says Queen. "Everyone expects James Spader to be kinky."

There's a predictable pattern to how movies treat people whose sexual behavior is out of the mainstream. "Gays' emergence from the closet traced a clear narrative arc," says Queen. "Early on, gay protagonists pay a price for their sexuality. Something bad happens. They die or lose a loved one. And then, as their behavior becomes more culturally acceptable, they get to have a happy ending."

In Secretary, submissive Maggie and dominant James get married. In The Wedding Crashers, too, "The kinky girl gets the guy," notes Queen. Which suggests that in addition to being out of the dungeon, BDSM is out of the 'you'll be punished for your sins' phase, too.

It's not just Hollywood that's seeing kink differently. So are professional psychologists. "Things are in a positive transition here," says Neil Cannon. "Most sex therapists don't pathologize BDSM behavior unless it's having a negative impact on the patient."

There are still some judgmental apples in the barrel, though. "A great deal depends on the therapist's professional and religious training," continues Cannon. "I was at a cocktail

party recently and a psychologist said to me, 'All kinky people are sick.' When I asked how she came to that conclusion, she said, 'I just know.' I've had clients come to me because they'd been seeing a therapist who told them they were sick."

The shifting take on BDSM will be reflected in the next edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the psychiatric community's diagnostic bible. DSM-IV, which was published in 1992, defined kinky behavior as a "paraphilia," a fancy word for any path to sexual arousal that's not standard foreplay. The language of DSM-IV "is unclear and sometimes contradictory about whether a paraphilia is a disorder," says Susan Wright, spokesperson for the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom (NCSF), an advocacy group for the BDSM, swing and polyamory communities. Although the language hasn't been finalized, it's looking as if DSM-V, which will be published in 2013, will make it clear that a person can be kinky without having a disorder.

BDSM is making the transition from creepy to okay for lots of reasons, starting with all the kinky people who are out there. The statistical studies are all over the place, according to Wright, ranging from a relatively modest 5% of the population to a whopping (or is it whipping?) 50%. It's totally understandable if this range inspires skepticism, and in fact, research in this area is fraught with difficulties. It's hard to get funding for this sort of study, and it's also the case that people resist telling the truth about their bedroom behavior. There are definitional issues, too. If you ever smacked your partner on the behind (and liked it), does that make you kinky? But even if we practice safe statistics and

go with the most conservative estimate, that's still 5% of the populace—a sizable number by any measure. "On any given day," says Taboo magazine's Ernest Greene, "one million people are looking at or engaging in kink."

Another reason for BDSM's emergence is that more and more kinky people are willing to go public, or at least semi-public, with their activities. Every reasonably-sized city has its own kinky community whose members get together for discussion groups and barbeques as well as more risqué activities. There are also lots of online networks. When last checked, FetLife.com, the leading website for the BDSM community, ranked an impressive 6,061 on Alexa.com's ratings of website traffic.

Where's there sexual smoke, there's also activist fire. Kinky people are a sexual minority. Organizations like the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom are working to raise people's consciousness about BDSM. Their efforts are making a difference, in no small measure by helping kinky people feel supported and empowered.

Yet another reason why kink is making inroads is its peculiarly culture-friendly personality. It gives great image and still has shock value, qualities that make it a superb way to attract attention—just ask Christina Aguilera! With its historical link to the Marquis de Sade, BDSM is also kind of scary—another cultural winner. We're collectively obsessed with the bogeyman under the bed—just think how much money we spend on horror movies! But kink, unlike Freddy Krueger, is also sorta funny. Who wouldn't agree that there's something inherently ludicrous about a naked person crawling about on all fours, barking? Scary, edgy, silly—it's a perfect combination for a culture that hungers for an

adrenaline rush yet also needs to feel safe.

And then there's the ubiquitous Web. Says Peter Acworth, "Where it used to be hard for someone to get information about alternative sexual lifestyles, the Internet now makes it very easy."

Speaking of Acworth, another contributor to the mainstreaming of BDSM is pornography, which is readily accessible on the Net—and increasingly kink-friendly. Sexologist Queen reports, "When I went to the AVN (Adult Video News) convention earlier this year, I was struck by how many of the clips included choking. Inevitably, some people who see these images will try it for themselves. This isn't necessarily a good thing, because it's something you have to learn to do safely. Still, it's an example of a kinky practice that because of porn is becoming more vanilla."

Ernest Greene, who in addition to his involvement with Taboo magazine produces kink-themed movies, concurs. "The legal barrier that used to keep people in the porn industry from showing BDSM has come down," he says. "If you present kink as non-consensual, that's a problem, but if you frame it in the context in which it belongs, as sex play between consenting adults with no actual injury, it's totally defensible."

In films with names like O—The Power of Submission, The Surrender of O and The Perfect Secretary Training Day, Greene depicts bondage with penetration. "We don't have a problem with this because our performers are visibly enjoying it. These movies are big sellers, and they're accepted everywhere. One of our main distributors, Adam & Eve, couldn't be more conservative and markets to people in

red states, where the films get great reviews.”

Where is all this headed? “Eventually,” says Greene, “we’ll reach a point where bondage in a porn movie is no more controversial than a blow job.”

No discussion of kinky porn would be complete without the academia-to-riches story of Kink.com’s Peter Acworth. In 1997, he was studying for a Ph.D. in finance at Columbia University when he happened on an article about a fireman who was making scads of money, in the words of the headline, “pushing Internet filth.” In that moment, Acworth reports, “It was suddenly clear to me that the Internet was not a gimmick, but rather a platform for genuine business and that it was going to be enormous. I realized that finance had become saturated with researchers and that the Internet was relatively untapped and under-developed. I was in the wrong field.”

Thus was Kink.com born. Thirteen years later, it has about 100 employees and is producing an estimated \$30 million in annual revenue. “Peter Acworth,” declares Carol Queen, “is the Hugh Hefner of the 21st Century.”

The parallels are unmistakable. Hefner has his Playboy Mansion. Acworth bought the San Francisco Armory, a 200,000 square foot edifice in San Francisco’s Mission District that’s on the National Register of Historic Places, to house his corporate headquarters. Hef reframed our culture’s take on sexuality. Acworth is doing the same for kink, only without the sexism.

Acworth is totally committed to promoting BDSM’s consensual-sex ethos. “We go out of our way to make it

clear that we are depicting play," he says. "Each movie includes a before and after interview with the participants in order to show that the activities are negotiated and are for the enjoyment of all participants (not just the guy). In the absence of such an introduction, we feel that the activities could be misinterpreted by some people who are not used to seeing such material."

Make no mistake about it: people tune into Kink.com to get turned on. Still, in its so-not-PBS way, it also provides a form of public education.

To be sure, it's not all sunshine and floggers for BDSM practitioners. Discrimination and violence remain harsh realities. In a 2008 survey, the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom found that 38% of people who self-identify as kinky reported being harassed, discriminated against, or treated violently against their will. In part, says NCSF spokesperson Susan Wright, "This is because the more visible we get, the more backlash we get, too."

A BDSM community member who blogs under the name Taw Preston fell victim to this discrimination. A Texas resident, he and his wife wanted to adopt two foster children. They were model parents, carefully keeping their sex play behind closed doors. Everything was going smoothly until, reports Preston, a Child Protective Services investigator "who was plainly an evangelical" tried to pull the plug on the adoption. The sole reason: their kinky lifestyle. For a time the children were removed from the Preston home. Two high-priced lawyers later, the kids were out of custody and the adoption went through. The ending isn't entirely happy, though. Because it was either pay the lawyers or pay the mortgage, Preston is declaring bankruptcy and his family is losing their home.

It's not only the family values crowd that has a problem with kink. Some feminists do, too. For them it's like porn gone bad—which makes it doubly despicable, since standard-issue porn is seen as already degrading to women. People of this ideological stripe, reports Ernest Greene, are convinced that “no one could legitimately consent to this sort of activity. They believe submissive women are ‘re-enacting a patriarchal script.’”

Greene, who's married to the porn star and 'out' submissive Nina Hartley, finds this framing laughable. “Nina is an extremely strong and independent personality,” he says. “She is submissive only when we engage in dominant/submissive role-play for sexual purposes. We do this by mutual choice within negotiated limits as an expression of our sexual creativity and a way of realizing our fantasies. It has zero impact on the structure of our relationship outside its erotic context.”

Kinkiness appears to be wired very early and not susceptible to change. “From a very young age, I knew this was my sexual identity,” says Ernest Greene. “Bondage fascinated me.” Similarly for Peter Acworth, who in 2007 told The New York Times that as a child, he “would get an erection while watching a cowboy-and-Indian movie where somebody was getting tied up.”

You'd think that building an empire out of that turn-on would make him a pariah, right? Maybe back when, but no longer. For proof of this, we need go back no further than last March, when Acworth spoke at The Economist's innovation summit.

Just imagine: Kink.com—whips, slave-games and all—

treated as another leading-edge (or is it `cutting-edge?') business! Twenty years ago, Kink.com would have been a Great Unmentionable in decent circles—and inviting its `pornpreneur' CEO to address a mainstream business gathering would have been utterly unthinkable.

And today? Wherever you go, there it is. Kink is in our movie theaters, on our TV sets, and all over the Internet. It's in our communities and, for all you know, in the bedroom of the folks next door.

Hey, it's even in our supermarkets! Here's a recent scene from the deli section at the local Hannaford's (and no, it's not that kind of scene).

A woman is waiting on a customer. A co-worker comes out of the back room. He's putting on his apron. "Sorry I'm late," he says. "Don't beat me."

"C'mon," his colleague says, "you know you love it."

Right there, alongside the boiled ham and potato salad.

BDSM has come out of the dungeon and entered—smack!—into our lives.

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